

The Media & the Presidency —Herbert Schmertz

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The fundamental problem in the media-presidency relationship stems from differential approaches to political issues. While the president's primary tasks include resolving conflict, media success necessitates feeding on and, perhaps, exacerbating such conflict. The media's conflict orientation can divert the president from his policy priorities, and "non-news news events" are created to fill an insatiable media appetite. Important presidential decisions are hastily arrived at to meet media desires for immediacy and deadlines, and are articulated in the most simplistic fashion. Ultimately, even the president may view the world in the media's simplistic terms with attendant negative policy consequences.

Schmertz's prescription for media reform centers on lessened access to the presidency, an added premium placed on presidential privacy, and greater journalistic professionalism. It appears, however, that Schmertz casts too much blame and responsibility on the media and not enough on the presidency for the problems he describes. Certainly, Schmertz underestimates the president's own weapons in his efforts to govern through the media. One might also take issue with the author's predominantly benign characterization of the presidency as a policy oriented office attuned to democratic values. While Schmertz writes that, "Americans need to rediscover something we all know about the Presidency—that it works very well indeed when no one is standing there watching everything it does," there are those who would contend that events such as executive behavior in the Vietnam war era, the Watergate scandal, the Iran-Contra affair, and more recent campaign finance transactions all counsel greater, not diminished, media scrutiny of the president and the presidential office.

In his great *Oxford History of the American People*, the historian Samuel Eliot Morison says of our first President that: "Everything that the Washingtons said was repeated; everything they did was watched. No other subsequent President of the United States has lived in such a glare of publicity." That Morison could write this in 1964, after the death of President John F. Kennedy—called "the first television President"—is puzzling and even peculiar. In Washington's day, political ideas and political news took a long time to travel. . . . But in our own day, political news has become virtually instantaneous, and I would say—*contra* Morison—that the glare of publicity is now so merciless as to have been unimaginable in Washington's day. . . .

So pervasive has the influence of the media on the President now become that it is virtually impossible to consider that office apart from the media and their influence upon it as a political institution. It is a cynosure—almost a stage setting surrounded by lights, microphones, photographers, and watchers who never sleep. The White House is no longer a home or retreat: it is never quiet, never still; it can never relax. The press—and by way of the press, the world—is an eternal and vigilant presence within the walls.

But in truth, the media are far more than just a presence and must be seen by those occupying the Oval Office as critics and adversaries on most of the issues confronting the Presidency. The attitude of the U.S. political leadership toward the media is perhaps best summed up in a sentence from Geraldine Ferraro's . . . book about her . . . campaign for the Vice Presidential spot on the Democratic ticket. In the opening of her book, Mrs. Ferraro says: "But nothing is worse than looking as if you don't know where you are going." One might amend this and say that nothing is worse to the media than looking as if you don't know where you are going. Among the electorate, I am sure, there would most certainly be a far different perception; namely, that "Nothing is worse than looking as if you know where you are going when you don't."

There has been no period of American history, of course, when the Presidency was free of media influence. We can recall that there were newspapers in Washington's day who felt that his driving about

New York in a coach and six was merely the overture to his installation as King.... Whether the muckraking journalists of the Progressive Era used Theodore Roosevelt, or whether Teddy was using them, is still open to debate—but certainly they seem to have worked in harness to advance both political and Presidential goals. Out of President Theodore Roosevelt's recognition that he was able to manipulate the media to advance his cause with the public came: the first permanent White House quarters for the press; the first daily interviews with reporters; the first Press Secretary; the first management of White House news to take advantage of deadlines and of the best days on which news might be made....

Woodrow Wilson was the first to schedule Presidential press conferences as a regular matter, holding them usually twice a week and opening them to all accredited reporters. Presidential interest in conducting these press conferences has thereafter waxed and waned.... Franklin Delano Roosevelt... held over 900 press conferences during the 13 years he held the Presidency. There was, however, in Roosevelt's day, no question about who was managing whom. He refused to be quoted directly and would lecture reporters who gave him stupid questions....

Roosevelt, too, was an early advocate of the advantages to be gained by use of the new broadcast medium. His "Fireside Chats" were a pioneering and effective use of the airwaves by the Presidency to advance the Presidential goals. Likewise Eisenhower, who had the much respected James C. Hagerty as his Press Secretary throughout both terms, pioneered with television to gain support for his programs. But it was Kennedy, whose four televised debates with Nixon were crucial in his election, who made the electronic media an art.

Consider, however, how the White House has been invaded by the media in our own day and age. We read of the President and his wife attempting to find some recreation at a remote hilltop ranch in California while the press watches continually from a nearby mountain top through huge telescopes.... No presentation from the White House seems complete to us without the horde of reporters and photographers and their tons of lumbering ancillary equipment as they scurry about like schools of fish seeking

the best vantage points from which to view and record everything the President says and does,

Yet their attitude is hardly that of docile fish, but is as if they themselves owned the place. All of us have seen their badgering of the President, the shouts to him from reporters after he has tried to conclude his press conference or while he is attempting merely to go about his business in a simple and direct way. Someone is always bellowing something like: "What about Nicaragua?" It is as if the President and the White House exist for the entertainment and convenience of the media rather than to get a difficult job done for us, for the electorate.

As the public continually observes the media in hot and heated pursuit of the President, the public's perception of the office changes. We see a man pursued by a herd of irritable and irritating inquirers, barking at him like dogs after a bear, demanding answers to their questions, and soon—on a subliminal plane—we begin to see him as perhaps our own opponent, our legitimate quarry, and perhaps even our foe.

This subliminal suspicion is further advanced by endless hair-splitting indulged in by the media concerning every Presidential word, gesture, bump, and at present, as ridiculous as it seems, the pimples upon his nose. This is very obviously not the behavior of people attempting to get something done *together*. It is rather a mark of those enveloped in a fog of mutual suspicion that is arising from what seems to be a fundamental hostility.

We have become—under the media's prodding—a people who do not trust *anything* that comes out of the White House. The President's medical condition is not just of natural interest, but is transformed into a matter for inquisition and investigation. Medical reports are not to be trusted; doctors are not to be believed, but are instead interrogated as if they were on trial when they attempt to report to the public on the President's condition. Legitimate curiosity about a President's health has passed over into morbid fascination with every detail....

We are treated to a Jules Feiffer cartoon that begins with a drawing of a man in some dark tunnel and a voice is saying "This is Dan Rather from inside the President's colon, which is to be removed today." Instead of being outraged we grin ruefully and realize

that this is the situation into which the media—and perhaps the White House—have led us.

Part of the problem arises from the different approaches to political issues that must be taken by the President and the media. The Presidency by its very nature is a place in which conflicts must be confronted and resolved. As Truman expressed it, "the buck stops" *there*, and the major intractable conflicts of the day and the age inevitably end up on the desk in the Oval Office. The President must continually seek ways in which to reconcile violent differences between various factions and people and even nations. To reporters, on the other hand, conflict is the stuff of which headlines and careers are made. It is therefore in their interest to *emphasize* the divisiveness and conflict that abound in a center of power such as the White House. The thirst for conflict lends fuel to the endless blather of speculation about what the President is up to: Will he be as tough as Gorbachev, as resolute as Thatcher, as wily as the Chinese, as clever as the Japanese, as audacious as the Israelis? No day ever passes without a comparison being drawn between the behavior of the American president and that of other statesmen—here and abroad—facing the same or similar problems.

Presidents are elected because they have promised to achieve certain national goals; they would undoubtedly prefer to concentrate on those promises. Reporters and the media, however, now have the power to set a *new* national agenda by their stories, their questions, by what they choose to emphasize or investigate. It is therefore entirely possible today for the press to divert the President and the White House from the national agenda and to have these public servants focus their attention entirely upon a *different* agenda—one that has been set by the press rather than by the President or the electorate.

A small army of reporters, photographers, and sound technicians—generally about 200 people—represents the media at the White House. For all the orders this is a choice assignment; for all their emoluments, a rather expensive one. There is a natural tendency to demand news in return, and this exigency creates the propensity of *both* the White House press corps and the presidential press secretaries to *manufacture* news—or at least *stories*—even when no

news exists. People in desperate search of material will tend to manufacture material if none is readily at hand. The White House therefore gives birth to a lot of so-called "news" only because the reporters are there and there is an urgent need to have a story. . . .

It is out of this compulsion for news that the media created the non-news news event; namely, someone standing in front of the White House fence or the White House fountain and reporting ponderously that the President has gone off in the helicopter to view the mountains at Camp David. Often these reports involve something that is not news in any generally-accepted sense. A President going off for a weekend is hardly a news story, and someone *telling* us the President has gone off for a weekend is hardly a news story, but the public may eventually begin to suspect that someone standing in front of the White House fountain with a microphone in his hand and telling us where the President has gone for the weekend is a news event. When this happens, we are corrupting not merely the reporter, but the public's view of what makes news. We are creating a national misperception about what is a legitimate interest in Presidential activities.

Once we have seen a few hundred of these vapid and empty television reports, it becomes obvious that the purpose of much television news is not to report what is happening, but to fill up the space. Someone has bought and paid for these minutes; therefore, something must be put into them that appears to be news. Therefore, we shall have reporters stand in front of the White House fence and tell us that the President has gone away to Camp David for the weekend.

News would be far more entertaining—and in my view have far higher ratings and generate far higher advertising revenue—if television were willing to restrict its reporting to real events: to seek out the real stories of the day and not give us floods of vapid posturing in front of White House bushes and fences.

The result of this inordinate media focus on the White House is that Presidential personality has become more important than Presidential achievement. A President who charms and fascinates and entertains us becomes more precious than one who advances the nation's goals. If you doubt this, note the erosion of policies and issues as factors in Presidential campaigns, and their replacement by campaigns that focus

on personality and leadership characteristics. It is difficult to investigate the issues—which are usually complex and often mysterious. It is far easier to do a sort of vulgar psychoanalysis of Presidential habits, to report gossip about Presidential personality, to speculate about Presidential likes and dislikes. Candidates find it hard to resist this media pressure, and the result is their focus upon personal issues rather than political issues; the result is to see them declare—as Mrs. Ferraro does—that “Nothing is worse than looking as if you don’t know where you are going.”

It is from this mutually-indulged fascination with the Presidential image that we see the Presidency gradually being turned from an executive position to a sort of a sacerdotal or shamanistic position—one in which the President, rather than execute the laws of the nation and perform the public will, becomes instead a figure who presides over the nation’s public ceremony, and one who attends to and consecrates the popular will rather than executes the nation’s and his own.

As we view recent Presidential campaigns, one cannot evade a suspicion that the media have decided ~~their business is to entertain us rather than educate us.~~ The stories they love are the “horse race” stories, not the issue stories. The pieces they write are the personality stories, not the historical perspective stories. The issues they raise are rarely philosophical but meretriciously personal: who will get the biggest office; who will have the maximum Presidential influence; who sat next to the President at lunch or rode in the car with him; who was forbidden to ride in the car with him and why; who went to the zoo with the First Lady instead of going to the speech with the President? To which we might all heartily respond: Who cares?

The public reads these stories, I suppose, because they are easy to take, diverting, entertaining, and go down so much more pleasantly than the difficult political analysis that would be required if there were less gossip to fill up the broadcasts and columns.

Television is particularly tempted, in my view, to make every Presidential story a personality story. It is easy to put people on television and simplicity itself to portray their disagreement. It is, in sorry contrast, extremely difficult to examine complex political issues on television—because the reporters themselves would have to understand the issues and find visual

symbols that would bring out the philosophical disagreements and illustrate the nature of the argument. One cannot do this without arduous study and analysis. Generally the time constraints and profit constraints in television are such that no one ever bothers to do it. It is cheaper and more fun to do the personality piece, the human interest story, the piece about a conflict rather than attempt a piece of complex analysis.

Another terrible pressure on the Presidency wrought by the media results from the small capacity for patience among reporters who have daily deadlines to meet in both broadcast and print media. A manager such as the President must often rely upon extraordinary patience as he attempts to sift through and reconcile the conflicting aspects of some large political or military issue. The pressure from the media for immediate solutions has often produced immediate solutions in cases where delay, and deeper thought and analysis, would have been the preferable mode of behavior.

A President may have to consult a dozen advisors and half-a-dozen other nations before coming up with a solution to some grave political crisis. Reporters do not have time for this: they must have the answer now—for tonight’s front page, for the seven o’clock news.

Because they are so anxious to do personality pieces, the media are continually contrasting the behavior of this President with that of his predecessors or of other world leaders. We are told that Jimmy Carter would not have been so insensitive about South Africa; that Lyndon Baines Johnson would not have been so relaxed about letting Congress go its own way; that Eisenhower would have been quicker to let the Russians know where he stood on Angola. In the media’s eye it is never enough for a President to be himself—he also must outshine all those who have gone before him.

Another popular diversion for the media is to pit one branch of government against the other. The Senate is continually pitted against the House, and the Congress against the Presidency. The judiciary is dragged in regularly and set in battle array against both the Congress and the Presidency. The harm, as I see it is not so much that this is done in print or on television discussion shows, but that the parties themselves—the

organs of law and government—are continually approached and pitted. The White House is asked whether it approves of what Senator Dole has just said. Senator Dole is asked whether he is going to put up with White House inaction on one of his pet projects. The general thrust of this agitation is to foster action where action may be inadvisable or hasty, and to speed the occurrence of events or battles that might better be delayed.

The effect of all this tumult and turmoil is to inundate the public every day in almost every medium of communications—newspapers, magazines, radio, and television—with news about the Presidency. We know how the President dresses, how his wife dresses, how he handles his meetings, and who sits where, and where he goes and when he goes there and what he does when he gets there, and who dines with him in the public spaces of the White House and who in private.

This is not occurring because the public has some sort of insatiable interest in all the trivia connected with the White House and the Presidency. It is occurring because all of these hordes of people are hanging around the White House with cameras and tape recorders and microphones and nothing else to do in their careers except make news emerge from the White House. They are not leading a public hunger; this is a relatively recent phenomenon in American history, this daily inundation of news from 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.... People heretofore got along very well without this, and this flood the media are creating is doing actual damage to the Presidency.

Given their pernicious influence on the institution of the Presidency, it is worthwhile to consider, briefly, the nature of the values brought by the media to that institution *versus* those the President must have and those that the public have enshrined in that office.

The media's values are not those attuned to the democratic values enshrined in the White House, but rather to far more mundane concerns such as headlines, career advancement, selling newspapers, filling up television and radio time, and entertainment. The President himself is in the White House because he wants to lead. The values he brings to the job are those inherent in any leadership assignment or chal-

lenge. So the media bring values to the White House that are not just different from those of the President, but that actually *impede* the successful execution of the President's own objectives and values....

Among the media there is also a natural tendency to seek the largest audience for a given story or a given feature, to make it as *embracing* as possible. This inclination runs against the basic diversity and pluralism of the electorate. We are a large and varied country with large, diverse, and varied interests, but one would never know this from looking at the coverage of the Presidency. Everything is simplified, boiled down to the least-common denominator, purged of the complex and obdurate realities involved in pluralism and the conflict of interests. Since it is so hard to cover the White House properly, we are usually treated to coverage that is childishly simple.

The danger in this coverage is that even the White House may start to lose its capacity to deal with ambiguity and complexity. It may tend to answer questions and choose political initiatives in a way that is easy for the press to understand (and *explain and sell to the rest of us*) but may not be designed to solve the problem in the most democratic and ethical way. Any President must be hard put to keep a valid perspective on his place in the tide of events and history and in his ability to influence world affairs when confronted by a horde of reporters that besiege him as though he could roll back the tides and turn lead to gold. One result is that the White House itself begins to get a perverted view of its importance and power in politics and world events. If every Presidential pimple is of universal significance, then indeed the President is not like unto the rest of us. He is not merely someone we have chosen to execute our will, but rather someone of different substance entirely and perhaps *entitled* to powers and influence the rest of us do not possess. This incredible focus by the media on the *personality* of the White House and its incumbent tends to pervert the democratic values inherent in the institution as *conceived by the Constitutional Framers*.

There is an analogous debilitating effect upon Presidential decision-making, since reporters like everything to be simple and clear cut, and a President—

if he wants to please them—must try to deliver everything in that style and cut. Matters that should require great deliberation and painstaking analysis—such as the approach to summit conferences between the American President and the leader of the USSR—become instead a propaganda chess game in which the Russians advance a propaganda initiative (a la “Star Peace”) and the Americans counter that and then advance one of their own; then the Russians counter and everyone breathlessly awaits the next American move. There is little time in this process for deliberation and the sort of reclusive silence out of which great decisions are born.

Media pressure tends to drive the Presidency in directions the public would not favor. Americans do not elect their President to govern by sampling or on the basis of public-opinion polls. They select the candidate who seems to possess the wisdom and judgment that will enable him to choose wisely among the difficult alternatives that come across his desk. In the public sense, the President is elected to make those decisions *on his own* for a term of four years, but now ~~the media are trying to turn the Presidency into a popular referendum that goes on seven days a week and where sudden disaster may befall any incumbent of the White House who ignores the raging currents of public opinion. The public may begin to believe this is proper, and this may change the Presidency from what the Constitutional Framers had in mind into a jovial Master of Ceremonies for popular opinion.~~

Another real danger created by the media pressures on the White House is that the President may tend to conduct his business not in the right way, but in the “public relations” way—in ways the media approve, in ways so that they write commendatory stories and ladle out large dollops of applause. Once that starts to happen, painful choices will *never* be made, arduous initiatives will *never* be undertaken, and arduous challenges will be ignored in favor of the simpler pleasures of public applause and commendation. The country, in my view, would be far better off if every President were to make his decisions with far less attention paid to the *impression* they will have not just upon the media and the organs of communication but even upon the public itself.

In a recent discussion on this very topic, *Newsweek* magazine asserted that the Presidency is “the office that belongs to all Americans.” But this isn’t so. Why the Presidency more than the Congress or the Supreme Court or the local council? These offices do *not* belong to all Americans, but rather to those we have chosen to fill them and to fulfill the promise inherent in them. We send a President to Washington, or a judge to the bench, or a Member to Congress *in order to act in our stead* in considering the problems of the day and to make the wisest choice among the alternatives that confront them in their work. They are not our surrogates but our *agents*, and even as agents, not actually to do *our* will but rather the best they can when confronted with situations unheard of at the time elections and appointments take place. There is much more freedom to be had in *that* conception than in the one we seem to be moving toward, in which everything is done under the pressure of public opinion and the pitiless glare of the media.

One solution might be to evict reporters from the White House. Let them cover that institution as they do so many other things—from their offices, on foot, and by telephone. Removing them from the White House would help make it more difficult for a President to use the media as an instrument of his policy and will. Tom Wicker of *The New York Times* has called the Presidential press conference “more an instrument of Presidential power than a useful tool of the press,” and there is a large measure of truth in that observation. Both the press and the Presidency would be better off if reporters covered the White House as outsiders rather than members of the family. So would *we the people*.

I believe it would also be advisable to provide a better understanding of the Presidency in courses and in schools of journalism. Whatever the function of the Presidency, he is not elected to be “the great communicator” and should never be measured on his communication skills. That skill has to do with election but it is not inherent in our concept of good government. Reporters seem to have but little appreciation of the *other* main branches of our government—the legislative, the judiciary, and (a factor virtually ignored by the press) the role of the *states* in our system o

federalism. If journalists held a better knowledge of the Presidency, we would get a better perspective on the news, and surely a lessening of the floods of publicity now emanating from 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue.

I believe, too, that a national reexamination of how much privacy the President is entitled to is now in order. Do we want this horde of reporters following him everywhere he goes? Do we want telescopes on nearby mountain tops to pry into the privacy of his vacation? Do we want everyone who has anything to do with him to be under continual siege from the press about his business with, or his relationship to, the President? If Americans want wisdom from the White House—and there is no question but that we do—should not the President be permitted the solitude and time for reflection that are the absolute prerequisites for wise choices?

Americans need to re-discover something we all know about the Presidency—that it works very well indeed when no one is standing there watching everything it does. We need to act on our knowledge that in some political problems, the glare of the media operates to ~~pervert and distort decisions, to foment~~ courses of action chosen for their impact rather than their justice or wisdom.

If there were less media attention on the White House, perhaps Americans could discover that indeed many things can happen (including their own) *without* being shown on television or discussed in the newspapers. We could learn that problems confront the White House that simply cannot be displayed in a 30-second news script but that instead require deep and painful thought, and perhaps extremely painful action, for their resolution.

I would hope as well that less media attention focused on the White House would help Americans to discover another truth about our democracy: that it is not the President who is sovereign in this system of government, but rather the people, and that the future of the country and democracy does not depend on what the President does, or what the media tell him to do, but on what we the people do. This is a fact that *with* White House reporters and White House staffs tend to forget. We the people get no coverage on television and little attention from the media—but the durate reality is that we, and not the incumbent of

the House on Pennsylvania Avenue, are the United States of America.

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READING 23

Making Laws and Making News

Timothy E. Cook

Timothy Cook is a political scientist who teaches at Williams College and is an astute analyst of political communication. This article, drawn from the book of the same title, examines the changes brought about in legislative policymaking processes, particularly those in the House of Representatives, by the introduction of television cameras, including those of C-SPAN, to congressional coverage. At bottom, according to Cook, what had been an institution that did its work in relative obscurity through behind-the-scenes negotiations became, over time, one that was more media conscious, utilizing television as part of the arsenal of resources through which legislative proposals were pursued.

Cook's article documents the many changes that television's presence has brought to Congress and its members, ranging from the ascendancy of media specialists on congressional staffs and the decline of the apprenticeship norm in the House, through fundamental changes in the nature of congressional campaigns. The primary thrust of the analysis, however, centers on the degree to which a more media-oriented Congress has brought about significant changes in the House's pursuit of its lawmaking function.

Cook eschews the alternative conventional wisdoms that suggest, on the one hand, that members' efforts to attract media publicity have diminished the House's legislative role, as well as

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the alternative perspective that such publicity seeking is irrelevant to legislation. He arrives at a different conclusion. That is, "newsmaking is neither incompatible with nor superfluous to the legislative process. Instead, perhaps making news has become a viable component of making laws."

Based on his research, which included a good deal of elite interviewing and personal observation, valuable tools for political scientists, Cook analyzes the multifaceted relationship between members of congress and reporters. He demonstrates clearly the degree to which each has become reliant on the other for successful performance of his or her job, a prototypical example of what political scientists call an "exchange relationship."

March 19, 1979, was like many other work days in the U.S. House of Representatives. Speaker Thomas P. (Tip) O'Neill, Jr., called the House to order at noon. After the chaplain's prayer and a smattering of one-minute speeches, a relatively minor bill, the Strategic and Critical Materials Stockpiling Act, was sent to the floor and introduced by Charles Bennett of Florida. The act passed with a minimum of debate and a voice vote. Several communications were reported to the Speaker, followed by debates on the international shipment of lottery materials and on establishing a new Select Committee on Committees. After three one-minute speeches and three short special orders, the House adjourned at 2:21 p.m. All in all, a quiet day.

In one important respect, however, the legislative day was unlike any previous one: for the first time, floor proceedings were televised and broadcast across the country through C-SPAN, the Cable Satellite Public Affairs Network, to 350 affiliated cable systems. A transformation begun in the early 1970s had finally been completed; in less than a decade the House had changed from an institution that virtually prevented television from covering any part of the legislative process to one that almost welcomed its presence.

The House of the late 1960s was what one scholar termed "a large impersonal... machine for processing bills." Its unspoken norms and folkways favored behind-the-scenes specialization and legislative labor, and the rules discouraging reporters' access to crucial

behind-closed-doors decisions supported those norms. But by the end of the 1970s, at any of its legislative stages the House could bar scrutiny from reporters only with difficulty, and both print and electronic journalism were paying closer attention to it. The legislative process since then has occurred not so much in the light of sunshine laws but under the media's spotlight. Switching on the television cameras on March 19, however, may have been a landmark not in what it did but what it symbolized: the advent of a media-conscious institution.

That consciousness was very much a product of the mid-1970s, which remain a watershed in recent American history for all political institutions. After the Watergate scandal, the forced resignation of President Nixon in the summer of 1974, and the Democratic landslide in that fall's elections, reform-minded politicians came to Washington to clean it up. In the process they may have created arrangements that made the policy process, never known for its coherence or completeness, even more dispersed and fluid. As more groups took advantage of the new permeability of the political process and entered the fray, coalition building moved away from assured management toward artful construction, issue by issue. The process of governance became more cumbersome, volatile, and unpredictable. All these changes should have encouraged, or at least facilitated, a more media-conscious membership, and indeed, changes within the House itself increased the importance of the media.

- The personal staffs of members expanded tremendously, and most legislators now employ full-time press secretaries, a post that was a rarity in 1970.
- The so-called Subcommittee Bill of Rights in 1973 mandated that committees set up subcommittees according to established jurisdictions, and the House Democratic Caucus in 1975 prevented members from chairing more than one subcommittee, effectively providing more bases for hearings and other events designed to win publicity.
- Junior members were no longer expected to serve an apprenticeship in which they might be seen but not heard. By the end of the decade virtually any member was expected to have a chance to sit on a

desirable committee and to address his or her concerns.

- Sunshine reforms opened up committee and subcommittee hearings and deliberations to outside scrutiny. Closing committee meetings to keep out the press became the exception to the rule.
- The number of reporters credentialed to cover Congress grew dramatically, providing legislators more potential points of access to print and electronic media.
- Television began to dominate many congressional campaigns. By the end of the 1970s, over half of House campaign budgets went for media and advertising. A new generation was elected that was, of necessity, comfortable with the new technology.
- Members of the House and reporters for national news outlets had begun to discover each other, especially because the extraordinarily positive coverage of the House Judiciary Committee hearings in 1974 on the impeachment of President Nixon showed representatives what could be done with media attention and showed reporters that the House could be newsworthy.

As a result of all this, one would expect changes in the House and how it deals with publicity—as Michael Robinson phrased his “First Law of Videopolitics”: “Television alters the behavior of institutions in direct proportion to the amount of coverage provided or allowed; the greater the coverage, the more conspicuous the changes.” But has the ubiquity of the media really changed the most essential functions of the House? Has the new importance of making news transformed the process or the outcomes of making laws?

Many would reply that it has. Senators charged that the House’s new visibility was enhancing the legislative power of the “other chamber” to their detriment. At least, that was the argument successfully advanced by senators who wished to follow the House’s lead in televising floor proceedings. In 1985 Robert Byrd, then Senate minority leader, complained, “The Senate is fast becoming the invisible half of Congress. We cannot hold our own with the White House and the House of Representatives when it comes to news coverage of the important issues of the day.” Others alleged that the chamber had be-

come a group of unruly individuals more concerned with self-publicizing than with legislative labor.

This interpretation was not only widely held but plausible, and it continues to have proponents. Nevertheless, I consider it mistaken. But neither do I find the counterargument—that the media’s impact on legislating in the House has been vastly exonerated because the news reflects rather than creates internal influence—fully satisfying. Newsmaking is neither incompatible with nor superfluous to the legislative process. Instead, perhaps making news has become a valuable component of making laws.

OBSERVATION: PUBLICITY DRIVES OUT LEGISLATING

The news media are accustomed to being blamed for (or credited with) many political developments. Television, especially, has been accused of contributing to the drop in the public’s confidence in political institutions, the decline of political partisanship, the rise of image-oriented and candidate-centered campaigns, the drift toward a government more dominated by the president, and the general fragmentation of the American political system. Critics have also contended that the media aided the dispersion of power within the House and made congressional leadership and collective decisionmaking even more awkward and difficult than it already was. Making laws and making news, they have argued, are not compatible tasks.

Claims of such a dichotomy are nothing new. They harken back to the oft-cited distinction between industrious work horses and self-promoting show horses, the two hypothesized types of members of Congress. There was renewed concern, however, that show horses were becoming dominant. In an influential 1984 article in *Atlantic Monthly*, Gregg Easterbrook declared, “The yearning for a Washington badge of recognition and the additional perquisites that would make Capitol Hill life what [the new legislators] imagined it to be can set in almost immediately.... Fame may be an elusive goal, but publicity is not.” Publicity was said to undermine the coherence of the legislative process. Hedrick Smith argued, “Television helped break up the policy monopolies of established

committees and throw open the power game. Over-shadowing the grinding inside spadework of bill drafting in committee, television offered shortcuts and a showcase... a marketplace for all 435 members of the House and one hundred senators to become policy entrepreneurs. That is one major reason why Congress seems so unruly today." Or in the words of a political scientist who wrote on the nationalization of American politics, "The corrosive influence of television does not end when the elections are over. The Senate is now notorious for being less a legislative body than a publicity mill for many members, and the same trends are spreading, inexorably, to the House."

The most sophisticated version of this observation has contended that the fragmentation of power within Congress is directly connected with the growth of the Washington media, the ascendancy of television as a major news source, and its gradual incursion into the workings of the institution. The media have supposedly helped create an "open Congress," in which members need not play by inside rules to advance the issues that concern them or to advance their careers. Mavericks are no longer tacitly disciplined and team players are no longer quietly rewarded; mavericks receive welcome attention, while the others are lost in the shadows. Members who seek publicity also have available to them increased staff and technological support, and legislative coalition building has taken a back seat to public relations. The media have, it is said, contributed another centrifugal force, dispersing power and hindering leadership and collective decisionmaking.

There is certainly evidence favoring this point of view. Many members have achieved publicity without leadership or committee positions. Members have devoted more resources to publicizing themselves and have become more sophisticated in pursuit of the now-willing Washington reporters. Yet, while credible, this conventional wisdom from the early 1980s has not gone unchallenged.

RESPONSE: PUBLICITY IS IRRELEVANT TO LEGISLATING

In *The Ultimate Insiders* Stephen Hess began by attacking the Achilles' heel of the argument, showing

that most members of Congress are invisible to the national press. Those covered most heavily are "the *Ultimate Insiders*, the ones who call the committee meetings or direct the floor action, or would do so if their party were in the majority." Zealously seeking publicity pays little dividend if the publicity-seeker is not in a category that reporters find newsworthy—presidential candidate, party leader, committee chair, sponsor of a key proposal, and so forth. The show-horse-work horse dichotomy makes no sense as long as those receiving most of the attention are also those contributing most to legislative labors. The power of the media has been exaggerated, Hess concluded; instead of determining power on Capitol Hill, the press reflects it. Making news is then superfluous, even irrelevant, to making laws.

This perspective has also had proponents beyond the ranks of political scientists. A 1987 article on power in Congress argued, "Reporters will want to talk to [a committee chair or party leader] regardless of how articulate he is or how well he looks before a camera. What he has to say is important because of who he is, not how he says it." An op-ed piece in the *New York Times* during the 1988 campaign also considered that reporters reflect power, but interpreted the situation as being less benign: "[Journalists] have frequently ended up pulling their punches for fear of appearing biased.... Too often, the press has functioned as merely a stenographer to power."

But the response was not without its own problems. Though a handful of senators are accorded the lion's share of national media attention, such dominance cannot suggest that other members have not altered their behavior. Hess granted this point, though he argued that it would be irrational for senators to pursue national publicity, given the media's lack of interest. Yet legislators could be more inclined to seek publicity diligently without succeeding every time. In fact, if backbench legislators are actively pursuing publicity, leaders might be maintaining their place in the spotlight only by aggressively wooing reporters, in which case the primacy of leaders in the news is even more to be expected.

More important, Hess argued that the Capitol Hill press corps is "almost totally reactive." Yet in a collegial institution in which the chain of command is

attenuated, knowing who or what to react to is far from obvious. Because current journalistic practice requires stories featuring individual authorities, covering Congress has been called "the search for the ultimate spokesman." Elsewhere in Washington, such a search is more straight-forward. Throughout the executive branch, press officers are designated to speak for the agency, the department, or the president. Reporters' tasks are simplified: they need only turn to the appropriate spokesperson when a given topic becomes newsworthy. With Congress, the solution is less simple. After all, neither chamber has anyone who can speak on behalf of all or even most of its members.

The national media do disproportionately favor leaders, committee chairs, and senior members as being in a position to know. But holding such a position is no guarantee of news coverage. After all, even if much of legislators' visibility can be explained by institutional power, there remains at least as much that is unexplained. Either additional reasons have yet to be discovered, or much of the coverage of members of Congress remains unpatterned and unpredictable. Reporters, even when conscientiously attempting to depict congressional power accurately, inevitably exercise choice in deciding whom to cover in Congress. Merely reflecting congressional power without contributing to it may be the goal of reporters, but it is a well-nigh impossible task.

A THIRD POSSIBILITY: MAKING NEWS LEADS TO MAKING LAWS

To comprehend the relationship of making news to making laws, one must understand that reporters and politicians are constantly negotiating and renegotiating the process by which news is made. Instead of a Congress that plays by reporters' rules or reporters that defer to Congress's decisions about what is important, the interactions between legislators and reporters are shifting and flexible. Making news can become a constructive component of the legislative process. By anticipating what a reporter will find newsworthy, House members can use the media to address an issue, move a proposal along, and enhance their career ambitions. Indeed, given the contemporary confusion in American politics, a media strategy may be a necessary part

of many legislative strategies. Such a process is most accessible to those who wield the most power; but backbenchers, too, can become an authoritative source on a particular issue and thereby court publicity and accomplish legislative goals.

To understand how this process works, one must recognize that newsworthiness is inherently an elusive quality. If reporters are asked for the difference between news and non-news, they are likely to provide anecdotes or examples, not a hard-and-fast dividing line. Yet the demand for fresh news is incessant. To standardize an inherently unpredictable process, reporters routinely turn to people in positions of authority within an institution, thus not only ensuring a steady flow of copy but also helping guard against charges of bias or incompleteness by covering politicians whom peers, superiors, and audiences generally agree upon as newsworthy.

Such connections work to officials' advantage. Their involvement makes something newsworthy enough to get in the paper or on the air and creates events that can serve as occasions to write stories. Because reporters must worry about alienating their main sources, they come to report the world in ways fundamentally similar to the perspectives of those they are covering: they become "unwilling adjuncts to City Hall."

Yet the reporters do not merely reflect a reality constructed by others. News inevitably constructs and reconstructs a public reality from privately experienced events. And Journalists' selections and emphases do diverge from those that their authoritative sources would make. American journalism is based on the tenet that news must be both important and interesting. Reporters' judgments on what is important and interesting must anticipate not merely the political sources but the judgment of the news organization for which they work. Collusion is unlikely because reporters and politicians do not share identical definitions of what news is and how it should be covered. The media thus act as powerful gatekeepers to the political arena.

Instead of determining or reflecting power on Capitol Hill, reporters and sources negotiate power, constantly bargaining with each other over the rules of their interactions and the shape of the final product.

Each tries to manage the other—the sources to place the most favorable light on their activity and the journalists to extract the information they seek with minimal difficulty. Sometimes the relationship may be adversarial. More typically, however, politicians need publicity and journalists need copy, and the two sides can and do perform valuable services for each other.

Despite some disagreements with journalists, House members may, through effective media strategies, be able to manage the news from Capitol Hill. Journalists may go along to ensure the routine production of news. Frequent interaction leads to an unspoken set of ground rules. The forces encouraging collaboration instead of conflict tend to be greatest in dealing with those legislators who are important and hence regular, prized newsmakers. The adversarial model does not work most strongly at the highest levels of the political hierarchy, then; it may actually be most applicable toward those who *least* frequently make the news.

At the same time, there is enough flexibility in covering a collegial body that observations cannot stop there. As more members are perceived to be important newsmakers, they may be able to use media strategies to raise issues to prominence and advance their careers. Moreover, the ones reporters consider more interesting may be able to win coverage if leaders cannot provide news that conforms to the media's demands.

So concerns that backbenchers can grab headlines are not unfounded. . . . [T]he media in general and the national media in particular have become more important for members of the House as the dispersion of power has made legislating more difficult. Legislators can use the media in various ways in addition to pursuing the publicity necessary for getting reelected. But this is not to say that the House is overrun by a new breed of legislators interested in publicity for its own sake. Making laws and making news are not contradictory. Nor are they synonymous. Instead, they are different but complementary parts of the same process.

The outside strategy allowed by media publicity offers the potential to manage an increasingly unmanageable work load in a balkanized and [bulky] political system. In the lingo of Washington the retail method of persuasion has been supplemented if not

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supplanted by the wholesale style. After all, the number of interest groups has dramatically increased, the legislative agenda is crowded, and the dispersion of power to more individuals makes one-on-one lobbying increasingly difficult. As presidents and interest groups find persuasion through media more useful to get things done in Washington, the same should be expected on Capitol Hill. After all, the media provide an important means to help set the Washington agenda, winnow down the alternative courses of action, keep pressure on politicians, and thus get something done in Congress.

MEDIA POWER AND CONGRESSIONAL POWER

The House of Representatives has long witnessed the chaotic comings and goings of its 435 members—from offices to committee rooms to the floor and back again while lobbyists and constituents try to get in a word or two on the run. But increasingly relations with the news media seem to take up legislators' time and effort. Dressed in telegenic blue shirts and red neckties, they stand before television cameras in the swamp, the section of the Capitol lawn set aside for interviews. Inside the Capitol, too, floor debates are often aimed at the discreetly placed cameras that broadcast the proceedings to members' offices, the press galleries, and homes across the country. Staffers and interns dash from one gallery to the next with stacks of press releases to be distributed. Reporters crowd outside hearing rooms to receive a committee report or corner a witness. In short, much of the hubbub of Capitol Hill today is contributed by the press and their would-be subjects. Making laws is far from the only business of the House. It has been supplemented by making news.

Making news was not always so important. Reporters have been present on Capitol Hill for nearly two centuries, but rarely before has seeking publicity been such a significant part of every House member's job. For most of the twentieth century the way to get things done and to advance a career in Washington was to play an inside game, building relationships with colleagues, deferring to senior members, and bargaining, while slowly building up the legislative longevity necessary to achieve a position of power.

Legislators paid little attention to reporters except those from the press back home, and they severely restricted the access of radio and television to the House. The House was governed by party leaders and committee chairs who preferred to stay out of the spotlight whenever possible.

Now all that has changed. The media are useful to members for publicity to help them get reelected, of course, but increasingly also in policymaking, wielding influence in Congress and in Washington, and pursuing their personal ambitions. Making news has frequently become integral to the legislative process. Reporters for all kinds of news outlets can now be present at any stage of the legislative process and can be instrumental in shaping the results. Sophisticated House press operations try to create national constituencies for issues on which members can serve as authoritative sources and build reputations. At the very least, legislators who wish to be considered influential experts have to ensure that their media image fits their chosen self-portrait, so few of them, inside or outside leadership circles, can pass up opportunities to be newsworthy. Making news, in short, has become a crucial component of making laws.

... The conditions that made it not only possible but necessary to use the media to get legislative business accomplished... show few signs of abating. The expansion of congressional staffs in the 1970s will not be reversed: and each new Congress will see members naming more full-time press secretaries. Likewise, the number of Washington reporters should continue to grow steadily. News organizations may be tightening their belts, but the rise of newspaper chains, the abundance of stringers, and the creation of groups such as Conus that contract out television news services mean that virtually any news outlet can have a relatively inexpensive link to Washington. Such easy hookups allow members to add their comments to stories that are bouncing among various newsbeats in the capital. Above all, the news media help House members set the legislative agenda, define the alternatives, influence public moods, and affect outcomes at a time when the political process is confused and unpredictable.

Yet if legislators need reporters, reporters also

though the needs of the two are rarely identical, they can work in a symbiosis. House members, even at high levels of power, cannot automatically make news. Instead, they must ensure that their information and stories meet journalistic standards of timeliness, pertinence, and interest. Reporters' dependence on authoritative sources to suggest news means that journalism tends to reflect the perspectives of the most powerful. But such power is not absolute, because while politicians control definitions of important news, journalists still decide what is interesting. So House members and reporters negotiate and renegotiate newsworthiness. The question should not then be what the news media have done *to* the House, or what the House has done *to* the news media, but what the two institutions have done *with* one another. What is the effect of this negotiation on policymaking in a representative democracy? The answers must be speculative, but they are well worth contemplating.

POLICYMAKING PROCESS AND THE MEDIA

The power of the press often buttresses established power and procedures in the House. Hill tradition favors pursuing expertise and influence dovetail with reporters' search for sources who are in a position to know. Reporters accord a reassuring coherence to the legislative process by focusing on "particularly peculiarly congressional actions," stressing the usual, orderly nature of the way bills are passed rather than the chaos or stasis that characterizes much of congressional life.

But the priorities of journalists and politicians are not always so synchronized. Reporters have a leeway in whom to report about or when to report that is not shared by politicians. It is not so much the issues that will receive coverage. So the coverage of Congress is a by-product of the ebb and flow of issues. Issues most likely to make news are those that are easily described, have clearly characterized sides, affect a large part of the audience, and come with straightforward reform remedies. Journalists tend to pass up matters that are complex, unfamiliar, specialized, or not apparently easily addressed.

If members want news coverage, they

sion of complicating factors. The alternative ways to achieve tax reform in the Ninety-ninth Congress, for instance, were displaced by an either-or question: "Are you for tax reform or against it?" Likewise, the inadequacies of the patchwork system of unemployment compensation went unreported when journalists converged on the single problem of hundreds of thousands of unemployed in danger of being precipitously dropped from the rolls when the Federal Supplemental Compensation program expired.

Setting the agenda is only the first step in the journey of legislation; press attention affects later stages, too. Bargaining among members, once the hallmark of a legislative institution, becomes more difficult when reporters are watching—not so much because members act differently in public than in private but because reporters' dislike for noncommittal stances tends to discourage the fluidity and maneuverability necessary to resolve differences on the fine points and to enact legislation.

Legislators who wish to get something done must be both outside and inside players. Press coverage can enhance their reputations and direct colleagues' attention toward them as people to listen to. Inside strategies can lead to the influential post that can be used to gain the media's attention. Using them [inside and outside strategies] together can be synergistic, accomplishing more than using either one on its own. But...changing from one approach to another is not always easy to handle.

To the extent that the press spotlights problems and helps set the legislative agenda, an additional complication arises: the clock of Congress will resemble that of the news. The media have a limited attention span. They discover problems suddenly, but their interest rapidly wanes, whether or not the problems have been solved. As entrepreneurial politicians take advantage of the brief window of opportunity to get something done, agenda items can rise and fall in importance with dizzying rapidity. In such a fast-forwarded context legislators feel pressured to respond and may grab the first alternative presented to them, often in spite of the details, while hoping that the other chamber will take care of the problem.

the One-hundredth Congress, when the legislative process overheats.

Yet for all these drawbacks, the conjunction of media strategies and legislative strategies can aid policymaking, particularly in surmounting entrenched interests and facilitating large-scale legislative initiatives. The news suggests problems or alternatives that Congress has bypassed. It helps inform and mobilize public opinion. At the very least it forces legislators to look beyond the interests of organized groups with the most immediate stakes and perhaps toward the larger public interest. When members would prefer to do nothing, publicity can increase the risks of inaction. In short, members in the spotlight are pressured to deal with problems in a way that corresponds to their readings of public opinion.