“Political Campaigns and New Media: A Changing Landscape”

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Abstract

The emergence of more journalistic niches has created a more competitive media environment, with an increased reliance on political polling in campaign coverage. As the traditional media provide horse race coverage, the polling process is becoming more volatile and unreliable. Experts worry that this dependence on polls is detracting from more important subjects – such as understanding the importance of elections and forging relationships with political candidates. Meanwhile, new media are developing two-way dialogues between citizens and candidates. Traditional and new media are balancing one another, but it is unclear whether the scales will remain stable or tip, ushering in an era of altered political engagement.
Literature Review

Political Campaigns: The Biggest Story In Journalism.

Political campaign style and reporting have shifted with the inclusion of "new media" in electioneering. Presidential hopefuls and their staffs now announce candidacies on YouTube, host Twitter accounts and maintain high-powered websites. Both campaigns and news outlets must be ever more responsive to the growing number of "new media" literate Americans, from bloggers to Facebookers and YouTubers to Twitter users.

These new platforms have altered the relationships between journalists, politicians, readers and citizens. Researchers are left to consider a wide variety of questions: whether horse race coverage harms political understanding, how new media will affect the dialogues between candidates and citizens, and how traditional and new media will interact in the future.

Questions like these often solidify elections as both the most trying and most rewarding times for journalists. “Few events in journalism reveal as much about the nature of the news culture as presidential elections,” wrote Tom Rosenstiel and Bill Kovach in “Lessons of the Election,” a part of the State of the News Media 2009 report. Rosenstiel was echoing a sentiment he wrote in a 2005 Public Opinion Quarterly article – that no story is more competitive, better at building audiences or more influential to news outlets’ reputations than a presidential election.

Political Polling and the Public’s Understanding of Elections. With the addition of new media outlets, both the number of polls and the reliance on polling in journalism has grown significantly. The number of organizations conducting national campaign polls tripled from 1992 to 2008, according to the National Council on Public Polls – an estimate that some say may be low (Rosenstiel and Kovach, 2009). In addition, Pollster.com calculated that an average of 1.58
polls were released per day from Jan. 1 to Nov. 4, 2008 (Rosenstiel and Kovach).

However, the increase in the number of news outlets has not necessarily prompted more original investigative reporting, Rosenstiel cautioned in 2005. The news cycle has become continuous, causing more emphasis to be placed on repackaging than on gathering new information (Rosenstiel). News outlets require more content to fill up the ever-increasing space they possess. These same companies are often asked to produce more content with fewer resources – newsroom cutbacks reinforce the need for secondhand material. The reporters that are still working have less time to enterprise, because they must concentrate on keeping up with breaking news across more and more platforms – blogs, social media profiles, video hosting sites and photo galleries, to name a few (Rosenstiel and Kovach, 2009). As such, some media outlets have begun to respond by offering up all of the available information without providing any filtering for the reader.

This idea is particularly well illustrated by poll-heavy Web sites – Realclearpolitics.com, Pollster.com and Fivethirtyeight.com are a few examples of this format. Sites like these received considerable attention during the 2008 election cycle because of the amount of information they offer. Although some of the sites treat certain polls as more valuable than others or attempt to average all of the data, many media professionals see this method of information inundation as a sign that journalists are giving up their traditional roles as gatekeepers (Rosenstiel).

*Media Standards And The Reliability Of Political Polling.* As Rosenstiel established in his 2005 article, some polling companies offer their surveys and data to news outlets free of charge. With the competitive nature of news and the growing number of new media outlets, it is not tough to see why publications would be interested in this free content. Due to increased competition, it is now more vital than ever that news organizations properly market themselves –
a factor that has caused some news outlets to sponsor polls. Many news media fund polls as an investment, because a well-publicized poll can significantly improve an outlet’s brand or image (Rosenstiel). While some experts believe that free polling data should not be trusted, this content can be particularly appealing to news sources. In fact, unreliability is sometimes appealing in itself – polls that are based on questionable methodologies often produce unique results that provide attention-grabbing headlines and stories (Rosenstiel).

Although some polling organizations are clearly more reliable than others, tracking polls have been deemed untrustworthy for years – in the past, tracking polls as a genre have been widely disregarded. In the 1990s, significant portions of the news media considered all nightly tracking polls to be acceptable for use as background information only. This is largely because tracking polls are unreliable even when the information is collected carefully, according to Rosenstiel (2005). Worst of all, Rosenstiel says, tracking polls are now used regularly throughout all media platforms.

Former American Association of Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) Vice President Cliff Zukin has said that election polling is becoming increasingly difficult to complete reliably. However, he clarified that the difficulty does not usually prevent agencies from trying, it only prevents them from doing the job properly. "It is easier to do polling at all, with nonscientific Internet surveys and automatic dialers recording touch tone activated answers, which means more people are out there doing questionable work," Zukin said. (Rosenstiel, p. 714)

The large number of unreliable polls available is particularly concerning in light of recent studies about polls’ effects on journalists’ positive and negative coverage of candidates. The Project for Excellence in Journalism conducted a study showing that, at nearly any given time, the candidate that was ahead in the polls during the 2008 presidential election received more
positive press coverage. This created a cycle – the positive coverage affected future polls, which prompted more positive media coverage for the candidate who was already ahead (Winning the Media Campaign, 2008). The pattern was occasionally broken because of candidates’ missteps, but it was mostly allowed to continue uninterrupted. This link between polling numbers and journalistic coverage suggests that inaccurate polling could significantly impact both election coverage and results.

_Horse Race Coverage: A Growing Problem Or A Changing System?_ “Horse Race Coverage” is a type of election reporting that is focused on “who is ahead in the race and whether a candidate's position is improving or deteriorating throughout the race,” according to the International Encyclopedia of Communication. Although Rosenstiel and Kovach (2009) detected public dissatisfaction with horse race reporting, they found that most coverage of the 2008 election was focused on which candidate was ahead. In fact, the pair asserted that such coverage is growing more prevalent. Overall, they found in a 2009 study that 58% of the stories included were devoted to the horse race aspect of the election.

While Rosenstiel and Kovach considered media outlets across several platforms, another study specifically compared the political stories posted on the blog Daily Kos with the coverage printed in the New York Times. The authors chose the two news outlets because of their relatively high levels of readership. Based on their 2008 study, Martin and Lanosga suggested that bloggers implement horse race themes in their writing significantly more often than do print reporters. Almost 75% of the stories on Daily Kos during the presidential primary season featured a horse race focus. At the Times, 62% dealt with election outcomes – still a substantial number, but considerably less than its new media counterpart.
Many of the stories, particularly on Daily Kos, received large numbers of user comments. Several also provided nearly up-to-the-minute reporting on events, a possible indicator that Daily Kos prints more horse race coverage in order to take advantage of its more easily updated medium. Although Jason Martin and Gerald Lanosga (2008) detected comparatively few issue stories on Daily Kos – 26% of stories, as opposed to 68.3% in the Times – the blog often linked to issue coverage in other publications, including the Times. Many Daily Kos readers also reported that they read the blog as a supplement to more traditional media. This suggests that Daily Kos readers may receive their issue coverage from other news sources.

*The Impacts of Horse Race Coverage on Political Understanding.* Rosenstiel and Kovach (2009) assert that campaign coverage’s everyday focus on the horse race can shift the focus of the election as a whole. In their view, most media outlets are not focused on explaining or understanding the political race – they are wrapped up in predicting the outcome. Over time, such narrow reporting is likely to alter citizens’ understanding of the U.S. political process as a whole, they suggest. The results of a continued concentration on the horse race will likely be a shallower understanding of politics and a more superficial view of elections for citizens, according to Rosenstiel and Kovach. In the authors’ opinions, the growing hubbub of horse race coverage is drowning out other, more necessary political discussions.

*New Media: Building A Dialogue Between Citizens And Their Government.* The online component of the 2008 presidential election was instrumental in both candidates’ campaigns (Keen, McCracken, Rosenstiel and Kovach). The candidates utilized the Internet for networking, fundraising and informing voters (Gordon-Murnane, 2009). Both Obama and McCain maintained accounts on Twitter, YouTube, MySpace, and Facebook; each had his own interactive website.
Obama also kept accounts on Eons, BlackPlanet, FaithBase, Glee, MiGente, MyBatanga and Asian Ave – all of which are social networking sites aimed at particular demographic groups (Gordon-Murnane, 2009). Obama’s considerable online presence is further illustrated by his successful Internet fundraising campaign: $500 million of his $600 million raised was donated online.

“The goal for us was to make sure that we were providing people information on all of these different social networks, so that if they never came directly to our website or signed up for our e-mail list, they still knew that the campaign was reaching out to them,” said Scott Goodstein, Obama’s D.C. campaign manager (Gordon-Murnane, 2009, pp. 31).

In “Election 2008 – It’s A Wrap,” Information Consultant Laura Gordon-Murnane rattles off seemingly endless numbers about Obama’s campaign: 13 million email addresses collected, 7 billion emails sent, more than 1 million people signed up for text messaging, 2 million profiles created on MyBarackObama.com, 200,000 offline events planned, 400,000 blog posts written, 14,548,809.5 hours of video viewed, more than 35,000 volunteer groups created and 5 million additional supporters connected to the campaign using various social networking sites.

This explosion in candidates’ use of social media is a campaign tactic that many political pundits and journalists predict will play a role in future elections (The Washington Times, 2007). "Right now, some future president is online, already getting to know the constituents who will vote 30 years from now," said Cyrus Krohn, director of the Republican National Committee's online campaign outreach division (The Washington Times).

If candidates use new media wisely, together they can create a two-way dialogue between the U.S. government and its citizens, according to Gordon-Murnane. She emphasized that, through YouTube, the Obama campaign was able to circumvent the mainstream media and
communicate with supporters directly. On his YouTube channel, supporters uploaded videos, commented on others’ videos and shared the content with friends (Gordon-Murnane, 2009). Thirty-five percent of Americans said they watched online political videos in the 2008 election cycle, according to Pew research. The 2008 figure is almost three times number who watched 2004’s presidential race. (Mediascape, 2008)

“Mass media will remain supreme, but the Internet is sending us back toward the relationships, dialogue and virtual handshakes,” wrote Jon Henke in “New Media Deserves Its Own Seat At The Table,” in 2007.


Many thought that the 2008 presidential election would be the first real Internet Campaign. However, it emerged instead as the first “Hybrid Campaign,” (Rosenstiel and Kovach, 2009). As such, it should be no surprise that the media produced a hybrid approach to match.

Rather than replacing traditional media, new media has taken on a complementary role. One needs only to consider Sarah Palin’s interviews with Katie Couric to take note of hybrid journalism in action (Rosenstiel and Kovach, 2009). Although the interviews reached relatively large audiences through their traditional media format on TV’s CBS News, many more viewers watched the segments on YouTube than on the actual program. CBS hosted the clips on their own YouTube channel, which kept the new and traditional media aspects from being in competition – instead, they each played to their strengths.

Rosenstiel and Kovach also cited another example, the coverage of Palin immediately after her nomination as the Republican vice presidential candidate. In the days immediately following the announcement of her nomination, many professional journalists were traveling between conventions or otherwise occupied. Information was made available because bloggers
and other new media-types used their capacity for instantaneous dissemination – they scoured the Internet for any facts about Palin and shared what they found quickly. As the week progressed, many of the journalists from the traditional media used their companies’ resources to travel to Alaska and dig deeper into the Palin story. Again, rather than tearing each other down, the new and traditional media outlets worked together to provide citizens with a better understanding than either source could alone.

National Public Radio host Michele Norris emphasized that new media, particularly social media, shape political dialogues because they offer what traditional media do not (Politico, 2008). "YouTube is a powerful tool. Videos by the candidates show people different aspects about the candidate," Norris said (Politico).

Author and Web 2.0 critic Andrew Keen agreed that the 2008 election outcome was determined by a “hybrid of traditional and new media.” (2008) He asserts that the two types of media have become so intertwined that it may be impossible to separate them. To illustrate his point, Keen listed examples of mainstream TV clips (like the Couric/Palin interviews) broadcast on YouTube and professional reporters blogging on Web sites, including HuffingtonPost.com. Although YouTube was influential in the election, Keen asserted that user-generated content did not have as much effect as did content provided by mainstream media sources – videos of Clinton’s crying interview, Palin’s talks with Couric and Obama’s speech in Denver. Clips like these, originally gathered by traditional media, were some of the most watched during the election season (Keen).

“The Internet, through its interactive technology, has contributed to giving millions of Americans a new sense of ownership and emotional involvement with Obama. Perhaps more than any other Presidential candidate in history, the relationship between Obama and the
American electorate is personalized and intimate,” Keen wrote in a blog post the Friday after the election (2008).

Keen asserts that the hybrid approach is being used in campaigning as well as reporting. “What Obama’s success proves is that having a strong Internet presence is only half the story,” he wrote on his blog, titled “The Great Seduction.” Some candidates, including libertarian Ron Paul, experienced success on the Internet that did not translate into high vote counts. Further, Keen emphasizes that Obama’s “key political relationships” with policymakers and consultants were developed outside of cyberspace – on the Senate floor or in Chicago.

Future Directions: Striking A Delicate Balance. Much of the research dealing with political campaigns and new media lacks depth – while the findings in many of the studies are significant and thought-provoking, their scope must be increased to better determine the impacts of new media on American political understanding. For instance, Martin and Lanosga’s “Blogging the Horse Race,” considers only Daily Kos and The New York Times; although these two news sources are widely read and largely revered, they are insufficient to represent the media industry as a whole. Martin, Lanosga and others should conduct further studies to truly determine the amount and impact of horse race coverage in the country’s journalism.

Many of the researchers on this subject make interesting points, but few are able to bridge the chasm between those who view new media as a repair-all for the journalistic world and those who view it as an unwelcome troublemaker. Although many brilliant minds realize the flaws of political polling and many equally brilliant minds understand the vast potential of new media, they will likely require a push into striking a balance between their perspectives.

In the area of research, the nature of measuring some types of data makes understanding the interactions between politics and journalism difficult. For instance, the researchers that
discuss polling suggest that a horse race focus will detract from citizens’ understanding of the
democratic process. However, that is difficult data to collect – the researchers would need to
conduct several studies over an extended period of time to test voters’ knowledge. Even then,
there would be many variables to consider, as so many factors could potentially influence
Americans’ understanding of the political process. If studies like these are indeed undertaken, the
public can expect some substantial waiting time before results are available.

Further, if it were proven that horse race coverage is detrimental to the public’s
understanding, it seems very unlikely that many media sources would change their methods.
Although journalists have a responsibility to inform the public, media is a business. As such, it is
tough to determine what decisions corporations would make in this situation. An increased
dedication to investigative election reporting would require more reporters and more funding,
something that most news sources would likely be unwilling to give in the country’s current
economic state.

While horse race coverage overtakes more and more of America’s election coverage each
year, the situation may not be as dire as many researchers suggest. The U.S. public does require
knowledge about political candidates – that is difficult to deny. However, the traditional news
media does not necessarily need to be the source of the information. In the past, there was not
another logical source to take on the role of educator, but that is no longer the case now. With
new media entering the playing field, traditional media may be able to comfortably take on an
outcomes-based approach; horse race coverage is certainly not entirely devoid of value – polls
are often significant indicators of what the majority of citizens want or need in a candidate. Polls
also offer convenient support for election articles, as they can provide a quick numbers-based
context for a story. (Rosenstiel, 2005) Indeed, some scholars and journalists alike assert that
horse-race coverage and polls have many positive applications, including increasing voter interest. Regardless of its value, the coverage – which has been traced back to 1888 – is unlikely to disappear. (Shafer, 2008)

Rosenstiel and Kovach (2009) assert that political candidates are more removed than ever before. The duo makes that assertion because of the lack of communication between candidates for office and the journalists on their campaign busses. In the past, this lack of communication would have been a barrier to the public’s knowledge about the candidate. However, candidates are now often able to bypass traditional media outlets and connect directly with citizens through new media like Twitter, YouTube, Facebook and MySpace.

Much of the appeal of a hybrid approach is that new and traditional media bring different skills to the table. Keen argues that the new media are beginning to look identical to traditional media, in that many newspaper journalists are moving onto the web (2008). If bloggers as a whole were to lose sight of their unique strengths – the ability to gather information from the Internet quickly and the option of publishing stories almost instantaneously – the healthy hybrid media relationship could falter. The coverage of Palin after her nomination shows why both approaches are necessary to provide political understanding in present day. While this has not yet become a problem, journalists, both new and traditional, must be on the lookout for coverage problems like these in the future.

New and traditional media outlets have shown that they are able to work well together to meet the needs of a wide range of readers and viewers. Indeed, many of their strengths and weaknesses complement one another. It is of utmost importance that citizens in the U.S. have to opportunity to participate in a dialogue about their government and remain informed about and engaged in the political process – the question remains, how will this dialogue continue to be
facilitated?
References


