TELEVISION, MASS POLLING AND THE MASS MEDIA

THE IMPACT OF MEDIA TECHNOLOGIES ON AMERICAN POLITICS, 1960-1996

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Introduction

The last thirty five years have witnessed a profound change in national level politics in the United States.[1] American political parties have been losing many of their functions as the primary mediators between politicians and the electorate, leaving the mass media as the dominant arena for political communication. At the same time, the ascendance of television as the public's main news source and the increasing reliance on public opinion polling by both politicians and the mass media have transformed the way that politics is covered by the American press. The ascendance of this new communication regime has imposed new logics on the practice of politics at the national level, encompassing far more than merely a change in the mediums through which politicians communicate with the public. Not only has it altered the kind information available to citizens about candidates for office and about the workings of their government ; it has altered the very content of the of appeals and promises that candidates make while campaigning, the processes by which leaders make decisions once in office, and therefore the criteria by which citizens judge their political leaders.

The informed participation of the electorate in the selection of leaders is best facilitated by enhancing citizens' understanding of political issues through public discussion of social problems and policy options, and by enhancing citizens' opportunities to assess political candidates in terms of their orientation towards policy issues and in terms of their leadership potential. The ascendance of an independent, non-partisan press in the 1800s, and the increasing commitment of American jour-

nalists since the 1920s and 1930s to more interpretive and analytical political coverage (Schudson 1973, 144-151), had helped to transform the American mass media, by the middle of this century, into a public institution which contributed significantly to the general education of the American electorate. However, the lack of any reliable method of assessing public sentiment before the ascendance of public polling, beginning in the 1960s, meant that the electorate had little opportunity to express its preferences, except at election time. And the opportunities for the electorate to make its preferences heard during elections was limited by the organisational strength of the political parties, which could often act counter to the general electorates' preferences in nominating candidates and dictating their platforms. Thus, although the development of an independent press dedicated to in-depth, interpretive analysis of politics had created, by the middle of the century, a public sphere which might potentially support higher levels of direct democracy in the United States, the political parties still constituted a powerful arena, which continued to be dominated by more traditional, modes of communication and negotiation between interest groups, and between politicians and the electorate.

Since the 1960s, however, technological innovations have, in combination with other political developments, brought about a new era, in which the power of the political parties has waned, leaving the mass media as the central and most powerful arena in the United States for political communication. At the same time, however, these technological innovations have transformed the way that the press covers politics, creating a new kind of electronically-incorporated public sphere. Beginning with the introduction and rapid ascendance of the television as the dominant media for political communication in the early 1960s, the new communication regime has been buttressed by the increasingly central role of public opinion polling in the waging of electoral campaigns, the formation and negotiation of policy, and in media coverage of both. Television has brought politicians directly into the homes of millions of Americans every night. And the intensive and continual polling of the American public about their political attitudes (made possible by new telephone and computer technologies,) has given politicians, in turn, more direct access to the electorate.

In many ways this new regime might appear to allow for greater democratisation of the political process. Individual voters can follow the actions and debates of their elected representatives in a way that was never before possible: they can see political statements and rebuttals first hand, and they can watch the evolution of discourse as it unfolds in real time. Leaders, for their part, can measure the interests and the reactions of the electorate more often and more accurately than was possible when this kind of political communication took place primarily through a myriad of local, state and national level party organisations. Paradoxically, however, although this new regime might appear to offer the possibility of a less mediated and therefore more directly democratic politics, the dynamics of the interactions between politicians, pollsters, the media and the American audience/electorate have developed in ways that are more likely to undermine the capacity of voters to make intelligent decisions about who to elect for office, and of politicians to make policy in the best long term interest of the electorate.

While the new political communication regime which has dominated American politics since the 1970s has opened up new channels for more direct communication of citizen preferences, it has also presented new challenges to the possibility of in-depth, sustained analysis of candidates and policy options. With the concurrent de-

cline of the organising role of political parties throughout the 1970s, this has resulted in a new kind of more individualised and personalised politics, in which politicians campaign and negotiate through direct appeals to voters and financial supporters.[2] The main conduit for these appeals are emotional and symbolic messages made in eight-second soundbites on television news programs, or thirty-second television ads during electoral campaigns which are strategically targeted, through the use of sophisticated polling techniques, to influence key demographic groups of voters and special interest organisations. As the national mass media, especially television, has become the central arena for political communication, the media has taken a more sceptical stance towards politics, devoting less attention to straightforward reporting and analysis of political debates and policy issues, and more attention to how politicians market themselves and try to use media coverage to their own advantage. This new regime may indeed make politicians more responsive to the electorate, and may in some ways give the electorate more direct access to the workings of their government. However, it has brought in its wake a number of challenges to the practice of American democracy by transforming the American press into an institution which provides increasingly fast-paced, superficial coverage of politics, increasingly treats the political process as if it were a mere game of continual power ploys on the part of politicians, and has become increasingly dominated by what I will call "hyper-reflexivity:" the tendency for the media to focus on political issues connected to its own institutional processes (how politicians try to manipulate press coverage, the impact of media events, whether politicians are generally getting good press or bad press) while neglecting to report on aspects of politics which transpire primarily outside the realm of the communications media (such as the actual workings of the government or formulation of, and debate over, policy initiatives).

Political discussion in the mass media has increasingly come to revolve around interpretations of, and reactions to, yesterday's interpretations and reactions, and has become more and more divorced from the complicated issues that politicians must address in these troubled times, when old paradigms, the welfare state and Keynesian economics at home, a bi-polar cold war world abroad, no longer provide easy recipes for policy orientation. The speed, superficiality, and hyper-reflexivity of the new public sphere appears to have had dangerous repercussions in the realm of political culture. Public opinion has become increasingly volatile, and the negativity, superficiality and apparent self-obsession of politicians and journalists seems to leave people feeling cynical and apathetic about politics. At the very moment that the new electronic regime of political communication has expanded and in many ways democratised the public sphere, the kind of discourse that it presents seems to have convinced much of the public that politics is a nasty business, and that their own participation is irrelevant.

In the pages that follow I first trace the origins of this new system: the decline of the American political parties, the concurrent rise of television as the dominant medium of political communication, and the increasingly important political role of mass opinion polling. I then describe in more detail how the dynamics outlined above have come to dominate the new electronic public sphere; how new technological developments like the television and computer assisted mass telephone polling have, when inserted into a liberal democratic society like that of the United States, and into a highly competitive, market-driven mass media, set up certain self-reinforcing dynamics which more and more Americans are coming to lament.

The Waning Power of the Political Parties and Increasing Dominance of the Mass Media

By the middle of the 20th century, the mass media in the United States had established itself as an important independent arena for political communication. Having established its independence from its roots in the political parties by the turn of the century, and with its increasing commitment, beginning in the 1920s and 1930s, to more critical and detailed analysis of social and political issues, American journalism came to constitute an important arena for public discussion of political issues.

However, if the mass media was coming to play an ever more important role as a sphere for political communication, its centrality was consistently checked by the power of the party system. Although a number of reforms had been instituted during the progressive era to enhance the participatory power of the average citizen, such as the dismantling of many legal barriers to suffrage and the introduction of direct primaries and ballot initiatives in a number of states, the political parties still maintained the prerogative of overriding public preferences in the selection of candidates and the negotiation of their platforms. For example, as late as 1968, for both the Democrats and Republicans, delegates to their parties' national conventions (in which presidential candidates are chosen), were chosen through direct primaries (in which average party members are allowed to vote for candidates) in only 16 or 17 states (Polsby 1983, 57). In the majority of states, candidates were selected and platforms hammered out only among party organisers, through closed-door negotiating sessions, and caucuses attended by only party activists. As a result, although the mass media had been steadily growing as an arena for political discourse throughout the twentieth century, the translation of that independent discourse into policy and candidate choices was still filtered through very powerful party mechanisms.

In the 1960s and 1970s, however, the impact of the mass dissemination of television, in combination with a series of political crises, resulted in a number of political reforms which significantly debilitated the political parties. Coverage of the political crises surrounding first, the rising public dissatisfaction with the United States' role in the Vietnam War, and later, the Watergate scandal, consolidated public opinion and political will in favour of decreasing the power of the political parties, through reforms of candidate nomination procedures and of campaign finance laws (Polsby 1983).

The first major blow to the party system resulted from reforms of the Democratic party's procedures for the nomination of presidential candidates which weakened the power of the party organisations vis-á-vis individual party members by replacing closed party caucuses with the direct election of candidates through primaries.[3] This shift to direct primaries has served to decrease the power of both state level and national level party leaders to set party platforms and discipline their membership. At the same time, it has enhanced the role of the mass media by opening the delegate selection process up to the general party membership, who depend heavily upon the press for their information about candidates.

Beginning with the Federal Election Campaign Act Amendments in 1974, a series of campaign finance reforms have also helped to disempower the political parties, while enhancing the centrality of the mass media in electoral politics. By outlawing financial backing by a small number of donors, the new laws aimed at encouraging smaller donations from a large number of sources. The new laws have encouraged

presidential candidates to enter primaries, and to rely heavily on press coverage in their primary battles, in order to attract a wide base of financial support. And the plethora of new rules and spending limitations have also served to centralise and professionalise campaigns: the need to carefully supervise all campaign activities to assure that no rules are being broken has had the effect of squelching much of the state and grass roots level party activities that had traditionally been an important part of political campaigns. And this has meant that funding has been increasingly dedicated instead to media spending (Polsby 1983, 79-81).

The result of these political reforms has been a significant weakening of the political parties as organisations within which political communication and bargaining are carried out. This decline of the parties is reflected in the fact that much of the public no longer identifies with either of the two major parties, and no longer recognises the parties as essential political institutions. Straight party line voting has declined steadily throughout the television era, from 91% of all votes for Congress and Senate in 1952, to only 73% in 1988 (Wattenberg 1991, 38). Newspaper references to party politics and party affiliations has dropped precipitously (mention of candidates vs. parties was 2:1 in 1950s, 5:1 by 1980 according to a study by Martin Wattenberg and his students, Wattenberg 1994, 93) In fact, Louis Harris and Associates, in a 1992 survey, found that a full 69% of the public "felt that the US should either eliminate party labels from election ballots, or have additional significant parties" (Coleman 1996, 6).

As parties have declined in their ability to channel political conflict and negotiation, the media has increasingly become a central arena for political struggles between election times as well. According to Benjamin Ginsberg and Martin Shefter, it is precisely as a result of party decline, and the "deadlock" that results from the consistent election of split governments, that politicians have resorted to non-electoral forms of struggle in the mass media. In televised congressional hearings and in what Ginsberg and Shefter call "**RIP**" (revelation, investigation and prosecution) campaigns, politicians attempt to use the media to sway public opinion in order unseat powerful politicians, to alter the balance of power between the major political parties, or to give individual politicians more visibility, and more of an opportunity to cultivate the financial support of special interest groups (Ginsberg and Shefter 1990, 1-31; Ansolabehere 1993, 188-125.)

These changes have all served to reinforce the dominance of the mass media as the primary arena for politics. But as the parties have receded as the central organisers of political communication, and this function has been ceded to the mass media, the post-war information revolution has been rapidly transforming the nature of the mass media. The increasing dominance of television and of mass opinion polling have created a peculiar logic of communication in this new public sphere The following two sections will briefly outline the historical ascendance of television and public opinion polling, and the sections that follow will present an analysis of the nature of the political communication which is fostered by these two particular forms of mediation

Politics in the Public Eye: Television and the New Political Communication Regime

In 1960, during John F. Kennedy and Richard M. Nixon's battle for the presidency, television made its grand debut as a major venue for national level politics. Presidents had sometimes used the mass media in the past as way of communicating with the

American public. But the mass media had rarely played a very significant role in campaign politics. The 1960 presidential election, with Kennedy's media blitz during the West Virginia primaries and the televised debates between Kennedy and Humphrey and then Kennedy and Nixon, is generally considered to be a watershed moment, which launched campaigning into the mass media (Ansolabehere et al. 1993, 72, 73).

Kennedy saw the opportunity in 1960 to take advantage of a recent revolution in communications technology. In the brief decade before his presidential campaign, the television had rapidly swept across America. Whereas in 1949, a mere 6 percent of Americans reported having a television at home, by 1959, a full 90 percent of all homes were outfitted with a television set (Mayer 1993, 601). But what launched the era of television dominated campaigning was not simply the size of the audiences that television provided, but the power of the new media, as demonstrated by the Nixon-Kennedy debate. Although most of those who had heard the debate on the radio that night claimed a victory for Nixon, who was generally considered to have bested his opponent with his arguments, most of America had watched the debate on television. And for those who had seen the debate, it was clear that the telegenic Kennedy had outshone an ailing and pallid Nixon (Yodel 1993; Graber 1984, 183). It was apparent to all from that moment forward that television would be a powerful medium, with a whole new visual logic capable of stirring strong emotions and creating vivid mental images, which all politicians would have to reckon with in their efforts to garner and maintain public support.

Since 1960, television has become the dominant medium for mass political communication. Today, the majority of Americans report television to be their main source for political news. In the early 1990s, 69% reported it to be one of their primary sources of news, compared to only 43% for newspapers and 16% for radio (see table below). By 1990, a full 58% reported it to be their only source of news (Ansolabehere, et. al. 1993 44). Not only do more Americans tend to get their news from television, but they trust television more than other media. In 1992 almost 60% reported television to be, in their opinion, the most credible source of news, compared to less than 20% who considered newspapers to be the most credible source (Ansolabehere et. al. 1993, 45).

Television has become the dominant mass medium for politics, not only because it is the most credible and most relied upon source of news for most Americans, but also because it has come to play an increasingly important role in setting the agenda for the coverage of politics. While national newspapers like ***The New York Times*** and ***The Wall Street Journal*** still tend to be the most important agenda-setters for national news coverage (Reese and Danielian 1989), increasingly, what counts as a new and important development in the realm of politics is determined either by events that are first covered on television (Perot's announcement of his candidacy on the Larry King Live Show in 1992); by events that are intentionally created by politicians as television photo opportunity events or television advertisements (Dukakis's ill-fated tank ride; Bush's Willie Horton commercials in 1988); or by exchanges between celebrity journalists and political figures (Bill and Hillary Clinton's 60 Minutes interview about Bill's marital infidelities).[3] Especially since the advent of CNN, television has come to play a more and more dominant role in setting the news agenda. As James Carville put it in his book about the 1992 presidential elections:

> *[T]here are fewer and fewer afternoon papers in the country, and CNN is on all day, every day [...]. Its now becoming an article of faith that television is more*

> *important than print, so the first coverage that [print journalists see] is CNN. If you want to find out what's going on, its the only game in town during the day. That has an effect. A reporter says "Well, look, this is what they took out of it. I might have taken something else, but I don't want to be wrong"* (Matalin and Carville 1994, 189).

Because of television's increasingly important role as the primary news source for most Americans, politicians are dedicating more of their campaign attention and dollars to television. Campaign strategising is increasingly coming to be oriented towards the demands of television coverage. Reagan and Bush's political consultants are considered to have mastered the art of managing television coverage. By limiting press access to Reagan and Bush, their media consultants assured that the only pictures that television journalists would have access to would relay specifically targeted messages about the politicians. Reagan and Bush would appear only infrequently in the public eye, and then always with throngs of happy school children, cheering workers, or disciplined military forces as background, depending on what image the politicians most needed to convey to the public (e.g., Reagan as the champion of the new American working class, Bush as the "education President"). Since symbolic and emotional impressions have a longer half-life with television viewers than specific facts or even story content, by strategically scheduling politicians' agendas with photo opportunity and soundbite considerations in mind, political consultants are able to "spin" the television coverage they receive (see Ansolabehere et al. 1993, 84; Fallows 1996, 62). The logic of television has begun to dictate not only how politicians frame their ideas (in short, soundbite-able spurts) but what kinds of public events candidates and elected officials will participate in, and how often they will appear in public.

Television strategy has come to overwhelmingly dominate electoral campaign spending as well. Whereas in the early 1960s, only about 9% of the budgets of national electoral campaigns were dedicated to televised advertising, by 1990, according to the ***Los Angeles Times***, television advertising represented the "biggest single expenditure for the average Senate campaign," and candidates for the House were spending a fourth of their total campaign budgets on television advertising (Ansolabehere, et. al. 1993, 74, 89-90). An estimated US $ 203 million was spent by American political campaigns for airtime in 1990 (Chuck Alston cited in Ansolabehere et. al. 1993, 89). In 1992, Bill Clinton and George Bush spent about US $ 40 million, combined, on television advertising; and in 1996, the Clinton campaign and the Democratic National Committee spent US $ 85 million on ads on ads for Clinton alone (Morris 1997).

As the mass media has become the central arena for political communication, television has come to dominate that arena, and this has had a profound influence on the way that politicians communicate with the voting public, and the way that journalists cover political news. The other main pillar of the new regime of political communication, mass opinion polling, also made its grand political debut in Kennedy's 1960 quest for the presidency, but was a bit slower to gain ascendancy.

Mass Polling: The Birth of Public Opinion

John F. Kennedy has been hailed as the first "modern media president," and not without reason (Entman 1989, 129). Kennedy's 1960 campaign was the first in which a polling agency was directly employed, and in which polling results played a prominent role in the formulation of campaign tactics. With the help of 77 private polls

conducted by Louis Harris specifically for the Kennedy campaign, decisions were made about which primaries to enter, which districts to campaign in, and even how to address the contentious issue of Kennedy's religion in the crucial West Virginian primary (Moore 1992, 78-88).

While the use of opinion polls as a central component of campaign strategy was inaugurated by Kennedy, it was left to his successors to institutionalise the use of polls for strategic planning for governance. Although Kennedy did continue to commission private opinion polls while he was in office, his reliance on opinion polls decreased significantly once he assumed office: during his years as president, Kennedy employed only 16 opinion polls. But in the administrations that followed, Johnson and Nixon made more frequent use of opinion polling (each averaging about twenty polls per year) and routinised the reliance of the White House on what Jacobs and Shapiro (1995, 164) call a "public opinion apparatus." Despite the fact that it was still enough of a potential stigma to be seen as letting public opinion influence policy making decisions that Nixon felt compelled to keep his White House polling operation a secret,[4] during the course of the late 1960s and early 1970s opinion polling became a regular feature of presidential administration.

In the late 1960s and the early 1970s, with the advent of computer analysis of polling data, public opinion began to play a clearly dominant role in the mass media political communication regime as well. With the advent in the late 1960s of computer tabulation, results could be obtained quickly enough to be regularly incorporated into news stories. In addition, these new technologies allowed poll results to be used even more strategically by politicians: results could now be broken down by population subgroups, and correlations between different responses could be tabulated, in order to identify groups of swing voters by census tract, and to determine which key groups of voters could be targeted with specific kinds of messages (Moore 1992, 128, 224). The new technologies also allowed for what Patrick Caddell, a top democratic pollster who worked with the McGovern and Carter campaigns calls "strategic polling," in which different communication strategies could be tested out in polls which sought to determine not only what current public opinions were, but how those opinions might be swayed in the future by different kinds of messages about the candidates (Moore 1992, 128-129). These new techniques allowed polls to play a key role in identifying what kinds of campaign messages politicians should publicise among which audiences, and throughout the 1970s and 1980s, pollsters like Caddell, Peter Hart and Robert Teeter became master campaign strategists. And as polls became ever more central to how politicians' strategising, the news media too began to pay more attention to opinion polling, and to incorporate opinion polls into their coverage of the news.

During the 1970s major national newspapers and television networks started conducting their own polls. CBS was the first network to establish an in-house polling team, headed by Walter Mitofsky, in 1967, and the other networks and major national newspapers like the ***Washington Post*** and ***The New York Times*** followed suit in the early 1970s (Moore 1995, 251; Patterson 1993, 81). As the media dedicated more time and energy to in-house polling, they began to rely on polling data for an increasing percentage of their political coverage. According to Stovall and Soloman, by 1980, more than 10 percent of all news stories about elections were based either wholly or in significant part on polling data. By the end of the 1980s, according to Scott Razan, stories based on polls had become even more dominant. In a three-week period during October of 1988, polling data appeared in 53% of ***Washington Post*** stories and

37% of ***New York Times*** stories about the 1988 elections (both cited in Patterson 1993, 81). As the reporting of public opinion has become so central to political coverage, it has become a major force helping to shape the logic of the television-dominated mass media communication regime.

The Dynamics of the Mass Media Political Communication Regime

As the mass media have become the main locus for political communication, the logic of the news business has helped to determine what kinds of messages are conveyed between politicians and the electorate, and has, in turn, shaped the political climate in which all groups in society, be they political parties, interest groups or social movements, must do politics. In his 1980 analysis of the impact of the mass media on the protest politics of the student movements of the American New Left, Todd Gitlin (1980, 28) identifies three key "traditional assumptions in news coverage" which determine what counts as news and how news stories are framed by the media: news concerns the **event**, not the underlying condition; the **person**, not the group; **conflict**, not consensus; the fact that "**advances the story**," not the one that explains it.

Particular issues will tend to be covered by the press only when some sort of event can signal their news worthiness. The result is that issues burst onto the agenda for public discussion, but tend to fade away again before most voters have had a chance to become informed about the roots of the social problems, current policies, or propositions for new policy solutions. The proclivity of the news media to frame stories in terms of conflict tends, as Gitlin points out, to polarise public debate and to trivialise political actors, as their positions are caricatured in an attempt to present two diametrically opposed sides in the coverage of any public conflict. And the media's tendency to present the fact "that advances the story," will tend to simplify complicated realities, by turning them into easy-to-follow narratives.

If it has been difficult for newspaper and radio news to maintain high standards of investigative and context oriented journalism, because of cost and time limitations, television news is even more limited in this regard. Prisoner to its need for fresh pictures, television news is even more limited than other media to covering issues only when triggered by current events. And if the norms of print journalism tend to oversimplify problems and debates, the extreme limitations of text length in most television news programs presents another real limitation. Local news programs, most viewers' main source for their national and international political news (see Ansolabehere et al. 1993, 48-4), tend to present most political news in a three to four sentence format. These severe limitations on the possibilities of in-depth analysis of political issues, means that television news must rely even more than print journalism on its capacity to turn issues into short and simple stories: "X did Y today. What will happen tomorrow? (Stay tuned and find out.)"

Increasing reliance on public opinion polls, both in print journalism and on television, has in part constituted an attempt to circumvent the limitations of the traditional news format. If a recent event is required in order to justify a story as "news," news organisations are able to generate events through public opinion polls. If a newspaper's political editors feel, for example, that increasing disparities in wealth in America throughout the 1980s and 1990s represent a development with important political implications which should be covered, they can devise a poll asking people about

their reactions to the increasing inequality, and then report on the pseudo-event they have created.

But the reliance on polls also tends to exacerbate some of the problems of mass media coverage of political issues. Polling can tend to create the impression of over-simplified cleavages in the electorate that do not really exist. According to James Fishkin, "on many issues, about four out of five citizens do not have stable ... opinions; they have what the political psychologists call 'non-attitudes' or 'pseudo-opinions'" (quoted in Shapiro 1991, 27). In other words, those being polled often feel compelled to give answers that fit into the schema presented to them, even if they did not, before being asked by the pollsters, have opinions about a particular subject, or their opinions do not correspond to the options they are asked to choose between. The result is that poll results may tend to reflect the cognitive world of the pollsters more than it reflects the actual thoughts and concerns of the public.

The dominance of television and public opinion polling in the mass media, therefore, has a tendency to exacerbate some of the more problematic aspects of mass media political communication. It also shapes political communication in some more idiosyncratic ways as well. Although it is hard to separate the various aspects of the logic of the new political communication regime, in the following three sections, I will use the theoretical framework suggested in the introduction to discuss how television and mass opinion polling have: (1) created an intensely self-reflexive public sphere, which is increasingly divorced from the workings of government and the social problems that our politics should ideally be addressing, (2) sped up the pace of news coverage, thereby increasing the superficiality of public political discourse, and (3) led to increasingly conflictual political practices and increasingly cynical news coverage of politics.

1. Interpretations of Yesterday's Reactions: The Hyper-Reflexivity of the New Public Sphere

A picture may paint a thousand words, but the voice-overs that accompany the pictures we see on television are invariably quite sparse. Because the average story on television can be accompanied by only a limited amount of verbal analysis, television discussion of politics tends to be limited and highly schematised. With only a few seconds to explain the import of a news story, reporters tend towards analysis of the game of politics, rather than analysis of the social context for, or potential implications of, policy battles. In covering a news event like Hillary Clinton's presentation of her health reform bill before Congress in September of 1993, for example, discussion of public impressions of Hillary (whether she was playing a proper role as first lady,) or the responses of key congressional Republicans to her presentation, were framing stories that could fit into a five or ten second time slot in an evening newscast. Particular details of the plan — for example, analysis of which aspects had elicited the most questions, or of ways in which the plan as unveiled that day differed from other options that the administration had considered — these all represented framing stories that were usually too complicated to fit into a typical television news story. There is simply not enough time for this kind of discussion on a television news program. And even if there were, audiences have been shown to have difficulty following complicated news analysis in television broadcasts: viewers often find themselves left with strong impressions of the emotional and symbolic impact of television visuals, but an inability to recall the news analysis that accompanied them (Ansolabehere et al. 1993, 258).

This tendency of television to discuss political issues primarily in terms of politicians' popularity ploys and battles has been accompanied by a trend towards the inclusion of less unmediated presentation of the speeches and public statements of politicians. From 42 seconds in 1968, the average television news soundbite had shrunk, by 1992, to less than 10 seconds (Patterson 1993, 74-75). In network news coverage of the 1992 general election, for example, anchors and reporters spoke six minutes for every minute that the candidates were shown speaking.[5] Journalistic debate has become increasingly dominated by discussions of the game of popular politics: daily assessments of the waxing and waning popularity of public figures, and the interpretation of all acts of legislation and political communication in terms of their intended or actual affects on the popularity ratings of politicians, and on their prospects for reelection. And as it has come to focus more intensely on the public relations wars of politicians than on their actions in office, or the issues they are addressing, the media has tended to become more and more hyper-reflexive: focusing on political issues connected to its own institutional processes while neglecting to report on aspects of politics which transpire primarily outside the realm of the communications media. As the journalistic presentation of politics has come to focus more and more on issues of "horse race" (who's winning in the polls today?) and "spin control," (how are public relations managers attempting to manipulate the press and public opinion?), political discourse in the public sphere constituted by the mass media has become more and more divorced from the social problems that politicians are hired to address, and from the real, and often quite complicated, workings of government.

Frequent public opinion polling by news agencies reinforces this kind of hyper-reflexivity. Through the pseudo-events created by opinion polls, trends in public opinion themselves create an endless cycle of news stories. Indeed, the increased use of daily tracking polls by news organisations during election campaigns has produced evidence that the figures they produce are not always representative of meaningful changes in public opinion. When the public's temperature is taken daily, it often manifests extreme volatility, such as the 14 point leap, from a 9 point to a 25 point Clinton lead over Dole, that the CNN/***USA Today*** daily tracking poll registered in a mere three day period last September (Bennett 1996). In fact, as political scientist James S. Fishkin points out, the result is a far cry from George Gallup's original vision that public opinion polling, in conjunction with the unification of political discourse through the mass media, might, in effect, reinstate the ideals of the New England town meeting, but on a national scale. On the contrary, a more apt metaphor for the resulting political discourse, as V. O. Key, Jr. and Milton Cummings presciently remarked in 1966, is that of the public sphere as "echo chamber" (both discussed in Fishkin 1996, 133-135).

2. The Ever-Quickening Pace of Coverage

Journalism is an extremely competitive business, in which a large premium is put on the ability to "scoop" the competition by getting a story out first. Over the last few decades the pace of the game has picked up considerably. With more news outfits conducting daily tracking polls (Morin 1995, 124), and the proliferation of weekly television talk shows featuring journalists who assess the week's winners and losers (Fallows 1996, 92-113), the feedback loop of journalistic reflexivity grows ever tighter.

The frenetic pace of interpretation of the game of politics has very serious implications for how we choose political candidates and how politicians govern once in of-

fice. The daily reporting and assessment of ever shifting public opinion can, for example, have a profound impact on the fate of contenders in primary races as successive reporting of quick turn-around polls in the early primaries can lead to "bandwagon" effects. Individual or Political Action Committee (group) donations to a campaign during the primaries entail an assumption that the candidate has a good chance of winning the party nomination (rarely will it be a wise allocation of resources to support a candidate who is sure to lose). Thus, if a candidate's chances of winning appear to suddenly crash, funding sources may dry up rapidly. The constant barrage of public opinion polls that has come to accompany the early primaries, followed by daily assessments in the press, can rapidly sink a campaign which, in a different media climate might have been able, over time, to persuade voters to shift allegiances. Before the public has had much exposure to the candidates, and before voters have therefore had much opportunity to assess the policy stances or leadership potential of the candidates, their opinions may be based primarily on assessments of whether a candidate seems to be doing well in the polls. Candidates' fates are too often determined by inaccurate assessments of their "electability," based on these shallow early polling results.[6]

The fast pace of public discussion is also speeding up the deliberative process of politicians, and is proving to be a significant distraction to the real work of government. As Fallows points out, the "non-stop news cycle," has not only sped up the deliberative processes of office holders, but it has handicapped policy making, as more and more attention must be paid to spin control and responses to the latest objections and rumours:

> *The most obvious effect of the non-stop news cycle is to force government officials to spend their time in non-stop response. Ideally public officials would be able to think decades ahead, in considering national savings rates and environmental challenges; or years ahead in planning school reforms and industrial growth; or months ahead about trade negotiations or foreign policy statements; or at least beyond the next weekend's political talk shows with their verdicts on "good" or "bad" weeks. In reality it can be hard for officials to think more than fifteen minutes ahead, as they look through the mountain of phone slips on their desk and try to answer congressional objections, kill off rumors or leaks, and put their spin on stories in the minutes before the next deadline arrives* (Fallows 1996, 185).

Thus, the quickening pace of news coverage, driven by the ascendance of both television and public opinion polling, has ramifications for many different aspects of the democratic process: not only does it prevent candidates lacking in either name recognition or enough money to buy it from slowly building public support throughout the nomination process, but it limits politicians' flexibility once in office as well.

3. Cynical Journalists, Negative Politics

Over the course of the last few decades, political campaigns have become more negative in tone, while journalistic coverage of politics has become more and more cynical. These two trends have, in fact, tended to reinforce one another. As television ads have come to play a more central role in electoral campaigns, political consultants have come to realise that negative ads, which attack one's opponent, are often more effective than positive ads. This is partly due to the fact that voters are more likely to believe and remember negative ads, but also because negative ads tend to have more

"ripple effects" in the press, because journalists' attempts to assess the accuracy of such attacks focus the news agenda on those very topics that a politician's political handlers are trying to emphasise (Ansolabehere et. al. 1993, 88, 97).

Paradoxically, journalists' strident attempts to prevent political candidates from setting the news agenda during electoral campaigns have forced the candidates to use more manipulative methods in their attempts to control coverage of their campaigns. It is precisely the shrinking sound bites and the constant attention to trends in popularity ratings that have made sophisticated spin control a more dominant part of political campaigning. But a vicious cycle ensues, because as efforts at spin control become more central to candidates' campaign strategies, analysis of how politicians try to manipulate press coverage of their campaigns becomes an important part of the real story journalists must tell about those campaigns. The current predicament for both politicians and journalists is the result of a number of reinforcing imperatives that have, since the inauguration of the new regime of mass media political communication, created a dragon that neither of them can now easily slay.

One result is that journalists are increasingly telling the public cynical stories about manipulative politicians and the games they play to try to persuade the electorate. For example, while 75% of the news coverage received by Nixon and Kennedy in the 1960 presidential elections was positive, 60% of the discussion that Clinton, Bush and Perot received in the 1992 election was negative in content (Patterson 1993, 20). According to one recent study, "over the years, press coverage of Congress has moved from healthy scepticism to outright cynicism" (Rozell 1994, 1). This cycle of scepticism and negativity may, in fact, be the most dangerous aspect of the new mass media communication regime, as the cynicism that has come to characterise so much of American political discourse and news coverage seem to be coming to characterise the attitudes of the American electorate as well.

Conclusion: The Mass Media Communication Regime and Voter Disaffection

Public alienation, regarding both the political process and the media, is at an historical high point in the United States. In a speech delivered to the Congressional Institute for the Future in 1994, pollster Louis Harris reported some sobering figures. Public confidence ratings in the major institutions of government and the press have fallen precipitously since the institution of this new communication regime in the 1960s. Since 1966, confidence ratings for government have fallen drastically: confidence in the White House had dropped from 46% to 18%; and for Congress, from 34% to 18% (Harris 1994). For example, according to a July 1994 ***Washington Post***-ABC News poll report,

> *a majority of Americans believes that Congress cares more about special interests and more about retaining their positions than the best interests of the country, and large numbers believe that campaign promises are made with no intention of keeping them* (in Capella and Jamieson 1996, 72).[7]

Confidence in the press has dropped as well: for the press in general, from 30% to 13%; and for television news from 43% to 24% (Harris 1994). This drop in confidence does not seem to reflect merely a broad pessimism among Americans. An ABC News/Money magazine poll in 1992 found that only 22% of Americans were dissatisfied

with their own lives, while 72% expressed dissatisfaction with "things in the country these days" (reported in ***The Public Perspective***, July/August 1992). [8]

Many have hypothesised that this growing public disaffection with political communication in the public sphere has left voters feeling apathetic, and may drive many of them out of the public sphere by discouraging them from participating in politics. A number of studies have shown that negative advertising and press attention to horse race and discussions of political spin control may discourage voters from participating in national elections, contributing to the United States' notoriously low voter turnout rates[9] (Ansolabehere et. al 1993, 180; Southwell 103; Ansolbahere and Iyengar 1995, 99-114; Capella and Jamieson 1996, 75-84).

While the mass communication regime constituted by the hegemony of television and mass opinion polling offers to the American public new opportunities for access to the workings of their government, and for expression of their preferences, the insertion of these new technologies into the intensely competitive free market American system has resulted in a number of self-reinforcing tendencies which appear to be undermining the promise of the new technologies. In order to counter the public disaffection that seems to be resulting from the superficiality, negativity and hyper-reflexivity of mass media political coverage, politicians and journalists and will need to begin to address some of these problems. Some prominent journalists and pollsters have like ***The Washington Post***'s Broder and Richard Morin, have not only made calls for less reliance on poll stories and less horse race coverage, but have actually managed to fairly successfully reign in these practices (Morin 1995; Mundy 1996). And a new movement of concerned journalists have begun to experiment with new forms of "civic journalism" which involve average citizens in agenda setting and provide more substantive news analysis designed to help readers become more active political participants (see Morin 1995; Weaver 1994; Hume 1996, 148-151; Fishkin 1996). A number of politicians and network news executives have also begun to experiment with the possibility of offering free air time to politicians to present unmediated messages to the electorate (see Mifflin 1996). But change comes hard, especially in an industry facing such intense market pressures, making both the time and financial resources that would be needed to carry out such innovative projects scarce. The success of these projects will, in the end, depend not just on the values of individual journalists, but on the capacity for these new formats of political coverage to attract audiences and to fit into the budgetary restraints of the businesses which run news organisations. It remains to be seen to what extent the efforts of the journalism profession itself may eventually succeed in reversing some of those dynamics of the mass media political communication regime which are most damaging to American political discourse, and therefore to our ability to carry out the kind of constructive national political projects that are now called for as we approach the 21st century.

Notes:

1. I would like to thank Manuel Castells for providing the inspiration, and much of the theoretical framework for this paper. This project began as a research project for his recent, three volume work on the information revolution and the network society, *The Information Age: Economy, Society and Culture*, and it was through my work with Castells that I first began to think about the impact of the media's new role as the dominant "space of politics," (see volume II, *The Politics of Identity*) and to speculate about the role that new media technologies have palyed in reshaping political discourse within that space.

2. Abramson et. al, among others, have pointed out that this results in an "individualist, plebiscitary-type government" at the expense of pluralistic and communitarian forms of interest organization and representation (1993, 89).

3. The McGovern-Frazer Committee reforms within the Democratic party were a response to the 1968 Democratic National Convention's highly contested choice of Hubert Humphrey as presidential candidate over the more popular, anti-war Eugene McCarthy. The reforms gave states an incentive to switch from closed caucuses to the more open process of selection of convention delegates through direct primaries (Polsby 1983, 55-61; Patterson 1993, 30-33). Whereas only 40% of all delegates had been selected through direct primaries in the 1950s, in the 1990s, a full 80% are now chosen in this manner (Ansolabehere et al. 1993, 75).

4. White House poll results were kept locked in a safe, and even Nixon's 1972 re-election campaign staff pollsters were never informed of their existence (Jacobs and Shapiro 1995, 186)

5. Clinton's the One, *Media Monitor*, Center for Media and Public Affairs, November 1992, 6. Cited in Patterson 1996, 102. A similar trend can be noted in print journalism as well. Patterson cites an interesting study in which a content analysis of newspaper articles showed that in 1960, while candidate strategy had become a significant part of presidential election news, the vast majority of articles still focused on the particular messages of the candidates. By 1984, however, the strategic game became a major focus of articles: one third of the of the stories, compared to less than one fifth in 1960 (and less than one twentieth in 1928 and 1898!) (Patterson 1993, 68).

6. A particularly dramatic example of this was the impact of a flawed poll conducted two weeks before the most recent New Hampshire Republican primary produced a wild swing of public opinion away from one candidate (Bob Dole) and towards another (Steve Forbes). Had the flaw been reversed, experts surmise the swing might well have destroyed the Forbes campaign (Mundy 1996).

7. Capella and Jamieson recognize that the public has always been rather cynical about the workings of Congress, and that since at least World War II, public evaluations of Congress have more often been negative than positive (52% of all evaluations since 1939 have been more negative than positive). Nevertheless, their real concern is that public evaluations have dropped even lower in the last few decades, and that it appears to be those who are most knowledgable about congressional politics who express the deepest cynicism.

8. This scepticism may, however, extend to other institutions as well. Decreasing confidence in many of the most traditionally well-respected professions, such as the legal and medical professions, would seem to indicate that there is a more general cultural trend toward scepticism about institutions and experts. To what extent this more general trend might be related to the processes addressed in this paper is an interesting question: might this general scepticism be attributable to trends in cynical investigative television journalism as well, or might we be better served to look elsewhere for the roots of this cynicism?

9. Voter turnout in the United States during the 1970s and 1980s averaged 46.2% (for presidential and congressional elections). Compare with the following figures: France, 76.0%; Germany, 88.6%; Italy, 91.4%; Japan, 71.2%; Spain, 73.9%; United Kingdom, 42.6% (see Castells 1997, 346).

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