



Governing in the Age of Fox News

The polarization of the American media has deep historical roots—the republic came into being amidst a vigorous partisan press. But the splintering of public attention and the intensification of ideological journalism—in particular, the rise of Fox News—have created unique challenges for President Obama. Is it possible to have partisan media that retain professional standards of reporting?

By PAUL STARR

THE FIGHT BETWEEN the Obama White House and Fox News may look like a replay of previous presidential conflicts with the media. After all, antagonism between presidents and elements of the press is a fine American tradition.

But the Fox News phenomenon is different, and its development reflects a deeper change in the public itself that presents a new challenge for presidential leadership.

What was once an expansive mass public has lost some of its old breadth and, at its core, become more intense

and combative. A growing percentage of people, especially among the young, no longer regularly follow the news in any medium, while those who remain the most attentive and engaged tend to be sharply polarized along ideological lines. On both ends of the political spectrum, people interested in politics

increasingly view national leadership through the prism of the partisan media that dominate cable news, talk radio, and the blogosphere.

Before cable and the Internet, the way for a president to reach the national public was through national media that sought to appeal to audiences spanning the partisan divide. The major newspapers, wire services, and broadcast networks controlled the flow of news from Washington and the president's access to the channels of persuasion, yet they operated more or less according to the standards of professional journalism, and the White House could exercise plenty of leverage in its media relations by selectively leaking news and granting exclusive interviews. So despite sometimes antagonistic relations with the press, presidents were able to use it to reach a broad and relatively coherent national public.

But now that the old behemoths of the news are in decline, the unified public they assembled is fading too. Neither the broadcast networks nor the newspapers have the reach they once did, raising concerns about whether the press will be able to serve its classic function as a watchdog over government. That problem also has a flip side. Precisely because the press is often critical of political leaders, it provides them legitimacy when it validates the grounds for their decisions. A press that is widely trusted by the public for its independence and integrity is also a resource for building consensus. Thus when the public sorts itself according to hostile, ideologically separate media—when the world of Walter Cronkite gives way to the world of Glenn Beck and Keith Olbermann—political leadership loses a consensus-building partner. This is the problem that faces Barack Obama. It is not, however, an unprecedented one.

TO MOST AMERICANS, at least until recently, it had long seemed a settled matter that the media should have no relationship with political parties—but that has not been the norm throughout American history, much less in other countries. In many democracies, newspapers and other media have developed in parallel with political parties (sometimes directly financed and

controlled by them), while elsewhere the media have been independent, with no partisan connection. The prevailing model for how American presidents interact with the media has gone through three historical stages. As a young republic (and to a large extent even after the Civil War), the nation had partisan newspapers; the second stage, stretching across the 20th century, was characterized by powerful, independent media outlets that kept their distance from the parties; and in the third stage, we now have a hybrid system that combines elements of the first two.

The founding period in American history created a new and richly supportive environment for the press. Britain and other European states, seeing popular newspapers as a political threat, had limited what they could say and imposed heavy taxes to raise their costs and reduce their circulation. America's Founders, in contrast, believed that the circulation of news and political debate could help preserve their fragile republic. So besides guaranteeing the press its freedom, they excluded it from taxation and subsidized its development by setting cheap postal rates for mailing newspapers to subscribers. The government thereby underwrote the costs of a national news network without regulating its content. Public officials also subsidized specific newspapers they favored, by awarding generous contracts for government printing and paying fees for official notices. Together with subscription and advertising income, the postal and printing subsidies provided the financial basis for a development of the press so rapid that by 1835, the United States, even though it was still almost entirely rural, probably had the highest per capita newspaper circulation in the world.

Under many regimes, government subsidies have made the press politically subservient. But in the United

States, the postal subsidies benefited all newspapers without limitation based on viewpoint—and newspapers did clearly express their ideological stances. And because of the separation of powers and the federal system, printing subsidies from different branches and levels of government went to newspapers from different parties. In fact, rather than solidifying incumbent power, the early environment of the press paved the way for two insurgent presidential candidates, Thomas Jefferson in 1800 and Andrew Jackson in 1828.

Jefferson's Democratic-Republicans were the first party to exploit the press environment established by the Founders, and they did so despite adversity.

In 1798, during an undeclared war with France, President John Adams's Federalists enacted the infamous Sedition Act, making it a crime to publish "false, scandalous and malicious writing" about the president (though not about the vice president, who at the time was none other than Jefferson himself, the leader of the opposition). The Adams administration used the act to prosecute leading Jeffersonian editors and

close down their papers—but the Jeffersonians more than offset those losses by establishing dozens of new papers in the run-up to the election of 1800. In the process, they demonstrated that the press could serve as a lever for overturning power in the United States.

Political parties at this time were only loose coalitions of leaders; they had no ongoing organization except their newspapers, and in practice, the parties and their newspapers were almost indistinguishable. Local editors were key party organizers, and local party leaders often met in the newspaper office. According to some historians, this partisan press belonged to the "dark ages" of American journalism. But it played a central role in mobilizing political participation and creating a vibrant democracy. And at no time was that more the case than in 1828, when

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Jackson's supporters built a network of Democratic papers across the country, and voting turnout increased sharply.

Once in office, Jackson established the practice (which lasted until 1860) of having a quasi-official paper that spoke directly for the president and received federal patronage. Still, the press continued to be highly competitive, and the presidential newspaper did not become a stable monopoly. In the 32 years following Jackson's election, 11 different papers in Washington served as presidential organs, and by the 1860s they were so outstripped in circulation by advertising-supported metropolitan dailies that a separate paper representing the president had become obsolete. Beginning with Lincoln, presidents communicated with the public through commercially financed newspapers, though many of these continued to have strong partisan identities.

The rise of the mass press inaugurated a long, second era in presidential communication, spanning most of the 20th century, when national leaders had to adapt to new realities, including the growing role of reporters as independent interpreters of the news and the development of media with national reach. In the late 19th century, presidents literally kept journalists at a distance (reporters had to wait outside the White House gates for news from officials coming and going). Presidents also did not represent themselves, nor were they seen, as the central actors in the nation's politics. Only at the turn of the century, as "congressional government" gave way to a stronger executive, did presidents begin to cultivate the press and make themselves more visible by seizing the opportunities for public persuasion and influence that mass communications provided.

If Jefferson and Jackson were the two breakthrough presidents in the era of the partisan press, the two Roosevelts were their counterparts

as presidential innovators in the mass media of the 20th century. Although the shift began under his predecessor, William McKinley, Theodore Roosevelt brought reporters into the White House on a more regular basis, providing them for the first time with a press room. He also projected his influence more widely, giving more speeches than earlier presidents had and making the most of his office as a "bully pulpit." With his charm and energy, Roosevelt infused the presidency with qualities that have served as a model for leadership through the media ever since.

Natural gifts were also critical to Franklin Roosevelt's success. The first Roosevelt, a Republican, had had the advantage of dealing with a press that was predominantly Republican in its sympathies. FDR, however, as a Democrat, was convinced that he needed to circumvent hostile Republican newspaper publishers to reach the public directly. Radio gave him that power. Unlike Herbert Hoover, Roosevelt spoke in a conversational style in his "fireside chats," creating the sense among his listeners that he was talking directly to them in their living rooms.

The advent of television highlighted the personality and performative abilities of the president even more than had radio. What the fireside chat was for FDR, the televised news conference was for John F. Kennedy—an opportunity to show off personal qualities to maximum advantage. In the era of the captive mass public, from the 1950s through the '70s—when people had access to only a few TV channels, and the three national networks had a 90 percent share of the audience—the president had command of the airwaves, and the narrative of the evening news typically cast him as the dominant actor in the nation's daily political drama.

For a time, this seemed to be the permanent structure of the news and national politics in the age of electronic

media. In retrospect, it was the peaking of the unified national public, the moment just before cable TV and the Internet began breaking it up, bringing the media to another historic turning point.

FROM THE FOUNDING ERA to the late 20th century, the news in America enjoyed an expanding public. In the 1800s, postal policies and advances in printing technology cut the price of the printed word and, together with wider access to education, enabled more Americans to read newspapers and become civically literate. In the 20th century, radio, newsreels at the movies, and television extended the reach of the news even farther.

It was only reasonable to assume, then, that the digital revolution would repeat the same pattern, and in some respects it has; online news is plentiful and (mostly) free. But a basic rule of communication is that abundance brings scarcity: an abundance of media creates a scarcity of attention. So although journalists and politicians have new ways to reach the public, the public has acquired even more ways to ignore them. Politics and other news are at our fingertips, but a lot of us don't want to go there. Between 1998 and 2008, according to surveys by the Pew Research Center, the number of Americans who say they don't get the news in any medium on an average day rose from 14 percent to 19 percent—and from 25 percent to 34 percent among 18-to-24-year-olds. And 2008 was a year when interest in the news should have been relatively high.

Obama's success in using digital media during the election may have led some to expect that as president he would be able to do the same. The job, however, is different. Rallying your activist base may not be the best way to win marginal votes in Congress. What Obama needs to do to win those votes—for example, make concessions to moderate Democrats on health-care legislation—may, in fact, disappoint his most passionate supporters. Mobilizing public support as president, rather than as a candidate, is also a different challenge. Although digital communications have made reaching political supporters cheaper and easier, the fractured nature

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of the public makes it more difficult to reach both the less politically interested and the partisan opposition.

During what the political scientists Matthew A. Baum and Samuel Kernell refer to as the “golden age of presidential television” in the early postwar decades, close to half the households in the country would watch a prime-time presidential TV appearance. As access to cable expanded in the 1980s, the audience started shrinking, and by 1995, only 6.5 percent of households watched one of Bill Clinton’s news conferences. Obama started out with comparatively high ratings. According to Nielsen data, 31 percent of TV homes watched his first press conference, on February 9, though that dropped to 16 percent by his fifth, on July 22. His speeches to Congress have drawn a somewhat bigger audience, but the ratings have followed the same trajectory. Nonetheless, the president still has the ability to command wider attention than any other figure in American politics. Obama’s health-care speech to Congress on September 9 drew an estimated 32 million viewers, which was down from 52 million for his first address to Congress in February but still far higher than any other political figure could hope to attract.

After a summer when the national debate on health-care reform seemed to be dominated by his opponents—thanks, in no small measure, to Fox News and its one-sided coverage of protests at congressional representatives’ town-hall meetings—Obama was able to reverse the momentum. In any conflict, the president’s voice can rise above the noise. In any national crisis, eyes will still turn to the president, and citizens will expect him to speak for the nation. On those occasions, if he uses the opportunity well, he remains the country’s most important teacher. And that remains Obama’s greatest strength in competing with Fox over the direction of the national conversation.

During his presidential campaign, Obama said he would try to repair America’s bitter divisions, and he reached out to conservatives on various occasions, such as his visit to Rick Warren’s Saddleback Church. American politics has become more polarized, however, for deep-seated historical

reasons. With the shift of the South to the GOP, the Republicans have become a more purely conservative party, and the Democrats a more liberal one. If this change in the parties had occurred half a century ago, the dominant news media might have moderated polarizing tendencies because of their interest in appealing to a mass audience that crossed ideological lines. But the incentives have changed: on cable, talk radio, and the Internet, partisanship pays.

Not since the 19th century have presidents had to deal with partisan media of this kind, and even that comparison is imperfect. Today the media saturate everyday life far more fully than they did in early American history. Fox News, in particular, is in a league by itself. In the absence of clear national leadership in the Republican Party, Fox’s commentators (together with Rush Limbaugh) have effectively taken over that role themselves. Although they have their liberal counterparts on MSNBC, the situation is not exactly symmetrical, because MSNBC’s commentators do not have as strong a following and the network’s reporting is not as ideologically driven as Fox’s.

Of course, professional journalism, with its norms of detachment, hasn’t disappeared, though it’s in deep financial trouble. Leading newspapers, notably *The New York Times*, have a wider readership online and in print than they had before in print alone. Media-criticism blogs and Web sites from varied perspectives serve a policing function in the new world of public controversy. Partisan media are now firmly part of our national conversation, but countervailing forces—not just the political opposition and its supporters in the media, but professional journalists and other sources for authenticated facts—can keep partisanship from controlling that conversation. Although most American journalists assume that professionalism and partisanship are inherently incompatible, that is not necessarily so. Partisan media can, and in some countries do,

observe professional standards in their presentation of the news. That is where civic groups and the scientific community, as well as media critics and others upholding those standards, should focus their pressure. Some commentators may be beyond embarrassment, but the news divisions of the partisan media are likely to be more sensitive to charges of unsubstantiated claims and loaded language. The yellow press of the 1890s looked equally immune from

rebuke—and for a long time it was—but the growth of professional journalism in the 20th century did bring about a significant degree of restraint, even in the tabloids.

No one can put the old public back together again. Walter Cronkite’s death last July provoked nostalgia for a time when it seemed all Americans had someone they could trust, and that person was a journal-

ist. But it’s not just Cronkite that’s gone; the world that made a Cronkite possible is dead. Now we have a fighting public sphere, which has some compensating virtues of its own. As in the early 19th century, a partisan press may be driving an increase in political involvement. After a long decline, voter turnout in the 2004 and 2008 elections returned to levels America hadn’t seen in 40 years. Fox News and MSNBC stir up the emotions not just of their devoted viewers but of those who abhor them; liberals and conservatives alike may be more inclined to vote as a result. Democracy needs passion, and partisanship provides it. Journalism needs passion, too, though the passion should be for the truth. If we can encourage some adherence to professional standards in the world of partisan journalism, not via the government but by criticism and force of example, this republic of ours—thankfully no longer fragile—may yet flourish. ■

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