

Media, Technology and Social Action: Politics and Public Opinion in America's Digital Age

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Preface: Context and Justification

We often discuss politics without any pretense of objectivity or impartiality. For example, depending on the speaker's perspective, Sarah Palin is a political joke or a Mama Bear Maverick, Barack Obama a left wing freedom-hating threat or a beacon of hope in politically fraught times. Non-politicians are subject to similar designations. Glenn Beck and John Stewart are alternatively regarded as either the most dangerous men on television or the last trustworthy purveyors of political information, depending on which side of the aisle one is on. These positions and their popularity are often taken as a sort of "a priori" condition of the status quo, and as a consequence we rarely find ourselves asking why what is popular *is* popular. Why are these people or movements widely recognized and supported or reviled? The answer lies not in sheer randomness or in matters of taste. The arcs of popular political discourse are the products of a systemized pattern of interactions and events. In order to truly understand American popular and political sentiment, we must consider our culture in tandem with the political and media system that produces it. Through understanding the way popular political sentiment is manipulated and produced, individuals seeking to instigate change are able to maximize their chances of obtaining what they consider to be favorable results.

This paper will attempt to untangle some of the complexities of modern political culture in the United States through an exploration of the history and development of America's political and media system, and will present a conceptual model that lays out how this culture is produced in today's day and age. This endeavor is being undertaken for a variety of reasons, not the least of which is the belief that understanding of the modern system of politics and media is a precondition of democratizing America's popular political culture. Though one can discuss media and politics in a variety of settings, I've deliberately chosen to limit the discussion, for the most part, to these systems within the context of the United States. What follows immediately is a justification of these parameters and the scope of my analysis.

Why focus exclusively on the United States? First off, it's simply efficient. An astounding number of mass media producers, distributors and owners are either based in the United States or have substantial US operations. The Walt Disney Company, News Corp, Time Warner, Viacom and CBS are all American companies, for instance. In addition, the United States has been a dominating influence in the development

global media practices and communications policies.¹ As such, much of the research conducted on media's influence on politics has used data collected in or pertaining to the United States. There is a second issue related to practicality. A field as broad as international political opinion and popular culture generation cannot be discussed within a single paper. The attempt to address even the system of a single nation is ambitious. To avoid being overly reductive, I have narrowed my focus to the United States and its system alone, with the understanding that workings of the US system extend their influences far beyond American soil.

This brings us to the second matter to be justified before the start of the paper, namely whether or not discussing American popular culture and opinion production as a "system" will oversimplify the issue or generate misleading conclusions. One might argue that, by describing America's popular and political culture through the use of a system, my conclusions will be either one of two things – misguided, as a result of patternicity², or reductive, simply due to the nature of system design. By streamlining a complex set of actions into a comprehensible system, I *do* risk leaving important factors out. And, in seeking to come up with a system at all, I *am* potentially creating order where there is none. Given both the strength of my data (or, more specifically, the data of my sources) and broadness with which this system has been designed, however, I think I have avoided both hazards and will present a product that is both meaningful and usable. By restricting the components of my system to those that I deem both necessary and sufficient for the steps to be carried out, I avoid the problem of being overly reductive or inclusive. Additionally, minding both of these corollaries helps guarantee that the system I'll present is, in fact, a systematic set of interactions.

Part I: History and Development of American Media

Framework: A Brief Discussion of Relevant Political and Media Theory

At the outset, I'd like to define the concepts of "Politics" and "Media." Media, here, ought to be interpreted in the broadest of senses, as including "the mass, the globalized, the regional, the national the local, [and] the personal media" – as well as the various forms that media might take, ranging from writing to artwork to film.³ Media serve not only as mechanisms for broadcasting entertainment but also as the conduits for basic information. Even in our most quotidian conduct, media are present. Humans, being social creatures, increasingly find themselves tethered to media,⁴ as they remain the most effective way to maintain in contact with

¹ McChesney 310-311.

² A term coined by Michael Shermer, an American science writer and founder of the Skeptics Society, used to describe the tendency to find meaningful patterns where there are none. (Shermer TED)

³ Silverstone 5.

⁴ Shirky 14.

friends, communities and world events.⁵ Media are integral in “shaping the world we live in. Moreover, media are a central part of the capitalist political economy, the center of the marketing system, and a source of tremendous profit in their own right. Media do not explain everything, but understanding media is indispensable to grasping the way power works in contemporary societies”⁶. The idea of “Politics” should also be treated holistically. The systems examined are not limited to the legislature or election processes, but rather the whole of political culture. Politics might be generally thought of as debates and discussions “about choice[s] for a society. Politics is also about which choices are considered to be ‘authoritative,’ that is, binding on individuals who do not independently contest... that choice”.⁷ In other words, political actions encompass not only those actions associated with choice of and interaction with government (like voting, choosing a political party or donating to a candidate) but also efforts and actions, large or small, to alter or maintain social norms and the status quo (like participating in a rally for Legalization of Marijuana, donating time to a shelter for battered women or tuning in to a television program that focuses on LGBT experiences).

With these definitions come several contentions. First, in modern societies, media are essential to the development of culture and the formation of opinions. In any society in which important events are not readily and tangibly available to the average citizen, a mechanism is developed to transmit information and current events. Thus, “citizens deal with a second-hand reality, a reality that is structure by journalists reports about these events and situations”.⁸ Much of the world, particularly politics, is “inconceivable and unsustainable without its appearance and its performance on the screens and through the speakers of the world’s media”.⁹ This is not to say, of course, that the world would not exist, but without technology to advertise and publicize current events, the public would have no way to attend to distant issues or react to them in the context of their daily lives.¹⁰ As we have invented different forms of media, different methods of attending to current events have been created out of necessity, as have different conventions of presentation.¹¹ “New technology makes new things possible: put another way, when new technology appears, previously impossible things start occurring”.¹² The notion that a media form’s inherent technological qualities might dictate the sort of content it can carry will remain important for the duration of this paper.

Further, our media are charged with constructing a world for media consumers, a world that they are

⁵ Silverstone 5.

⁶ McChesney 14.

⁷ Cook 85-86.

⁸ McCombs 1.

⁹ Silverstone 25.

¹⁰ Postman 7.

¹¹ Postman 29

¹² Shirky 107

contextualized within and constructed by simultaneously.¹³ Let's examine this idea in regards to an economic concept. The Efficient Market Hypothesis is a theory which has dominated financial practices in modern Western markets. Essentially, it boils down to the following statements:

1. Markets tend toward efficiency.
2. Agents work as rationally self-interested participants – meaning individuals in the market are acting:
 - a. With perfect information and
 - b. In order to maximize return on their own interests.
3. Because of statements (1) and (2), market values always tend towards the *true value* of products.

From the outset, there's an epistemological problem with this theory – *Who dictates "true value"?* – but there is a larger problem still, related to the second corollary. George Soros¹⁴ responded to the EMH in his recently published book *The Crash of 2008*. Here, Soros promotes the notion “reflexivity,” which challenges the idea that agents can ever act from a position of perfect rational self-interest if they are embedded within in a system. In other words, individuals can only act based on their perceptions of reality, as opposed to in reference to an “objective truth,” and that these actions further influence whatever objective events might be occurring. My contention is that the same is true, if not to an even greater extent, in the field of popular political culture. Because the individuals who produce media also, unavoidably, consume media, consumers can't (and shouldn't) assume that media reports are devoid of bias or perspective. As citizens of the United States, “we are all immersed in American culture,” as are our media.¹⁵ This is important in part because, without careful analysis, we perceive a filtered reality to be objectively true.

An inevitable byproduct of media filtering is the creation of narratives. The idea of narratives “is central for an understanding of the media's role in the creation of a public space for deliberation and judgment”¹⁶. A “narrative” here can be defined as the organization of actions into a comprehensible story line with the goal of better understanding the world.¹⁷ One way to think of politics is as a field composed entirely by a collection of narratives,¹⁸ a cluster of values and norms that cohere into a popular understanding of political life.¹⁹ The stories told within a society, and thus by that society's media, are culled from a set of intra-nationally accepted scripts

¹³ Silverstone 6.

¹⁴ Famed financier whose international market savvy enabled him to rake in \$1 billion by shorting the British pound in 1992.

¹⁵ Lakoff 147.

¹⁶ Silverstone 52.

¹⁷ Adams 5.

¹⁸ Adams 2

¹⁹ Adams 4.

that allow people to better understand their political realities.²⁰ Thus, individuals and organizations in a position to shape these conventions of storytelling are in a particularly authoritative position,²¹ as the choice of narratives impacts the perception of events by the public, which can in turn help push a particular political agenda.²² This is a process popularly referred to as “framing”, or the utilization of “dominant perspectives used to organize both news presentations and political thoughts”.²³ Narratives or frames are inculcated in forms of “news and reporting, as well as in the various manifestations of serial drama on the established national and global broadcast media,”²⁴ and as such can potentially screen out relevant considerations for the sake of narrative simplicity. This, too, will be a concept we will come back to, particularly when examining the role of media forms on political discourse.

Finally, we must examine the roles that media forms have on the production of authority and power. Theories posited, separately, by Hannah Arendt and Dorothy Lee are useful in conceptualizing these developments. First, in her work *On Violence*, Arendt makes a distinction between “Power,” which is the ability of individuals to act in concert,²⁵ and “Authority,” which is the power to control action or group activity without need for coercion, violence or persuasion.²⁶ Dorothy Lee, separately, presents theories on social constraint and autonomy in her work *Valuing the Self*, which is itself a book regarding the relation of individuals to their societies (among other topics). Lee contends that social “constraint” may be less restrictive than it is structuring and that, furthermore, the constraint may ultimately serve to enable activity.²⁷ Lee uses the example of time as being one such social constraint that “not only frees [an individual] from the interference of others but actually makes it possible for [individuals] to act,” thus furnishing basic conditions of freedom.²⁸ Further, removal of social structures make freedoms irrelevant, in those cases where structure would inspire choices and encourage actions²⁹. Taking this concept one step further (though again, working independently), Lewis Mumford furthers Lee’s discussion of time as a human invention and social constraint, one which not only has prevailed in societies but which is now treated as a natural, instead of man-made, phenomenon.³⁰ All of these hypotheses, taken together, serve as a very effective guide for decoding the manner by which the business of

²⁰ Adams 31.

²¹ Adams 20.

²² Adams 10.

²³ McCombs 88.

²⁴ Silverstone 61.

²⁵ Arendt 44.

²⁶ Arendt 45.

²⁷ Lee 65.

²⁸ Lee 4, Lee 66.

²⁹ Lee 68.

³⁰ Postman 11, citing Mumford in-text.

media produces power and authority in relation to popular political sentiment. As technology has advanced, abundance of information and access have developed in tandem, resulting in the creation of more outlets for more ideas to be transmitted to more audiences (and more *types* of audiences) than ever before. Importantly, the recent creation of social networks has provided a simple way for people to create groups that “lead to new groups... [and] more kinds of groups” that can more effectively participate in political discourse. Reverting back to the vocabulary employed by Arendt, Lee and Mumford, new “constraints,” or outlets with XYZ rules or limitations, actually enable more people to participate in discourse, and their ability to participate in tandem affords the opportunity for previously disorganized or un-empowered groups to seize power. One example of this might be the number of recent revolutions in the Middle East, most notably in Egypt, where social networking tools (which pose constraints on what mechanisms communicate messages and how these messages are broadcast, both in form and in content) enabled an unhappy populous to unite and pursue action. In addition, the increasingly quotidian nature of these technological advances gradually removes the idea of “constraint” from peoples interactions with these systems, in effect naturalizing media and allowing more individuals to exert authority in novel ways through novel outlets. This notion, that our changing methods of communicating have profound effects on power and authority within society,³¹ will be important throughout the rest of this text, particularly in the eventual discussion of the Modern American Media-Political System.

The Evolution of the Business and Politics of American Media

As was stated in the previous section, media are an integral facet of American society.³² Though the media of modernity might be spoken of as being a cohesive force, the same cannot be as easily said of earlier incarnations of the media institution. In fact, American media have been evolving since the nation’s inception, starting with print and eventually developing into the multi-faceted entity that exists today. The United States has a “profit-driven, advertising supported corporate media system,” long assumed to be the only possible system in American society.³³ While it is true that the evolution of American media and news sources has always been “intimately tied to political sponsorship, subsidization, and protection,” we should not be so quick to insist that this was the nation’s only option.³⁴ What we *can* more readily regard as a fact, however, is that the idea of “news of the day” cannot have existed without widely institutionalized media sources³⁵ and, further, that both the United States government and media producers have always held stake in what is considered news and how

³¹ Shirky 17.

³² As they are, arguably, in all societies of sufficient size to warrant some system of mass communication

³³ McChesney 492.

³⁴ Cook 17.

³⁵ Postman 7.

media, informational or otherwise, ought to be regulated.³⁶ Here, we'll detail the evolution of the business and politics of the American media. It is impossible to make sense of the media and the content they present without first attempting to understand which “minds... have filtered it. For the accepted types, the current patterns, the standard versions intercept information” before it enters the public sphere.³⁷

Centuries before the birth of the United States, print had become the standard mechanism for transferring knowledge.³⁸ At their core, early media “enabled the fixing and spreading of vernacular languages and, through that emergence, the boundaries and identities of the embryonic nation-state,” thus making newspapers a useful tool in the task of nation and coalition building.³⁹ In the 1700s, newspapers were somewhat “bland and meek,” highly dependent on official proclamations and notices provided by government sources.⁴⁰ After the American Revolution, newspapers printed by rebellious Americans began cropping up, which operated on somewhat contradictory terms, simultaneously “stressing impartiality and the empirical collection of facts in newspapers deferential to officialdom... [and] independent crusades against corrupt authority on behalf of a political faction”.⁴¹ In fact, some of these “crusades” were not very “independent” in nature at all – both the Hamiltonians and Jeffersonians were responsible for producing publications highly sympathetic to their respective causes.⁴² Early news media were regular recipients of political patronage,⁴³ which allowed politicians ways to influence debates without “undermining the dignity of the executive, as many feared speeches and public controversy would do”.⁴⁴ As the United States moved into the nineteenth century, the demand for printed media increased and libraries proliferated,⁴⁵ so that by mid-century, “the newspaper as a conveyor of information, as political advocate, and as entertainer of audiences beyond small localities had emerged”.⁴⁶

Though printed media was influential for a number of reasons, it had one critical advantage that it does not have today – the newspaper held a monopoly in the realm of news, political or otherwise, and on-demand entertainment.⁴⁷ There were really no alternatives for individuals who wished to communicate to a broad audience, which is part of what made print so important in the eyes of the law. It made sense for political parties to utilize the press to whatever extent they could, but posed a problem when the nature of both printed media

³⁶ Cook 2-3.

³⁷ Lippmann 67.

³⁸ Postman 33.

³⁹ Silverstone 19.

⁴⁰ Cook 22-23.

⁴¹ Cook 24-25.

⁴² Cook 26.

⁴³ Cook 37.

⁴⁴ Cook 28.

⁴⁵ Postman 38

⁴⁶ Rossides 41.

⁴⁷ Postman 41.

and politics began to shift.⁴⁸ By the mid-nineteenth century, demand for printed media had provided substantial profits for newspaper owners, which generated “an early crisis in communications – an early expression of the tension between market practices and democratic values”.⁴⁹ This conflict emerged during the Civil War era, a time when the American public had reason to crave up-to-date and accurate information.⁵⁰ The demand for news resulted in “the growth of mass circulation newspapers and the commercialization of the press as a big business,” a process which in general favored papers that presented more seemingly objective reports. Eventually, party patronage of press was no long a financially viable practice.⁵¹ For political parties, “it was one thing to have highly partisan journalism in competitive markets where a broad range of views were available and where a newspaper could be launched without massive amounts of capital,” and it was another thing to attempt to influence established and financially self-sufficient institutions who benefited from presenting less-partisan information.⁵² By the end of the nineteenth century, the press was recognized as an “institution,” as opposed to a collection of newspapers and reporters,⁵³ and sponsored press had essentially vanished.⁵⁴ This was, of course, anything but the end of governmental involvement in media and news production.

The entrance of telegraphy and radio into the American media system would lay the groundwork for fundamental changes in both the content of media and also its regulation. Telegraphy and radio both served as miniature content revolutions – Neil Postman, in his work *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, bemoans the telegraph’s invention as the harbinger of an age of commodified and decontextualized information⁵⁵ - but they also posed problems of usage and distribution heretofore not dealt with in the worlds of government and of business. Unlike the printing press,⁵⁶ radio provided materials that could be consumed even by the illiterate, creating perhaps the first large-scale communications tool that would, theoretically, expand participation across class lines. “Radio broadcasting was a radically new development, and there was great confusion in the 1920’s concerning who should control this powerful technology and for what purposes”.⁵⁷

In the earliest days of radio, amateurs dominated the airwaves. Initially, they went largely unmonitored.⁵⁸ By the mid-1920’s, several hundred nonprofit groups were broadcasting, the assumption being that most

⁴⁸ Cook 31.

⁴⁹ McChesney 309.

⁵⁰ Cook 33.

⁵¹ Cook 33.

⁵² McChesney 309.

⁵³ Cook 21.

⁵⁴ Cook 32

⁵⁵ Postman 65, Postman 67, Postman 70.

⁵⁶ Though, oddly, very much like the internet in the 1990s

⁵⁷ McChesney 359.

⁵⁸ In fact, the Radio Act of 1912, which required radio operators to obtain licenses certain frequencies, was inspired by stories of amateurs interfering with the *Titanic*’s calls for help. (Cook 54)

broadcasters weren't "earning profits from the business of broadcasting, and there was little sense... that they would."⁵⁹ The US government, sensing a real opportunity for both regulation and agenda promotion, passed the Radio Act of 1927. This act established the Federal Radio Commission, which was charged with "[allocating] broadcast licenses and [bringing] order to the airwaves by reducing the total number of stations" for the duration of the year, though the act was renewed 1928 and then in 1929 indefinitely.⁶⁰ In early 1928, the FRC set aside forty of ninety national channels for one occupant only, and allowed the other fifty channels to "house the remaining 600 or so broadcasters who could operate simultaneously on the same channel at much lower power levels.... The FRC had competing applicants shared the contested frequency, with the station deemed most worthy allocated the majority of hours... [which led to] 100 fewer stations on air by the autumn of 1929".⁶¹

Individuals who favored nonprofit broadcasters argued that airwaves were a public resource and broadcasting a public utility, and thus regulation that favored private broadcasters constituted a scandalous misallocation of public resources.⁶² They sensed that the Radio Act of 1927 would invariably favor broadcasters promoting a government-sanctioned conception of the status quo, and that the FRC would inevitably end up marginalizing unpopular or radical opinions.⁶³ Even members of congress felt this may have been the case – in the 1928 hearings on extending the Radio Act, members of the FRC were repeatedly admonished for failing to protect nonprofit broadcasters.⁶⁴ That said, politicians and government officials began to insist that broadcasting remain within certain ideological confines and found that for-profit broadcasters were more amenable to these reforms. Thus, "federal policy worked explicitly to subsidize the operation of for-profit radio"⁶⁵. So it was that early regulation paved the way for the birth of "Big Media."

The first major for-profit broadcasting companies, the National Broadcasting Company (NBC) and the Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS) were established in 1926 and 1927, respectively, and began to benefit almost immediately after the Radio Act of 1927's passage.⁶⁶ In the start of 1927, "NBC had twenty-eight affiliates and CBS sixteen, for a combined 6.4 percent of the broadcast stations; within four years they together accounted for 30 percent of the stations.... Indeed, when the number of house broadcasts and the level of power are considered, NBC and CBS accounted for nearly 70 percent of U.S. broadcasting by 1931".⁶⁷

⁵⁹ McChesney 158

⁶⁰ McChesney 159

⁶¹ McChesney 161

⁶² McChesney 168

⁶³ McChesney 168.

⁶⁴ McChesney 160.

⁶⁵ Cook 57.

⁶⁶ McChesney 158.

⁶⁷ McChesney 161.

Though major newspapers had sprung up in the late nineteenth century, this sort of market domination was unprecedented. This phenomenal growth was explicitly encouraged by the FRC, which “decided that the listener’s well-being had priority over the rights of the broadcasters.”⁶⁸ The growth of media institutions was “not merely encouraged by policies... [but was] a product of government regulation, albeit regulation in terms that the embryonic industry welcomed and was to find beneficial”.⁶⁹ It was around this time, also, that governmental policy regarding cooperation with media sources shifted. Officials realized that reporters “were going to be interested in particular developments... [and that government] sources of the news could favorably influence the final product... by cooperating and providing [broadcasters] with help”.⁷⁰ Political support of institutions that the government believed were communicating a proper sort of message led to further legislation – the Communications Act of 1934 – through which “Congress effectively removed itself from substantive broadcast policy issues for the balance of the century.”⁷¹ Favorable policies, paired with NBC’s and CBS’s public relations campaigns that insisted on the “American-ness” of this type of organization of broadcast services⁷², ultimately cemented the notion that the determination of what type of broadcast system ought exist in the United States was out of the American public’s hands.⁷³

It seems absurd that government chose to ally itself with early for-profit broadcasters, or at the very least premature. After all, even major newspaper publishers weren’t subject to such favorable treatment. What distinguished the radio broadcasters from the purveyors of print? The answer, as it often is in US history, is related to economics – specifically, to advertising. In the earliest stages of radio, the idea of commercial broadcasting was unpopular and the potential contribution of advertisers was treated with great skepticism⁷⁴ - commercial advertising barely existed prior to 1928⁷⁵. Newspaper companies, threatened by their sudden lack of market monopoly, had to find some way to generate profit, and in doing so inadvertently opened the door to commercial involvement. Thus, “Yellow Journalism” was born. Sensationalist tabloids were both profitable, due to increasing profit from locally run ads, and a boon for political elites, as they distracted the public from controversial political issues⁷⁶. Increased market competition made advertising revenues not only attractive but also critical to the survival of media producers, eventually pushing business values to the forefront of media and

⁶⁸ The FRC went so far as to state that the airwaves didn’t have enough room for “every school of thought.” (Cook 55-56)

⁶⁹ Cook 39.

⁷⁰ Cook 47.

⁷¹ McChesney 177.

⁷² McChesney 171.

⁷³ McChesney 179.

⁷⁴ McChesney 159.

⁷⁵ McChesney 161.

⁷⁶ McChesney 73.

advertising concerns.⁷⁷ Advertising developed “in tandem with the onrush of the corporate economy,” as radio broadcasters (and expanding newspapers) opened up a new opportunity for businesses – regional (as opposed to local) advertising and brand recognition.⁷⁸ By 1934, commercial advertising revenues totaled approximately \$172 million annually.⁷⁹ What followed was a simply matter of market power – the few media units that remained competitive in the face of “reducing competitors, streamlining production... [and] selling for the maximum price what may be produced for minimum cost” were “ideally situated to lever up their influence to advance a political agenda.⁸⁰ And advance an agenda they did – because major broadcasters were favored by government, neither these businesses nor their regulators were blindsided the next time a technological development came around. By the birth of television, broadcasters and politicians were ready to expand upon their existing political system.

Television provided another revolution in communications technology, ushering in an eventual replacement of printed news as the primary source of information, ideas and epistemology in American culture.⁸¹ One obvious yet radical distinction between television and previous media is this – television involves *watching*, as opposed to reading or hearing, and therefore visual/auditory processing. It seems simple, but this difference fundamentally altered how mass media has informed American citizens.⁸² The fact that a person didn’t have to be able to read or listen to text, but could instead be shown an object, person or event altered the way media, advertisers and government went about nearly all aspects of content production – for better and for worse.

Businesses and advertisers, understanding that the difference in media could be utilized for economic gain, were quick to revamp their strategies. Pre-television markets were largely local or regional, and since major television was broadcast to national markets⁸³, advertisers learned to communicate not only by talking about a product but by showing what it could do. Product advertisers and media alike discovered that “a picture was not only worth a thousand words but, where sales were concerned, was better. For countless Americans, seeing... became the basis for believing”.⁸⁴ Likewise, they discovered that appealing to a consumer’s perception of themselves was just as important as trying to alter a consumer’s perception of a

⁷⁷ McChesney 54

⁷⁸ Rossides 48 and Rossides 51.

⁷⁹ McChesney 161.

⁸⁰ McChesney 70.

⁸¹ Postman 27-28

⁸² Neil Postman elegantly noted this through the following mental exercise: “Think of Richard Nixon or Jimmy Carter... or even Albert Einstein, and what will come to your mind is an image, a picture of a face.... Of words, almost nothing will come to mind.” Postman 61.

⁸³ Herman and Chomsky 5.

⁸⁴ Postman 74.

product – if not more so⁸⁵ As preposterous as it sounds, this is a strategy that has persisted – if one were to think of any number of recent laundry detergent commercials, for example, one calls to mind a generic, caring, motherly protagonist, who takes time during the thirty-second spot to smell her freshly washed linens. She is also almost unanimously pictured with a child who appreciates the hard work she puts in to mothering, and benefits from the products she uses. Advertisers haven't completely extracted information about the products – there are still the infamous side-by-side comparisons of socks washed by Bleach X and Bleach Y – but the focus on the consumer is enormously clear.

These new types of advertisements led to increased revenues, and advertisers took advantage of this to increase their leverage with media. Advertisers soon were such a dominant source of revenue for media that media were forced to seek out advertisers in order to remain competitive in the marketplace.⁸⁶ Broadcasters began to develop a “specialized staff to solicit advertisers and... to explain how their programs serve[d] advertiser's needs”.⁸⁷ Advertisers eventually parlayed this influence into product placement and advertiser friendly programming,⁸⁸ but advertisers also insisted on more airtime for ads. In 1982, advertisements accounted for about 9.5 minutes of the content per hour during primetime broadcasting.⁸⁹ By 2002, this same time slot held fourteen to seventeen minutes per hour of commercials.⁹⁰ There was, essentially, an “abandonment of restrictions... on radio-TV commercials [and] entertainment-mayhem programming... opening the door to the unrestrained commercial use of the airwaves”.⁹¹ Perhaps more significant, however, was the effect that new types of product advertisements had on political advertisements. Political campaigns noted how ads for products pandered to potential consumers, and followed suit – and while one might argue that politics has never been a field in which genuine honesty was considered a virtue, this shift in presentation led to advertisements that shifted the focus from the candidate to the “consumer,” or electorate. Once campaigns began to conduct themselves in this fashion, commercials began focusing not on who was “more capable at negotiation, more imaginative in executive skill, more knowledgeable about international affairs [or] more understanding of the interrelations of economic systems,” and instead became about the idea of “image”.⁹² Simply watching the

⁸⁵ Postman 128. Postman, acerbic as ever, quipped, “The television commercial is about products only in the sense that the story of Jonah is about the anatomy of whales, which is to say, it isn't. Which is to say further, it is about how one ought to live one's life.” (Postman 131)

⁸⁶ McChesney 265.

⁸⁷ Herman and Chomsky 16.

⁸⁸ The impetus, in fact, for the development of reality television has been these programs' ability to integrate product placement. (McChesney 267.)

⁸⁹ McChesney 266.

⁹⁰ McChesney 266. This figure also excludes products worked into television programming through product placement.

⁹¹ Herman and Chomsky 8.

⁹² Postman 133-134.

background of television spots can key any observer into what share of the market the candidate might be trying to capture; “if candidate A is in trouble with the women’s vote, they will be women. If weak on education, they’ll be kids”.⁹³ In short, “on television the politician does not so much offer the audience an image of himself, as offer himself as an image of the audience. And therein lies one of the most powerful influences of the television commercial on political discourse”.⁹⁴ A political spot, with its “carefully arranged studio setting... live shot in shopping malls and residential areas, and staffs of advertising and media experts, pollsters, and psychologists [makes] it possible for political elites to package and *sell* a candidate”.⁹⁵

The change in format from radio to television affected more than commercials and political campaigns. The actual content of media changed as well, most notably in the field of news production. Instead of generating material that could be reviewed at the leisure of a consumer, reporters were put on a clock. Material now had to be informative but timely, brief, serious and, at some level, entertaining.⁹⁶ This was a tall order to fill, but a necessary one. Since media had the unique responsibility of having to communicate about distanced world or political events, their ability to provide resources for citizens to make effective political judgments became critical – though, arguably impossible.⁹⁷ Part of this difficulty arose, and continues to arise, from mainstream media’s practice of targeting and serving elite opinion, a strategy that makes sense given that these groups are advantageous to capture from an advertising perspective, but detrimental in that the interpretation of world events presented by media must reflect the interests and concerns of these same, select groups.⁹⁸ Further, the actual format of television necessitates that each story be salient and compact, at least to the extent that a viewer can follow a narrative up until or through the inevitable commercial break.⁹⁹ Lastly, objectivity continued to be a powerful pull on journalists, and attempting to meet this ethical demand – or at least present ones’ self as doing so – remained integral to reporting even as it transferred from print to TV.¹⁰⁰ Because of all of this, television news is forced to be prescriptive, instead of open up debate, having to present “viewers with a taken-for-granted world, a fixed ‘objective’ world in which... action takes place in terms of unquestioned cultural a priori propositions about the family, government, capital, labor unions the legitimacy of experts, and other countries”.¹⁰¹ This assumed voice of absolute “objective” assuredness, whether it is objective or not,

⁹³ Stimson 104.

⁹⁴ Postman 133-134.

⁹⁵ Rossides 126.

⁹⁶ Postman 103.

⁹⁷ Silverstone 45.

⁹⁸ Herman and Chomsky 303.

⁹⁹ Postman 104-105.

¹⁰⁰ Cook 5-6.

¹⁰¹ Rossides 170.

allows television news to assume an increased, and potentially dangerous, level of authority, specifically in the sense that Arendt refers to.¹⁰² In a format in which the most important facts of the day must be communicated in the space of time one might reserve for making breakfast, the only voice that sells is one of assuredness, confidence and absolute integrity. And, in fact, the strategy of following journalistic norms in the realm of television allows journalists to inadvertently mask just how important their political role might be.¹⁰³

The US Government adjusted its relationship with major media outlets accordingly. After all, by the age of television these networks were huge businesses, able to invest not only in broadcasting but also in other profit-oriented endeavors and possessing interests similar to those of other major corporations.¹⁰⁴ This, as explained earlier, was in no small part the product of the government itself. Further, corporate media were, and are, in a unique position among corporations. “On one hand, given the media control over news and communication, few politicians wish to antagonize the owners of the media.... On the other hand, the corporate media control how any debate over media issues will be presented to the public.... Moreover, when it suits corporate media interests, the news will be employed to advance the corporate media position”.¹⁰⁵ This said, broadcasters and networks require government licenses and depend on the government for general policy support.¹⁰⁶ Media also risk receiving fines or sanctions if their content strays too far from the establishment’s orientation.¹⁰⁷ Additionally, and especially in the case of the news, media are dependent on government for information regarding issues of the day. Since “the mass media claim to be ‘objective’ dispensers of the news,” their sources on any issue regarding government action must be presumptively accurate.¹⁰⁸ Thus, the media and government have entered into a symbiotic relationship as far as the production of news goes, with “guidance provided by the government, the leaders of the corporate community, the top media owners and executives, and the assorted individuals and groups who are assigned or allowed to take constructive initiatives”.¹⁰⁹ It surely doesn’t hurt that the individuals in a position to dictate angles and frames are likely to be from the same social cohort and thus more likely to perceive the world in a similar manner from the outset.¹¹⁰ As long as both sides of the equation hold up their ends of the bargain¹¹¹, the relationship is profitable and allows all parties to maintain a

¹⁰² Rossides 126.

¹⁰³ Cook 5.

¹⁰⁴ Herman and Chomsky 14.

¹⁰⁵ McChesney 238.

¹⁰⁶ Herman and Chomsky 13.

¹⁰⁷ Herman and Chomsky 13.

¹⁰⁸ Herman and Chomsky 19.

¹⁰⁹ Herman and Chomsky lx.

¹¹⁰ Herman and Chomsky lx.

¹¹¹ Government producing favorable legislative action for the media and acting as sources on stories; the media producing content that is in line, at least to some extent, with the government’s agenda.

baseline level of political and social authority.¹¹² The government, in fact, goes out of its way to make sure that this relationship is maintained, providing facilities to congregate in and events to report about (i.e. Press Conferences), as well as advance copies of speeches and reports, all scheduled at times and formatted in manners favorable to media usage.¹¹³ This relationship remained fairly stable until the latest fundamental change in media occurred, one which would threaten to turn all established relationships and media corporations on their heads.

In its infancy, the Internet threatened to overturn all established media institutions, perfecting the case for free markets in media¹¹⁴. “Now that anyone could launch a Web site and anyone could have access to anyone’s Web site, there was a truly democratic and competitive media system”.¹¹⁵ These claims, of course, collapsed, and what ensued was not a true “Digital Wild West” scenario, as scholars of the 1990s often predicted.¹¹⁶ The opening up of media, however, was dramatic and perhaps even unprecedented, and “much of the traditional thinking about communication – who says what to whom with what effect – [had] to be recalibrated”.¹¹⁷ What the web provided was a “site of experimentation and innovation, where [could] amateurs test the waters, developing new practices, themes, and generating materials that [could] attract cult followings on their own terms,”¹¹⁸ similar to what radio had been like seventy years prior. In fact, the internet might have taken a similar course, if not for two factors. First, the contemporary corporate media structure was in place when the internet began to produce profitable materials, which were “then absorbed into the mainstream media, either directly through the hiring of new talent or the development of television, video, or big screen works based on those materials, or indirectly, through a second-order imitations of the same aesthetic and thematic qualities”.¹¹⁹ This previous remark suggests the nature of the second factor, which is that the internet removed more barriers for more types of communication than radio did. The commercial viability of most media companies lay in their ability to move words, images and sounds from creator to consumer, a process that, in the time before digital innovations like the Internet, was only realistically available to broadcasting organizations or corporations.¹²⁰ For the first time, any person was able to spread any type of information he or she desired to a nearly global audience. Corporations, instead of accepting a loss in profits or market share, barged into the market,

¹¹² Herman and Chomsky 18-19.

¹¹³ Herman and Chomsky 22.

¹¹⁴ McChesney 18.

¹¹⁵ McChesney 18.

¹¹⁶ McChesney 18.

¹¹⁷ McChesney 15.

¹¹⁸ Jenkins 148.

¹¹⁹ Jenkins 148.

¹²⁰ Shirky 59.

attempting to create both vertical and horizontal oligopolies in production by owning all stages of content creation for as many types of content as possible. Now, our media is shaped “by two seemingly contradictory trends: on the one hand, new media technologies have lowered production and distribution costs, expanded the range of delivery channels, and enabled consumers to archive, annotate, appropriate and recirculate media content in powerful new ways. At the same time, there has been an alarming concentration of the ownership of mainstream commercial media, with a small handful of multinational media conglomerates dominating all sectors of the entertainment industry”.¹²¹ These complications have led to developments in demands of consumers, innovation by previously un-empowered parties, and a straining of previous relationships between media, government, and the population at large.

For the first time in history, the idea of “on-demand” information and communication became a possibility for a wide range of consumers. The Internet, as well as the suddenly omnipresent mobile phone, made accessing anyone and anything at a moment’s notice possible, at least in theory. Media became virtually inescapable, creating a “kind of perpetual contactability that marks a fundamental shift in our status as individuals in social and virtual space”.¹²² In fact, it’s difficult to conceive of contemporary life without media, as electronic printed media have come to define society’s perception of reality, providing orientation and connectedness to people events and all types of information.¹²³ With new technologies, the public found itself more thoroughly enmeshed in their media, but also found that, to some extent, they now possessed the ability to interact with it. The Internet made “publishing” information a possibility for the everyman, enabling nearly instantaneous sharing of any type of information, from love letters to research to observations on some political event¹²⁴. The question regarding sharing information has switched from “Why publish this?” to “Why not?”¹²⁵

While this had social implications – which we’ll return to in a moment – it had economic implications as well. The goods that media organizations were exclusively able to produce were suddenly being created at a lower cost by individuals or organizations that were not bound or driven by the same political and economic incentives. Corporations responded to this in many ways, one of which was by trying to cut costs of their own or create content that was more likely to draw advertising profits. Journalism entered a full-blown crisis, as media corporations introduced measures that led to “a decline in hard news, a lack of investigative and process stories staff cuts... more advertising [and] trends towards infotainment”.¹²⁶ Many of the adjustments made by

¹²¹ Jenkins 17-18.

¹²² Silverstone 115.

¹²³ Silverstone 110.

¹²⁴ Shirky 149.

¹²⁵ Shirky 60.

¹²⁶ McChesney 68.

media corporations served to “advance the specific political and economic agenda of media owners and advertisers while depoliticizing or misinforming the citizenry. [Major broadcasters] abdicated [their] responsibilities to democratic self-government in the pursuit of greater revenues”.¹²⁷ Cutbacks were especially hard on international coverage, which came at a direct cost – in the last two decades, American media organizations have been hard pressed to find foreign correspondents still on payroll who “have a familiarity with the language, history, and customs of the regions they are covering... [meaning] that there is less capacity to provide a counterbalance to whatever official story Washington has put forward”.¹²⁸ It has also meant that the number of international stories, both on broadcast networks and in print, have reduced steadily, despite evidence indicating that the public is just as interested in international reportage as ever, if not more so in recent years.¹²⁹ It may seem, perhaps, idiotic to avoid investing in producing content that the public wants, if a media corporation’s goal is to capture market share, especially in an age in which the American viewing public has become increasingly more difficult to satisfy or impress.¹³⁰ What the media *has* invested in, it seems, are a greater volume of easy-to-report stories, with texts either ripped from AP wires or told in reduced detail. There has been a great deal of scrambling by networks in recent years, as media corporations search for ways to remain profitable and in the seat of authority they’ve come to inhabit. It’s difficult to compete, however, with individuals or organizations whose products and interests aren’t bound by the same economic constraints.

Many independent media producers are not only liberated from the economic obligations of corporations, but do not believe that they should be held (or are incapable of being held) to the same standards of ethics and objectivity. This has led to a crisis of trust in the world of media. After all, some basic level of trust is a crucial component in everyday life,¹³¹ and the media’s task has traditionally been to inform the actions of the general public with presumptively accurate information.¹³² This has always been an issue for media, who have been charged with informing larger and larger groups of people as societies grow bigger and the daily news becomes more difficult for the public to independently verify, simply due to increased distance from subject matter.¹³³ As the citizens of the United States have become more involved in national and international affairs, they have had to “accept the media both as necessary for [their] understanding of the world... [and] also as sufficient, which they can never be”.¹³⁴ Traditionally, when the public found itself at a loss for choosing between

¹²⁷ McChesney 69.

¹²⁸ McChesney 103.

¹²⁹ Miller TED.

¹³⁰ Jenkins 67.

¹³¹ Silverstone 124.

¹³² Silverstone 127.

¹³³ Lippmann 219.

¹³⁴ Silverstone 129-130.

true or false accounts of some issue, it sought a “trustworthy” source, ranging from a news outlet to an encyclopedia or some independent expert.¹³⁵ The internet has made this already complex task even more challenging. To put it bluntly, anyone can put anything they’d like on the internet, which has broadened the range of material available, but also opened a doorway to false, authoritative-seeming “information”. “Aside from the ranting of hate groups, there are many varieties of messages that appear rational and scientific; it is not always easy to sift out disinterested and worthy material from biased and self-serving messages”.¹³⁶ Even our conception of “experts” has shifted, as the open-ended process of communication in cyberspace has eroded the traditional delineations between informed authorities and random bystanders.¹³⁷ Pierre Levy has posed the theory of Collective Intelligence, which refers to the “ability of virtual communities to leverage the combined expertise of their members”.¹³⁸ In these sorts of communities, participants are only called to contribute when they have some relevant knowledge,¹³⁹ resulting in a collective intelligence that is constantly in the process of acquiring knowledge and is, presumably, more informed than any one individual at any given time.¹⁴⁰ This is the sort of model that guides websites like Wikipedia, which are often and increasingly being consulted as “legitimate” or “trustworthy” sources, as one might treat an encyclopedia. While neither source is without its potential flaws, at the very least an encyclopedia is subject to some standardized form of review, whereas a collective intelligence is, by definition, “disorderly, undisciplined, and unruly. Just as knowledge is gets called upon on an ad hoc basis, there are no fixed procedures for what you do with knowledge” or even for verifying that the “knowledge” is fact, as opposed to speculation or invention¹⁴¹. There are plenty of online sources with good intentions who publish materials based on erroneous information because of this, an error increasingly being made by mainstream media as well. Bloggers are now “jousting with mainstream journalists story by story, sometimes getting it right, sometimes getting it wrong.... One can’t count on either side to always provide the public with the truth,” even if objectivity is at the root of the reporters’ intentions¹⁴².

The prominence of collective intelligence collaborations on the Internet points us back in the direction of the social implications of digital media. To refer back to the Hannah Arendt and Dorothy Lee tool explained towards the beginning of this paper, the Internet has generated social constraints, both in and of itself and in its applications. Developments in technology had previously brought about new manifestations of authority as

¹³⁵ Lippmann 155.

¹³⁶ Rossides 91.

¹³⁷ Jenkins 52-54.

¹³⁸ Jenkins 27.

¹³⁹ Jenkins 53.

¹⁴⁰ Jenkins 54.

¹⁴¹ Jenkins 53.

¹⁴² Jenkins 216-217.

defined by Arendt, but the Internet is perhaps the first development to fundamentally change the structure of power in American society. By this, I mean that the ability for individuals to “talk back” to media strips some of the authority from everyday transmissions, and these same tools that enable individuals to voice opinions and concerns can be used to publish original content and organize agreeing coalitions without any professionally organized structure. The internet provides tools for communication and coordination that not only mimic existing forms of communication but amplify their effects, such that the Internet increases “our ability to share, to cooperate with one another and to take collective action”.¹⁴³ What we can do on the internet is almost without limit – from watching videos, to writing blogs, to learning how to cook – but much of what we do involves interacting with others and building or reinforcing existing communities. In some ways, the actual tasks we perform are almost irrelevant, as it isn’t what we are communicating about that matters so much as who we are communicating with.¹⁴⁴ Digital media allow for access, participation, reciprocity and peer-to-peer communication¹⁴⁵, and though the internet provides a huge increase in the number of available communications tools we have¹⁴⁶, it cannot, and has not, replaced all of the functions of mass media. Instead, the Internet has acted as a companion to existing media, and this “diversification of communications channels... expands the range of voices that can be heard”.¹⁴⁷ Modern political culture, then, is produced by the push and pull of these disparate media systems. “New ideas and alternative perspectives are more likely to emerge in the digital environment, but the mainstream media will be monitoring those channels, looking for content to co-opt and circulate. Grassroots media channels depend on the shared frame of reference created by the traditional intermediaries; much of the most successful ‘viral’ content of the Web... critiques or spoofs mainstream media. Broadcasting provides the common culture, and the Web offers more localized channels for responding to that culture”.¹⁴⁸ Independent producers, aren’t expected – and, with rare exceptions, aren’t able – to create the same content as major media organizations.

Some of the applications of digital media have been simply startling. Though people often talk of an “information revolution” when speaking about digital media, what has happened is closer to an information speedup¹⁴⁹ and a revolution in the field of association and content development. Social networking websites like Facebook are obvious examples of applications that enhance our ability to keep up connections and remain in

¹⁴³ Shirky 20-21.

¹⁴⁴ Jenkins 83-84.

¹⁴⁵ Jenkins 208.

¹⁴⁶ Shirky 266.

¹⁴⁷ Jenkins 208.

¹⁴⁸ Jenkins 211.

¹⁴⁹ Rossides 85.

communication, but these tools were in some ways predictable extensions of media because they mimic everyday social practices (talking to people, calling a friend, sharing a photo) and help fulfill basic social needs. A slew of online charity organizations, like Kiva International and DoSomething.org, have arisen that capitalize on altruism and encourage political involvement, activities that may not be as commonplace for some as talking on the phone, suggesting that the internet solves a coordination problem for groups interested in socially oriented, not-for-profit work.¹⁵⁰ As Lee states, social constraints and systems enable activity and encourage action, though they do not create it. Digital organizations that promote the public good, then, are a reassuring phenomenon, as the actions they perform haven't been generated by the Internet but have, rather, been enabled.¹⁵¹ Artists, both popular and independent, have realized that digital media can enable collaborations, and have devised ways to create products with different types of artists or even their own audience to generate innovative and engaging content.¹⁵² Of course, it would be tremendously misleading to imply that these sorts of collaborations or associations dominate new media. The Internet is littered with inane memes, like LOLcats and being "Rick Roll'd", as well as entire websites whose only purpose is to generate said memes, such as the infamous 4chan and its even more infamous message board, "/b/". But even 4chan has had its moments of social action. Christopher "moot" Poole, 4chan's creator, has spoken publicly of one instance in which participants on the website tracked down an animal abuser and reported him to the police, in a form of digital vigilante justice.¹⁵³ In short, because digital media is not expected to perform the same functions that major broadcasters do, what has ensued is a proliferation of new types of associations, concepts and cultural objects that occasionally make their way into popular or political culture, but certainly constitute elements of a culture of their own.

Finally, the Internet has played a role in globalization and the formation of global communities, both driving and hastening the process. "Important branches of the media such as movies and books have had substantial global markets for many years, but only in the past two decades has a global media system come into being that is having major effects on national media systems, culture and politics. It has been fueled by the globalization of business more generally, the associated rapid growth of global advertising, and improved communications technology that has facilitated cross-border operations and control".¹⁵⁴ Social media and digital

¹⁵⁰ Shirky 159.

¹⁵¹ Shirky 159.

¹⁵² Jenkins 96. Jonathan Harris, for example, created a project entitled "We Feel Fine," which scanned the internet for statements on blogs and other websites about feelings, and aggregated these statements into an enormous array of alternate, colorful displays, ranging from simple lists to mounds of particular statements. (Harris TED)

¹⁵³ Poole TED.

¹⁵⁴ Herman and Chomsky xiv.

communication have also helped forge international ties and enhance cross-cultural communication, but truly integrated forms of multi-national communication and association are scarce. In general, the trend has been to associate intra-nationally or intra-regionally, and to characterize such communication as unilaterally global is both inaccurate and misleading.¹⁵⁵ In those incidences where groups from three or more regions of the globe are communicating about any given topic digitally, usually at least one party or source of information is from a Western nation, if not from the United States, and usually English is involved somewhere in the chain of communication – it would be nearly impossible, for instance, for a Swahili speaking individual to get news from Tibet without having to consult a source that has already been translated at least once and, usually, translated into English.¹⁵⁶ Additionally, it is Western, specifically American, media corporations that are leading the way to a global media system, which has developed into a global corporate media oligopoly in which “local and regional media markets develop and... link up rapidly with one or another of a few emergent global giants”.¹⁵⁷ These developments tie back into my justification for this work, explaining why it is so critical to understand the Political Media system of the United States, both in its current manifestation and as it has developed throughout time. The United States is not, and has not ever been, the be-all-and-end-all of global culture, but the continued involvement of American media in global markets ensures that our system’s development will have both domestic and international effects. Let’s now examine how political and social discourse has been affected by changes in the media, before we discuss how the system that produces this discourse operates today.

The Impact of Media Forms on American Political Action and Social Discourse

The discussion thus far of the development of media, especially its relationships to corporate and government interests, has touched on media’s ultimate source of authority within societies but hasn’t explored in great detail how media’s various forms actually affect it. In order to do this, we have to begin by asking a seemingly simple question – what exactly do media *do*? Media spread information and facilitate communication, but their influence lies in the fact that this information and communication shapes daily life, interaction and choice. In other words, the information conveyed by media serves to inform public opinion. “The public uses... the media to organize their own agendas and decide which issues are most important. Over time, the issues emphasized in news reports become the issues regarded as most important among the public.”¹⁵⁸ This influence is, in part, a by-product of the limitations of media. Because there is only so much room in a newspaper or

¹⁵⁵ Zuckerman TED.

¹⁵⁶ Zuckerman TED.

¹⁵⁷ McChesney 315-316.

¹⁵⁸ McCombs 2.

evening report, the news media can only focus on a few topics a day.¹⁵⁹ The news gains coherence when it is organized in a way that attaches this daily coverage to larger themes or narrative arcs.¹⁶⁰ All media are significant in the production and proliferation of issue coverage, however, and though the news has traditionally been used as an indicator of what the public considers important, popular culture is equally influential and indicative of public sentiment. Further, though public opinion often seems dramatic and unstable, it actually trends steadily in certain directions,¹⁶¹ responding not only to big and exciting events but also to more subtle and normal politics.¹⁶² It is the ability to guide public opinion in both the short term and the long term, then, that endows the media with power. Traditionally, there had been minimal competition in this realm but, as we will see, developments in media technologies have altered who tells which stories and, in turn, who holds what influence.

Two narrative styles have remained particularly salient throughout American history. The first is the focus on an “Us vs. Them” dichotomy paired with a specific rhetoric of evil, which existed in its infancy in fights against Native Americans and immigrants and has found its most recent articulation in the “War Against Terror”.¹⁶³ Generally, the story goes like this; “Group X is evil and an enemy to our way of life. They threaten to destroy the sanctity of our civilization and, if they cannot be taught to love our values, they must be eliminated.” The second narrative pattern is the Jeremiad, also guided by religious rhetoric. In this case, the focus is redemption. A Jeremiad is “a lament that people have fallen into sinful ways and face ruin unless they swiftly reform”.¹⁶⁴ This narrative pattern draws its power from a distinction between Us and Them, though the end goal here is to reclaim something that has been lost – whether it is jobs, in discussions of immigration, or integrity, in discussions of the moral decline of the youth (a frequent and enduring American concern).¹⁶⁵ Jeremiads draw political power by capitalizing on “our sense of common values and shared fate.... The policy problem turns to protecting us and controlling them”.¹⁶⁶ In both narrative forms, religious terminology is often employed, and some political theorists have likened these tales to biblical passages, components of a sort of civil religion¹⁶⁷. Ultimately, however, both narrative styles share common themes: differentiation of groups, assignment of blame, and policy strategy that punishes or regulates those at fault. Thus, the ability to define which group has caused XYZ problem profoundly shapes the kind of government or policy that follows.¹⁶⁸

¹⁵⁹ McCombs 19-20.

¹⁶⁰ Cook 100-101

¹⁶¹ Stimson xvii

¹⁶² Stimson 21.

¹⁶³ Silverstone 65-66.

¹⁶⁴ Morone 14.

¹⁶⁵ Morone 14.

¹⁶⁶ Morone 17.

¹⁶⁷ Merelman 487-488

¹⁶⁸ Morone 278.

The practice of utilizing media in order to spread narratives developed early on in the history of the United States. From America's outset, government and politicians regularly were patrons of publications and found it politically profitable to invest in the generation of content that would sway public opinion in their favor. In the late nineteenth century, "a huge outpouring of popular culture, made possible by new communication technology, had enabled American power groups to envelop the American population... in a wide array of myths".¹⁶⁹ These narratives gave a focus to nationalism and, when utilized by politicians, assisted in the spurring along of various political pushes.¹⁷⁰ In the days when print held a monopoly position in media form, spreading narratives was a simple matter – stories told by media or government were framed in the context of the printed story. When media representations threatened to go outside of these constructs, laws like the Sedition Act of the late 1700s and the Comstock Act of the early 1900s¹⁷¹ were enacted to keep content in line. Radio was quickly regulated by the FRC and Congress, and by 1928 the government had built a structure within which media could be trusted to self-regulate on a regular basis. By the end of World War I, media were recognized as powerful players in public policy support, and government began to provide journalists and publications assistance through developing an infrastructure that would churn out press events and government statements.¹⁷² These government-provided stories, combined with the economic incentives set-up for media by turn-of-the-century legislation, helped ensure that predictably and governmentally-friendly narratives would dominate popular culture and infuse major media publications.

Television only enhanced this, as new technology made it "possible for the public to participate directly in events of national importance".¹⁷³ Television, by nature, allows for a different sort of story to be told, as content is edited to represent various viewpoints while maintaining an air of objectivity that, within the medium, is not questioned. In other words, television producers can create vivid, plausible "realities" which may or may not accurately represent events.¹⁷⁴ These representations are more similar to our perception of daily life,¹⁷⁵ lending each seeming credibility. Further, because of the sort of information that television conveyed, the medium developed a role as "our culture's principle mode of knowing itself. Therefore... how television stages the world [became] the model for how the world [ought] properly to be staged".¹⁷⁶ Events, archetypes and attitudes that

¹⁶⁹ Rossides 50.

¹⁷⁰ Rossides 58.

¹⁷¹ Morone 229.

¹⁷² Cook 52.

¹⁷³ Rossides 59.

¹⁷⁴ Rossides 127.

¹⁷⁵ In that they are presented not only on a page or through a speaker, but in multiple dimensions (moving images, sound) that we are more accustomed to treating as "real life". Less imagination is required, on the part of the viewer, to construct a fully realized alternate "reality."

¹⁷⁶ Postman 92.

make it to air influence not only the stories within which they are embedded but public behavior as well, which makes content development a politically charged affair.¹⁷⁷ It's worth pointing out that the contested material was not limited to news reports – entertainment programming has been recognized (at least by those in the television industry) as an important carrier of cultural conversations¹⁷⁸ and, in some cases, as a tool for setting long-term political agendas.¹⁷⁹ The rise of television raised the political stakes of what sort of content was broadcast, as American culture moved increasingly towards a new manner of conducting business, wherein important national affairs were conducted on screen.¹⁸⁰

As content became a more hotly contested commodity, a strange yet significant development occurred in social sciences. Researchers began studying public opinion, both its formation and also its manifestation. Studies yielded several distressing conclusions. First, it appeared that most of the American public was largely indifferent to politics and that the framing of a question or story would generally dictate what opinion a person might claim they had.¹⁸¹ Further, research indicated that willingness to express a view did not indicate intensity of feeling (and, in fact, didn't necessarily indicate that the opinion had been anything but made up on the spot).¹⁸² Finally, the public's opinion of what constituted "important affairs" was most correlated to what stories were covered in newspapers or on televised news reports. For instance, between 1954 and 1976, the percentage of US respondents who claimed that civil rights was "the most important problem" in response to Gallup polls shifted constantly between zero and fifty-two percent – yet when compared with the stories that had appeared on the front page of the *New York Times* during the month preceding each poll, the correlation between public concern and news coverage was an astonishing +.71.¹⁸³ In short, there was considerable evidence that people informed (and, in some cases, acquired) their opinions from the mass media.¹⁸⁴ Political and social elite drew a fairly straightforward conclusion – that continuing their involvement in mass media would ensure a greater level

¹⁷⁷ Silverstone 30.

¹⁷⁸ Postman 16

¹⁷⁹ McCombs 27.

¹⁸⁰ Postman 98

¹⁸¹ "The scientific study of public opinion began roughly at the same time as did the Cold War between East and West. One of the early findings was that most Americans, asked about 'Russia', were not as hostile as would have been expected from the times. Posing the same question about the 'Soviet Union,' in contrast, produced the expected antagonism. And if the adjective 'Communist' were added to the label, the answers were so one-sided as to make the questions unworkable; they produced only a single response. And yet there were all the same question. Thus, opinions were so lightly held that they were strongly influenced by the shape of the question asked." (Stimson 13)

¹⁸² "Asked, for example, to express their feelings of warmth or coldness toward people and groups, many respondents proved willing also to express feelings toward individuals and groups that did not exist. And the numbers who rated the nonexistent were not notably smaller than those expressing a view about real peoples and groups." (Stimson 13) This study was specifically conducted with respect to Communist sentiment, and provided fictional groups that were implied to have similar belief sets or cultural backgrounds.

¹⁸³ McCombs 11-12

¹⁸⁴ McCombs 4.

of control over the narratives told to the public, which would then ensure that the public would primarily be armed with content skewed towards the opinions of the governing or powerful classes. As broadcast networks grew, mass media sustained their political significance, and established an increasingly powerful bargaining position by expanding coverage to all realms of American life. In *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, Neil Postman stated the following: “There is no subject of public interest... that does not find its way to television.... Television arranges our communications environment for us in ways that no other medium has the power to do.”¹⁸⁵ When Postman’s book went to print – 1985 –the statement revealed the cause behind the need for corporations and government to align themselves with media in content production. This same statement would come to apply to the next great shift in technology, though differing practices in production and broadcast would muddle the relationship between corporate media and government, beginning to fracture a partnership that had been nearly a century in the making.

As was mentioned earlier, critics predicted that the Internet would create total democratization of information and content production, if not some sort of Digital Wild West. The internet increased an individual’s ability to share, coordinate and act, thereby enhancing the general public’s ability to pursue goals in self-organized coalitions.¹⁸⁶ Of course, this sort of participation has only occurred intermittently, resulting in a shift of power and authority but *not* in a total revolution.¹⁸⁷ “Regardless of how a communication technology is owned and operated, it [can] have consequences that are often unintended and unanticipated,” and those developments that have emerged from the rise of the Internet have often brought about unpredictable complications for government, media providers and the public itself. Yet at every level of society, the Internet has created fundamentally disparate modes of social interaction and culture production, which have threatened the principles of business and social control that corporate media and the government had established their relationship upon.

The most immediately recognizable change occurred on a person-to-person level. As was predicted by media theorists of the 1990’s, anyone could be both a consumer *and* a producer of content. This content production, however, was uneven, and still placed corporate media and certain individuals in better positions to produce works for large-scale audiences.¹⁸⁸ Our focus here should be on social media¹⁸⁹, which have brought

¹⁸⁵ Postman 78

¹⁸⁶ Shirky 122-123.

¹⁸⁷ At least in the United States – recent uprisings throughout the Middle East have highlighted some of the potential uses of social media in pursuit of coordinated political action.

¹⁸⁸ Jenkins 3

¹⁸⁹ Social media should be conceived of as encompassing all IT developments aimed at communication/social networking, beginning with e-mail and early message boards spanning through the currently popular YouTube, Twitter and Facebook.

about a more unilateral change in communication. Increasingly, scholarly work is demonstrating that relationships and communications that occur online provide sufficient contact for participants to feel engaged and supported.

¹⁹⁰ This has led to thriving online communities that, in some ways, mirror real-world interactions but are differentiated by their lack of limitation with connecting people, despite differences in physical or temporal space. Removing the limitations of traditional assembly alter the limits on “size, sophistication and scope of unsupervised effort.”¹⁹¹ This said, as these barriers are lifted, other complications regarding action and association have developed, as Dorothy Lee might have predicted, which have had myriad effects on the way internet communities are effective outside of cyberspace.

The governing factors here are largely cost and accessibility. Social media drastically lowers the cost of communications and enables increased frequency of information exchanges, as well as increased information exchange reach. Because these technologies are both accessible and, often, affordable, the primary hurdles to unmanaged assembly are removed, which has resulted in “serious, complex work, taken on without institutional direction.”¹⁹² These same factors often also eliminate the need for maintaining a hierarchical organization, which allows more people to participate in greater capacity without supervision.¹⁹³ Thus, large-scale and sometimes loosely defined communities flourish. This ability has the potential to serve as a corrective to established powers, like government and corporate media,¹⁹⁴ as has been demonstrated recently in the rebellions occurring in Egypt. Social media, theoretically, ought be a panacea for traditional coordination problems,¹⁹⁵ but the enhanced ability to connect with others is a double-edged sword. “As an increasing amount of social interaction moves online, the way in which we maintain and access our social interaction moves online, the way we maintain and access our social networks begins to change as well.”¹⁹⁶ To put it simply, those that we might refer to as being “friends” online aren’t necessarily people that we’d refer to as being “friends” in real life.¹⁹⁷ The ease with which we can make associations on a digital platform has, in some ways, reduced each individual connection’s relative importance. We accumulate an excessive number of connections and our channels of communication “become crowded with an array of information sources of wildly varying perspectives, reliabilities and motivating intentions.”¹⁹⁸ This results in a digital distractibility of frequent internet users, as each handles more material (for

¹⁹⁰ Silverstone 117

¹⁹¹ Shirky 21

¹⁹² Shirky 46-47.

¹⁹³ Shirky 29-30

¹⁹⁴ Jenkins 245

¹⁹⁵ Shirky 210.

¹⁹⁶ Easley and Kleinberg 54.

¹⁹⁷ Easley and Kleinberg 55.

¹⁹⁸ Easley and Kleinberg 1.

potentially shorter time periods) on a day to day basis. It also leads users to forge digital connections that they'd never commit to outside of cyberspace because the act itself is more easily achieved and the significance of each connection is downplayed. Thus, digital "associations" aren't a perfect predictor of real-world action. This is a point to easily forgotten by various members of the media, and will become important again shortly.

These changes on a person-to-person level affect the public's access to media and the process of creative development. Amateur media producers operate under different financial and moral constraints than mass media producers. Few people, if any, expect "unorganized" media to produce the same sort of content as corporate media. Nonetheless, they *do* produce content, which proves difficult to combat on the part of mass media. On the one hand, the content is generally of a lower production value than that of corporate media (most notably in the realm of television programming)¹⁹⁹, and on the other, the content mirrors that which is produced by and promoted within general commercial culture.²⁰⁰ In other words, the content is culturally familiar, and in those rare cases in which exceptional content is available online, it can draw consumers that might otherwise be viewing or reading productions of the mass media. Additionally, a difficult complication has arisen when trying to determine who constitutes the "media." Computers initially merely expanded a portfolio of platforms for consumers to interact with media content, but once said interaction turned into participation in the production and distribution of cultural goods, mass media organizations found the public's involvement to be a force they needed to counteract.²⁰¹ Mass amateurization and a low barrier to entry render the categories of "producer" and "consumer" temporary, as opposed to static.²⁰² By the millennium
been ingrained to the extent that expecting independent content production to cease is unrealistic.²⁰⁴ What the mass media have on their hands is an increasingly well-developed citizen-driven media body that constitutes simultaneously corporate media's consumers and competitors.

Corporate media have responded to this challenge in many ways that can conceptually be clumped into two strategies. The first depends on advertising dollars to subsidize mass media content production, which boils down to variations on product placement. Digital technologies are actually a boon in this respect, allowing for innovations in the incorporation of sponsored products – for example, AOL Time Warner developed tools that

¹⁹⁹ Though the exceptions to this rule are becoming an interesting case in and of themselves – recently, the websites "Funny or Die" and "The Onion" began producing and circulating exceptional filmed content, resulting in both groups receiving deals with television networks to produce shows for air.

²⁰⁰ Jenkins 137

²⁰¹ Jenkins 133.

²⁰² Shirky 107-108

²⁰³ Defined by marketers as the generation roughly situated between ages 18-28 (in the year 2011).

²⁰⁴ Jenkins 158.

allow them to place products in reruns that had previously been unpopulated by advertiser goods.²⁰⁵ Motion picture studios now have entire departments in charge of product placement, which arrange for elaborate promotions that tie film releases (or re-releases) to mobile phones, sandwiches and music players.²⁰⁶ And rap music, always a site of defining status through tangible goods, has proven a gold mine for a surprisingly large range of advertisers – in 2002, Def Jam Records partnered with Hewlett Packard to feature products in the songs of Def Jam artists and Def Jam songs in Hewlett Packard ad campaigns, for instance.²⁰⁷ Hip-hop and rap labels have been of particular interest to advertisers, who traditionally have trouble capturing the genre’s youthful, African-American market demographic. Bragged an editor of influential hip-hop magazine *The Source*, “Once our audience takes to a product, their influence is tremendous on the rest of the population.”²⁰⁸ All of this has led into a shifting paradigm for media and commercialism, “where traditional borders are disintegrating and conventional standards are being replaced . . . a marriage of editorial/entertainment and commercialism to such an extent that they are becoming indistinguishable.”²⁰⁹

The second strategy commonly utilized by mass media content developers is less related to selling an audience a product they’re unacquainted with than it is to reinforce a viewpoint that audiences already know and love. In other words, the mass media have the option to pander to consumers. Mass media have known for some time that only a portion of their audience seeks to inform itself, while the rest are happy to be influenced and guided by media coverage if they don’t know or don’t care about an issue.²¹⁰ By providing content aligned with a particular view that a target audience already espouses, mass media have a greater probability of capturing their desired markets and, therefore, of capturing a greater share of profits. This practice spans entertainment and news programming, the most notorious and hotly debated example being news coverage by Fox News Network. The overlooked alternative on the other side of the political spectrum, however, is an equally potent example of this strategy in practice. *The Daily Show* and its spin-off *The Colbert Report* air on Comedy Central, mimicking the style of traditional broadcast news while mocking the content. “From the start, *The Daily Show* challenges viewers to look for signs of fabrication, and it consistently spoofs the conventions of traditional journalism and the corporate control of media.”²¹¹ This is perfectly acceptable and problematic in only one regard – despite their status as “entertainment television,” an increasing segment of the population is

²⁰⁵ McChesney 267.

²⁰⁶ McChesney 268.

²⁰⁷ McChesney 275

²⁰⁸ McChesney 272

²⁰⁹ McChesney 272.

²¹⁰ Stimson 20

²¹¹ Jenkins 227

receiving their information about the news from these broadcasts. A Pew Foundation report on the matter found that the percentage of all respondents who received political information from traditional news casts had dropped from 39% in 2000 to 23% in 2004, and that the proportion of respondents under 30 years old that cited *The Daily Show* and similar programs as their source of information raised from 9% in 2000 to 21% in 2004.²¹² Comedians, like Jon Stewart and Steven Colbert, are not bound by the moral standards of journalists much in the same manner that bloggers aren't²¹³ - the point of each show is, largely, to comment on the counterproductive processes of contemporary mainstream journalism²¹⁴ - and some might argue that their liberal bent is not as objectionable as Fox News' conservative slant. The argument that each show is justified due to their status as a comedy program is valuable, but only to a point. After all, the programming is still consumed as a form of "news" and is broadcast by a Viacom-owned channel. Each show, in fact, might be regarded as a component of the very system each program seeks to correct.

We then come to the manner by which the Internet has changed the nature of corporate influence and advantage in the political and media realm. Developments in media technology, especially those recent developments in I.T., haven't removed the absolute advantage of corporate media so much as they have stripped corporations of their relative advantages (compared to amateur content creators).²¹⁵ Keep in mind that corporate media are only valuable to government so long as they remain drivers of opinion and public perception. While the media can control debate and manage the direction of discussion, they remain critical to guiding public perception.²¹⁶ Dissenting, unregulated voices pose a direct and powerful threat to media, not only in diminishing their market share but also in devaluing their services to government regulators. Many people continue to argue that the Internet has broken the corporate stranglehold on journalism and mass communications,²¹⁷ but individuals who claim that the field has been entirely democratized are only considering one side of the coin. Though corporate media still enjoy advantages due to their financial means and established relationships with government bodies, they have had to actively work to maintain this status, and in some cases have actually amplified their existing influence. One manner by which corporate entities have tried to maintain their privileged status is through adjusting the content they provide, but there have been other efforts made in business and legal realms that have proven equally fruitful.

The most successful of these efforts have centered upon conglomeration. The entire story of mass media

²¹² Jenkins 224.

²¹³ McChesney 126

²¹⁴ McChesney 126

²¹⁵ Shirky 23.

²¹⁶ McChesney 350.

²¹⁷ Herman and Chomsky xv.

in the United States has been one of mergers and incorporation, arguably, but the tail end of the 20th century brought with it a wave of consolidation, such that the degree of ownership concentration of media outlets is at its highest in United States history.²¹⁸ This began most noticeably with the 1995 sale of CBS to Westinghouse and the mergers of Disney with Capital Cities/ABC and Time Warner with Turner Broadcasting, conglomerations which gave final say of angle and content to an elite few.²¹⁹ Major media organizations have sought both vertical and horizontal integration, developing branches (or purchasing existing companies) to take care of all elements of content development, production and transmission as well as purchasing smaller networks or publications (both national and local) and integrating these into the parent company brand. Large media companies have diversified their holdings beyond media properties, even, further complicating relationships with advertising and branded entertainment.²²⁰ An unintended consequence of these mergers was a reduction in points of view espoused by major media sources – instead of a field of competitors, there were now fewer companies with fewer journalists who were increasingly covering fewer stories with fewer resources.²²¹ This whittling-down of perspectives soon spread to digital holdings, as media conglomerates purchased or developed popular websites and then distributed identical content through multiple channels, a process often referred to as “synergy”.²²² The unprecedented concentration of power generated political hazards as well, as content on all levels of distribution is “synergized” and a cross-platform standardization of material occurs, turning the news into an infotainment-oriented, ideological business across wider cross-sections. This is an interesting development, particularly compared with the way that the Internet and social media have worked on a person-to-person level; what has made interpersonal interaction less hierarchical and more democratic has arguably worked in the reverse on a larger scale, rendering the control of media in the hands of fewer and control over agendas more structurally ingrained.²²³

The second and significantly less successful strategy has been a variety of attempts to secure power over content distribution. The Internet enabled newer and higher quality forms of piracy, emerging in the market place by way of file sharing networks like Napster and Limewire or through peer-to-peer sharing conducted on an independent basis. Newspapers found their stories published in entirety online, and motion picture studios faced copies of blockbusters being leaked to the Internet, resulting in plummeting box-office sales at movie theaters. As they had in the past, media conglomerates sought legal action against individuals violating copyright

²¹⁸ McChesney 80.

²¹⁹ McChesney 355.

²²⁰ Herman and Chomsky 12.

²²¹ McChesney 80.

²²² McCombs 148

²²³ Rossides 95.

laws, though in this case the individuals violating said regulations were often very young and being pursued in manner that opposed economic rationality.²²⁴ Corporate media are still struggling to define what constitutes “renegade behavior” and what sort of participation and sharing of materials ought be pursued, which has done more harm than good on both financial and public relations grounds.²²⁵ As distribution appears an increasingly impossible front to wage war on, corporations are switching gears and determining how to provide content digitally while still turning a profit. Thus, major media outlets created their own content-hosting websites, providing content either free or with ads or some sort of monthly fee. Websites like Hulu and companies like Netflix have played an integral role in repairing mass media’s relationships with their consumers, with those companies that appear most willing to ease up on copyright control gaining more of the benefits that come along with having content distributed via the web (like increased viewership, cult-like fan bases and free press).²²⁶ Even these websites are being constantly tweaked, as corporate media seek a perfect form of distribution that would both drive profits and render their position as drivers of public opinion secure.

Finally, we turn to how all of this has affected media and politics. As far as use of new technologies goes, politicians began to understand the utility of a digital presence. Beginning in the 1980’s, public apathy in politics began to be matched by reduction in all forms of voluntary action, as a loss of communicative experiences contributed to plummeting civic involvement.²²⁷ The computer and the Internet, ideally, could have enabled citizens to participate in perfect representative democracy, with all information about candidates and policies available at an instant’s notice.²²⁸ While the “perfect democracy” element never emerged, greater access and scope of information did become available, and as the pursuit of political life was forced out into the open (and onto more channels),²²⁹ politicians and political organizations took to the digital frontier. Theoretically, bringing political engagement to cyberspace opened doors to courting a greater variety of potential voters. Certainly blogging took off as a new form of grassroots convergence, as individuals from all ends of the political spectrum took to the Internet to hash out partisan talking points and important debates.²³⁰ The same problems, however, that cropped up in person-to-person relationships became a problem for political organizers – namely, that digital tools sometimes proved *too good*, lessening the impact of calls to action or driving up the numbers of

²²⁴ Jenkins 159.

²²⁵ Jenkins 19.

²²⁶ Jenkins 159.

²²⁷ Rossides 119-200

²²⁸ Rossides 100.

²²⁹ Silverstone 162.

²³⁰ Jenkins 215. (As a side note, Jenkins here also likens blogging on elections to blogging about popular TV shows, essentially claiming the point of political blogger communities is to “spoil” the government as one would a plot point in an upcoming episode of Survivor.)

“supporters” beyond plausible (and sometimes actual) levels. For instance, MoveOn.org found itself in a dilemma when they urged their followers to e-mail Congress people. The inevitable influx of e-mails is far greater than paper letters received but also constitutes less of a demonstration of passion and effort. Thus, to politicians, e-mail messages and petitions are effectively meaningless.²³¹ In the end, candidates have found that they must use the Internet as a supplement to traditional media in their campaigns, thereby utilizing “push media (where messages go out to the public whether they seek them or not) and a pull medium (which serves those with an active interest in seeking out information on a popular topic). The internet reaches the hard core, television the undecided,”²³² allowing politicians to cover all of their bases while spreading their messages.

In some cases, politicians have also sought to utilize multiple media resources in the pursuit of a policy or election victory. One of the mass media’s strategies in content development, as noted before, is the pandering to a specific target audience, which has led to a commercial polarization of sources, or what some have called a “consensus culture,” in which familiar viewpoints are already diagrammed and mapped out for the undecided, uninterested and ardent alike, furthering a overall less rounded and nuanced public political dialogue.²³³ Communicating within these parameters appears to reach a larger voting base, as the strategies employed in entertainment and popular culture began to intertwine with politics to an unprecedented level of entanglement.²³⁴ This manifested itself most noticeably in the involvement of entertainment networks or personalities in politics, with MTV, Nickelodeon, Def Jam and even the WWE starting voting initiatives.²³⁵ Implied in all of these partnerships was an increasing reach towards a demographic politicians were having a difficult time engaging – young people and children, who found the language of politics unfamiliar and uninteresting compared to popular entertainment.²³⁶ Campaigns by youth oriented networks helped raise political engagement within previously disinterested populations. Engagement also became more ardent when young people began circulating their own content and images either supporting or parodying political figures, in a sort of “Photoshop for Democracy”²³⁷ unorganized movement.

But the most astounding development in politics and media dealt not with who was involved but rather with what people were saying. Newly developed mass media made a new phenomenon possible, what some might term “politics and government by cliché. Thanks to television and the computer, political campaigns are

²³¹ Shirky 286-287.

²³² Jenkins 213.

²³³ Jenkins 236.

²³⁴ Jenkins 208.

²³⁵ Jenkins 223.

²³⁶ Jenkins 228.

²³⁷ Jenkins 222.

now exercises in the manipulation of consensus-oriented formalisms.”²³⁸ Put in plainer terms, political narratives are now simpler, harsher and have a shorter shelf life than ever before. The specifics of political events and concepts already existed only in allegorical terms in most of the minds of the general public,²³⁹ but the increased amount of information and the media’s increased sensitivity to easy-to-report, immediate events have made the communication of salient and affecting narratives a political necessity.²⁴⁰ Political actors now view publicity as a necessity, and work with the press no longer a means of ego gratification or feeding popularity so much as a facet of their jobs.²⁴¹ “Although the ultimate goal of any political campaign is to win on election day, campaigns increasingly see their immediate purpose as capturing the media agenda.”²⁴² As the media had by now made clear, those concepts that would resonate most with either a strong, nationally-inculcated narrative structure (like the Jeremiad or the cry of “Us vs. Them”) or a simple and provocative rallying point designed to induce fear, cries of allegiance or utter humiliation²⁴³ were bound to capture the most attention. The key for politicians has become to zero in on a resonant narrative and trumpet it at a moment calculated either to bring attention during a personal emergency or raise support in the long run.²⁴⁴ The real variable that remains is a simple determination of which story to tell.

Howard Dean’s 2004 bid for the Democratic presidential nomination is an excellent example of many of the changes documented above. 2004 was the first major campaign year during which the Internet and citizen-produced media came into play,²⁴⁵ which resulted in a great deal of experimentation in early social media and uncertainty as to what the potential of digital media might be. Howard Dean was perhaps the first candidate to have significant backing in cyberspace, to the extent that he ended 2003 with the best-funded, best-publicized bid to be the Democratic nominee.²⁴⁶ Dean’s Internet following brought him visibility in media outlets and also provided the necessary cash to fund television advertisements,²⁴⁷ making Dean seem incredibly well supported. His early followers organized flash-mobs²⁴⁸ and took to Meetup, a precursor to Facebook, to

²³⁸ Rossides 229.

²³⁹ Lippman 115

²⁴⁰ McCombs 101-102

²⁴¹ Cook 162.

²⁴² McCombs 104.

²⁴³ Like the “Terror Babies” fervor that swept Congress in July of 2010. Terror babies are, supposedly, the children of terrorists whose parents fly to the US to give birth and then raise the children as jihad-loving extremists in their home country. This became a very popular narrative with several congress people from Texas and surrounding states, who claimed members of the FBI confirmed this was occurring. The FBI and CIA have both concluded that not only does this *not* happen, but that there have never been reports of anything remotely *like this* happening. None the less, the “Terror Babies” narrative dominated the news for nearly a whole month.

²⁴⁴ Lippman 102.

²⁴⁵ Jenkins 218.

²⁴⁶ Shirky 222.

²⁴⁷ Jenkins 213.

²⁴⁸ Shirky 165.

organize one of Dean's early 2003 events²⁴⁹. This Internet following made it appear as if Dean had a massive, devoted following – but this may not have actually been the case. As we've discussed, social media tend to artificially amplify our digital connections and affiliations without regard to actual levels of dedication or connected-ness, while also allowing groups of dedicated individuals to organize efficiently and effectively. Thus, the individuals who turned up at the 2003 Meetup event may have seemed like emissaries from a greater network, when really they comprised the few and the passionate who were driving and directing the movement all along.²⁵⁰ We should also note, here, that Dean had nothing to do with these organized groups, and therefore had no way of monitoring what his actual levels of support were.²⁵¹ Thus, he chose to communicate a message that would have worked with a large and passionate group of supporters – that their enthusiasm and energy was enough – but would instill false security in a small group of organizers whose “following” consisted of loosely engaged internet users, “accidentally [creating] a movement for a passionate few rather than a vote-getting operation.”²⁵² This is, perhaps, why the “I have a Scream” speech – in which Dean yelled loudly at the tail end of an address – had such an enormous effect. This new narrative of an overconfident man being humiliated appealed to a larger number of potential voters than those that were enthralled with Dean's message, and thus the media, particularly Internet users, tore into Dean and ripped his campaign to shreds.²⁵³ The clip of Dean screaming and a still image of it rendered one of the Internet's first “viral” phenomena, as his image was shown in such poses as “[groping] Janet Jackson, shouting at a kitten, or simply exploding from too much pent-up passion.”²⁵⁴ In short, the Dean candidacy demonstrated several potential pitfalls caused by the rise of new media. One might argue that Dean would have been more successful had his read on his own levels of support been more accurate and had his message been tailored to this instead of to his misconception. Barack Obama's 2008 campaign would build off of and learn from Dean's errors four years later, creating both online and offline presences and tethering both to a narrative that connected the two. The inclusion of narrative sensibility, in combination with a more developed understanding of the dynamics of social media, allowed Barack Obama to better rally his base of support and eventually rise to success.

I hope it is clear by now that, despite the changes in media and politics, narrativity has remained an important factor. Thus, when examining the system of American popular and political culture production, we must keep in mind not only the relationship between the structures that govern and tell stories, but also the sorts

²⁴⁹ Shirky 288-289.

²⁵⁰ Shirky 288-289.

²⁵¹ Jenkins 210.

²⁵² Shirky 223-224.

²⁵³ Jenkins 213.

²⁵⁴ Jenkins 213-214.

of stories they find themselves able to tell (or financially motivated to tell) in our contemporary environment.

Part II: The Modern System of American Popular Political Discourse

By now, we've discussed virtually all of the relevant material, from the development of the political-media institution to technological influences on the system's output. An understanding of these histories is critical to interpreting the system's intentional and unintentional products, especially if the idea is to utilize such a system to further social change.²⁵⁵ The only information left to present, then, is theory that will allow us to better understand the system's structure.

Framework: A Brief Discussion Relevant Theories and Previous Systems

Models of social systems are inevitably muddled due to their often non-linear mode of operation.²⁵⁶ In the social world, causation is complex, with outcomes being determined often by multiple causes, and even in these cases not necessarily as a sum of each separate effect.²⁵⁷ Even those who have developed and published models for social, media and political systems concede that models perhaps cannot capture the full workings of large social structures in their entirety.²⁵⁸ The most plausible explanations, then, are those "whose elements have independent motivation and use minimal additional cognitive counterparts,"²⁵⁹ or, in other words, models that focus on actors as opposed to specific, triggering actions or events. This saves a researcher or theorist from attempting to extrapolate what exact trigger causes a social pattern, when a general causal pattern between agents or *types* of events (as opposed to specific events) is proven to exist.²⁶⁰ That said, an effective social model should include, to the extent possible, the following: location of participants in the pattern within the systemic structure, a consideration of alternative modes of behavior that are not accounted for by the emphasis of the system, the understanding of the system by the system's participants, a distinction between motivations for system participation and behavior observed within the system and, finally, those patterns of behavior that may not be recognized by system participants but that none-the-less constitute systemic patterns.²⁶¹ Included within these considerations is a determination of whether actions are oriented towards the ends of an action (consequentialist) or the means of the action (non-consequentialist)²⁶² as well as the intended (manifest) and

²⁵⁵ Merton 135.

²⁵⁶ Byrne 14.

²⁵⁷ Byrne 20.

²⁵⁸ Herman and Chomsky 304.

²⁵⁹ Lakoff 157.

²⁶⁰ Elster 21, Elster 37.

²⁶¹ Merton 114.

²⁶² Elster 81.

unintended (latent) consequences of an action within the system.²⁶³ After all, “the social functions of an organization help determine the structure... just as the structure helps determine the effectiveness with which the functions are fulfilled.”²⁶⁴

The participants within the system will be explicitly labeled, but before getting to identifying these actors we ought to specify how to conceptualize of what they do. Action, in this case, will be a term best defined loosely as any intentional behavior, caused by the desire and belief of the agent in question.²⁶⁵ Actions must go through two successive filters in order to be performed – the first being comprised of various social constraints (which, as Lee has said, may not hinder activity so much as channel behavior) and the second representing an agent’s choice within the array of possible actions.²⁶⁶ Many of the types of actions that will be discussed involve the idea of strategy. In this realm we will utilize basic concepts within Game Theory. Game theory, of course, is a field concerned “with situations in which decision-makers interact [simultaneously] with one another, and in which each participant’s satisfaction with the outcome depends not just on his or her own decisions [but also] on the decisions made by everyone.”²⁶⁷ In traditional Game Theory, each player is identified and has options for how to behave, and there are specific (usually quantified) payoffs attached to each strategy and contingent upon the choice of each actor.²⁶⁸ One can often determine exactly how rational players will behave by a surveying of all of the numerical outcomes.²⁶⁹ Given the field we’re exploring, it would be impossible to assign specific values to all possible strategies without extrapolation or fabrication. That said, the principles of game theory, as well as several of the types of strategies that occur within games, are useful to consider. First, there is the notion of “equilibrium,” being a set of strategies and results that provide no incentive for players to change strategy. The Nash equilibrium is a specific sort of balance achieved when all players have incentives to choose particular strategies and no force exists within the system to push players to a different outcome.²⁷⁰ Also important are ideas related to dominant strategies. A player has a dominant strategy if it is the best response to every strategy of another player, and a strictly dominant strategy if the strategy is the absolute (or strict) best response to all strategies of another player – a player may have multiple dominant strategies which they can pick and choose among, but will unilaterally choose a strictly dominant strategy if given the choice.²⁷¹ Finally, there is the issue of

²⁶³ Merton 117.

²⁶⁴ Merton 136.

²⁶⁵ Elster 163.

²⁶⁶ Elster 165.

²⁶⁷ Easley and Kleinberg 140.

²⁶⁸ Easley and Kleinberg 140-141.

²⁶⁹ Easley and Kleinberg 142-143.

²⁷⁰ Easley and Kleinberg 150.

²⁷¹ Easley and Kleinberg 147.

optimality. Pareto-optimal strategies are those that return payoffs that are at least as high as all alternatives and, for at least one player, higher than payoffs associated with other actions.²⁷² Pareto-optimal strategies rest on the idea that players can make a deal to choose strategies that aren't at equilibrium.²⁷³ An alternative optimal strategy solution, termed Socially optimal strategies, maximize the sum of the players' payoffs and (in theory) act as a sort of social welfare maximizer.²⁷⁴

The system with which we will be dealing with features agents acting strategically, but payoffs cannot be identified numerically in part because the currency in the system at hand is that of influence, attention and power. Concepts like these are difficult to quantify but far from impossible to track through efforts of observation. Some theorists refer to concepts such as these as items of social capital, as opposed monetary capital, claiming that resources such as these are intangible and yet critical in mobilizing groups or accomplishing tasks.²⁷⁵ The definition of "power" we will use will mirror Arendt's definition – namely, the ability of people to act in concert – whereas the idea of influence will be tethered to Arendt's definition of authority, or the ability of an agent to utilize power without need for violence or coercion. Attention will be treated in a manner similar to how one might treat a commodity – agents have the ability to direct the focus of other agents, if only temporarily, and this direction of focus allows for a) multiple people to pay attention to something and then choose to act because of it (resulting in an exercise of power) and b) an agent to focus other agents' attention in such a manner that they inspire power, or cause other agents to believe action is necessary. All of these variables are the result of behaviors that occur within the system, resulting in a "network" connected by actions. Within networks, the rules of game theory apply, in that multiple actors are choosing strategies simultaneously and that the strategies chosen by all actors affect outcomes across the board.²⁷⁶ The ebb and flow of capital, however, is not as fixed and definite as in a game theory model. Something else to consider in this context is the difference between social connections, or ties. "Strong ties, representing close and frequent social contacts, tend to be embedded in tightly-linked regions of [a] network, whereas weak ties, representing more casual and distinct social contacts, tend to cross between these regions."²⁷⁷ Such variations in association provide a piece of the explanation as to why the decisions of agents with formidable authority, i.e. governments, can sometimes matter less to specific

²⁷² Easley and Kleinberg 166.

²⁷³ Easley and Kleinberg 166.

²⁷⁴ Easley and Kleinberg 166.

²⁷⁵ Easley and Kleinberg 61. Examples of theorists who write about social capital are Pierre Bourdieu, who speaks of both economic capital (monetary/physical resources) and cultural capital (resources of culture expanding beyond one's social circle), and James Coleman, who uses the ideas of physical capital (implements/technologies that help perform work) and human capital (skills/talents of individuals that can be brought to a task).

²⁷⁶ Easley and Kleinberg 4-5

²⁷⁷ Easley and Kleinberg 7.

individuals than the opinions of their friends, neighbors or (increasingly) favorite celebrities, with whom they share stronger ties.

By regarding the whole American media-political system as we would a network, we can explain some of the shifts in institutions and institutional relationships that have occurred over the past twenty years and can appreciate some of the fundamentally altered forms of action and power that have developed in response. Since we will be speaking of institutions, it's necessary to clarify exactly what institutions are. In this context, an institution should not be regarded as any one entity but as a group of "social patterns of behavior identifiable across the organizations that are generally seen within a social sphere,"²⁷⁸ for example conventions of corporate media. Each of the "agents" will actually constitute an "institution," precisely for many of the reasons discussed earlier in this paper – that the roles of "consumers" and "producers" are no longer static, nor are the rules of "businesses" and "media sources." Finally, I'd like to introduce the idea of a "coordination problem," which is a situation in which multiple actors wish to participate in some action, but this wish is contingent upon the participation of others²⁷⁹. Social integration and political change, as well as media events, can all be regarded as coordination problems.²⁸⁰ Solving coordination problems allows for greater demonstrations of power and, if some particular agent is responsible for the solution, new manifestations of authority. As we will see, shortly, the many of the more surprising developments in the American media and political system have occurred when technologies or individuals have figured out solutions to coordination problems, allowing for a greater flexibility between roles and a greater shift in institutional relationships.

The System at Hand (Graphic with Case Studies) *See Appendix for Graph*

In this portion of the paper, we will turn to the graph accompanying this work. Here, we have a system with six agents – Government, Business, Corporate Media, Independent Media, Organized Public and Unorganized Public – along with three stages of "action" – Attention, Potential for Action and Action itself. We also have three distinct systemic relationships and processes mapped out. The purple arrows indicate a relationship between corporate media, government and business which shapes the content that corporate media releases. The red arrows indicate the influence of media on political action on the part of the public, both organized and unorganized, as well as the government. Finally, the blue arrows indicate the type of "raw" information that informs the system as a whole.

"Government" is inclusive of all individuals working for government or national partisan associations, as well

²⁷⁸ Cook 70-71.

²⁷⁹ Chwe 12.

²⁸⁰ Chwe 3-4.

as individuals vying for positions within these groups. In this context, it is useful to think of government not merely as a legally established institution but rather as a mechanism for “solving” collective problems.²⁸¹ Because of this, participants in government are concerned with their public representation both as a means to stay in or obtain office and also as a means to govern effectively. The longstanding relationship between government and media has enabled politicians to use the media as a means to influence and conduct policymaking decisions,²⁸² and serves as an important resource for politicians attempting to frame issues in ways that benefit them in a particular election cycle. “There is constant tension, with likely winners trying to shape the debate to an issue dimension on which they are favored and likely losers trying to introduce some new consideration into the mix to shake up the outcome. Because the need to shake up the system occurs with predictable frequency, new issue conflicts do get introduced every few years.”²⁸³ In addition to using the media to bring up new issues of debate, politicians often use the media to assess how they should present certain decisions or create specific policy.²⁸⁴ While it’s important to emphasize government’s reliance on (and support of) corporate media institutions and business interests, one must not forget that the primary function of government is to govern. Thus, with great regularity, government contributes to the field of “Action,” by enacting legislation, campaigning or holding press events. Though government are not fully liberated from media sources when determining courses of action, the group as a whole bypasses many of the steps that members of the public must go through on the road to action. By in large, the best strategy for members of the government is to try to utilize the media to frame content in a manner that enables particular actions to gain public support. Theoretically, members of government should choose Social Welfare Maximizing strategies, but it is more often the case that political figures will choose more competitive strategies in order to gain an upper hand in policymaking or political debate.

“Business” includes all large (and often transnational) corporations who are either parent companies of large media outlets²⁸⁵ or else help govern media content through advertising dollars. Businesses are able to control some of what the media says through monetary incentives. Businesses are also dependent on the media to portray their organizations in a favorable light so as to build upon public good will, driving sales and corporate expansion. Additionally, the relationship between Business and Corporate Media has grown increasingly strong as conglomerations occur that merge media networks with telecommunications giants.²⁸⁶ The relationship between Business and Government is fairly straight-forward – businesses are subject to government regulation,

²⁸¹ Rossides 119

²⁸² McChesney 135.

²⁸³ Stimson 64.

²⁸⁴ Cook 139.

²⁸⁵ For example, General Electric (in the days when it still owned NBC)

²⁸⁶ McChesney 435.

but are also able to provide valuable services and financial backing to parties and candidates. Thus, Business and Government have incentives to seek cooperative strategies in most circumstances. Businesses' best strategy is to use the media and their ties to government to position themselves in favorable positions for future growth, and to avoid scandals or loss of "good will" by either complying with governmental regulations and prevailing moral standards or by manipulating their relationship with the media to avoid press coverage. In this model, businesses do not directly contribute to the field of Action because the types of businesses that fall into this agent category rarely make public political actions. That said, these sorts of events are not unheard of – fast food chains will advocate for pro-life groups, for example, or campaign for free trade. In these cases, however, the actions fall more into the category of funding and media manipulation to increase capital of "good will." In those rare circumstances where a business's actions have political ramifications that extend beyond donations – the B.P. oil spill, as an extreme example – the actions best fall into the category of "exogenous events." This additional category of action is intended to be inclusive of all events that occur outside of standard or predictable events, such as natural or man-made disasters.

Corporate Media (sometimes referred to as organized or mass media) consist of the few enormous media entities that mass-produce media content, both news and entertainment. The media, both Corporate and Independent, have tremendous abilities to affect public opinion and action due to their role as parties responsible for selecting and framing materials for attention and consumption.²⁸⁷ Corporate media, however, are in a better position to wield greater authority due to their size, economic resources and existing relationships with Government and Business. Media rely on the government for permits, clearances and subsidies, and rely on Business for money obtained through advertising. Additionally, the news media rely on the government to produce Action that they can cover. Because of all of these dependencies, members of the corporate media often have a difficult time opposing corporate interests with their content.²⁸⁸ That said, members of the corporate media have the potential wield enormous authority, provided that they stay within the parameters that Government and Business have set.²⁸⁹ Further, because Corporate Media are charged with filtering and delivering content to the public, they determine what constitutes "valuable" or "newsworthy" material and, in this way, have the potential to shape debate and contribute to opinion formation.²⁹⁰ The media both outline and publicize the issues of the day,²⁹¹ and must choose those angles that provide for engaging content as a matter of financial necessity. Corporate Media also serve as one of the few conduits to Attention, therefore constituting

²⁸⁷ McCombs 70.

²⁸⁸ Rossides 166-167.

²⁸⁹ Hermand and Chomsky 304.

²⁹⁰ Cook 89.

²⁹¹ Lippmann 118

the agent through which Business and Government inform and influence the Organized and Unorganized public. Though both Corporate and Independent Media have the ability to draw attention to issues, the reach of Corporate Media is more substantial. Thus, as is indicated by arrow size, the Corporate Media is a larger contributor towards the driving of attention. Corporate media determine what information to broadcast by selecting from Actions that have occurred within the sphere of American political and popular culture, as well selecting certain exogenous events. Final consideration of what material to broadcast, in addition to framing and shaping of narratives, occurs in response to Government and Business influences. Additionally, Corporate Media are finding new ways to monitor what their consumers are interested in (via social media), using this data to create more appealing and financially viable content. Corporate Media do not have a strictly dominant strategy, but rather a set of competing dominant strategies whose unifying goal is to maintain an equilibrium wherein Government and Business support Corporate Media and Corporate Media is able to keep their position as valued content creators by providing engaging, informative or entertaining materials to the general public. Corporate Media often seems to accept Pareto-Optimal strategies with regard to Government and Business, potentially compromising the integrity of material to drive the interest of the other agent. There are also situations in which Corporate Media will pursue strategies that may harm their relationships with Government and Business in pursuit of another end (capturing a greater share of the market through pandering to audience beliefs; pursuing stories that expose corporate or governmental misconduct in pursuit of promoting the social welfare of the public).

Independent Media are comprised by both media organizations that are smaller in size (and therefore not attractive partners for Government or Business) and also by individuals producing content independent of any organization. This is a category that has become increasingly fluid as social media has enabled greater numbers of people to become informal content creators. As such, Independent Media have different relationships with other agents, as well as different concerns. The Independent Media do not, in general, have the financial means to produce the same level of content as Corporate Media, nor do they have the connections and relationships to receive information about as many types of event in a manner that would render them a news-breaking competitor. Indeed, much of the news covered by independent media is culled from Wire reports or existing news coverage, as is indicated in the system design. Independent Media, however, are not hindered by many of the economic or content-producing constraints that Corporate Media have to combat,²⁹² which frees these producers to create a different sort of content. Independent Media call attention to objects and events in a fashion similar to that of Corporate Media, but on a much smaller scale. That said, Independent

²⁹² i.e. journalistic norms or constraints placed on Corporate Media by Business or Government

Media are free to communicate considerable biases and often tailor content to a target audience, rendering their content more influential to a smaller group of people. Additionally, members of the Independent Media are generally the parties responsible for Viral Videos, “User Generated Content” and Internet memes. They alter existing content using graphics or audio editing software or create short videos which are then posted to the web, which, in certain contexts, can generate profound political or cultural statements and potentially change the course of political debate.²⁹³ Independent Media’s best strategies lie in producing compelling content for their target audiences. Few, if any, other variables come into play.

The Organized Public is another somewhat fluid group, comprised of all organizations of people who do *not* constitute a corporation and do not seek to establish themselves as members of the media. These groups, ranging from professional associations to reform groups to charities to public-think tanks, are created due to a shared interest in a vocation or cause, and often seek to influence members of Government or Business to reach a particular end.²⁹⁴ Because these groups are smaller, they don’t tend to be part of the privileged relationship shared between Government, Business and Corporate Media. Their opinions, however, are often monitored by these more authoritative bodies, and data on the Organized Public is utilized by all three agents only in so far as it contributes to their respective strategic goals. The Organized Public relies on the Media, either Corporate or Independent, to cover its Actions in order to bring any particular group to Attention, but this happens only under specific circumstances, either relating to a particularly attention-grabbing, reckless or fascinating group Action or due to some exogenous event that a group within the Organized Public is somehow attached to.²⁹⁵ The Organized Public only have one strictly dominant strategy – to Act in ways that Media members find important or salient enough to bring attention to, with the hope that this Attention may give the group a platform from which their concerns might be addressed.

The Unorganized Public is the final agent category, and arguably the most flexible out of all six groups. The vast majority of the population finds themselves members of the unorganized public during some part of any given day. The Unorganized Public is comprised of individuals, separated from organizations and consuming (and not producing) media. Members of the competing organized public have a variety of personal goals and political beliefs, some of which may intersect and compete.²⁹⁶ Their information comes through both Corporate and Independent Media sources. Should they formulate an opinion and choose to act, they may either do so on an individual level or by seeking out, joining or assembling a group of people dedicated to the same belief(s) –

²⁹³ Jenkins 220.

²⁹⁴ Rossides 119.

²⁹⁵ Cook 95-96

²⁹⁶ Stimson 30.

though, in doing so, they become members of the Organized Public. Very few actions by a member of the Unorganized Public gain media attention. Those that do are usually acts of extreme heroicism, fanaticism, violence or absurdity which meet the standards set by Corporate or Independent Media as action worthy of directing attention towards. As such, unless a person seeks to act in one of these ways, there is very little strategy that goes into being a member of the Unorganized Public. Individuals generally try to pursue their best interests in whatever manners are available to them, but do not have the resources to pursue strategy with larger, more authoritative agents within the system.

Case Studies: System in Action

Case One: The “Ground Zero Mosque” Debacle

2010 was a big election year – all of the seats in the House of Representatives and over a third of the seats in the Senate were contested – and, as such, the months leading into election season contained passionate political debates. Remember that Government uses Corporate Media, in part, to push for policy decisions and to promote their own agenda, particularly when running for office. This is particularly useful in election years, when politicians use media to bring up salient issues that they can rally support around. The summer of 2010 featured a variety of talking points – questioning President Obama’s national origin, calling for strict border control to keep out “anchor babies,” Arizona’s racial-profiling immigration legislation – but one in particular stands out. In this instance both politicians and Corporate Media leveraged their authority in pursuit of maximization of influence.

The issue was referred to as the “Ground Zero Mosque.” An Islamic Community Center was set to be built several blocks north of ground zero, containing a gym, swimming pool, performance space and a mosque. News of the building began to hit the press in May, generating almost instantaneous responses from conservative candidates or incumbents who demanded that the construction never take place. The building began being referred to exclusively as the Ground Zero Mosque, and the facts of the project were temporarily thrown to the wayside. The story became, instead, that Muslim organizations planned to build a “victory mosque” on what several politicians determined was “hallowed ground.” Protests broke out on a national level, ranging from local outcry to Tea Party rallies in Temecula, California. Groups based outside of New York State campaigned to have the buildings made official landmarks in order to stop the community centers from being constructed.²⁹⁷ Eventually, the President made comments regarding the Ground Zero Mosque, essentially stating that construction could not be opposed without threatening Freedom of Religion. Today, the community center

²⁹⁷ CNN Wire Staff 1.

exists, though it is (predictably) not without its internal issues.

That politicians would attempt to shift public focus from “community center” to “Ground Zero Mosque” is not surprising, nor is it unusual for an issue that is essentially local to become a national concern. Members of Government are best in a position to use the Corporate Media when they are calling attention to issues that they feel they can solve, as opposed to lasting problems that might simply have to be endured. The increased visibility of the issue can not only drive support towards a politician but can also serve as a sort of sounding board for policy-making, especially when the politician in question is in the process of vying for office.²⁹⁸ The Corporate Media, on the other hand, employed very interesting tactics. Corporate Media brought the issue to the attention of both the public and members of government, perhaps sensing its potential for being fodder for Action on the part of multiple groups. Many of these media sources consistently and correctly reported that the center would not exclusively be a mosque and would not be built on, or even adjacent to, ground zero.²⁹⁹ Several outlets made points of developing broadcast or written material that mocked these misconceptions – it was, in fact, Anderson Cooper who pointed out that the land that some were petitioning to be declared a New York landmark was, in fact, the site of an abandoned Burlington Coat Factory. Yet, despite these efforts to correct false statements circulating throughout public discourse, Corporate Media continued to refer to the community center as the Ground Zero Mosque, effectively eliminating the effects of any of their disambiguating stories. In fact, the phrase has been used *so* often that it immediately evokes the issue in question – with or without the relevant facts.

Corporate Media chose to piggyback on the issue to boost ratings while trying to simultaneously avoid compromising coverage. In this way, Corporate Media were able to satisfy two competing dominant strategies, one being to strengthen ties with members of Government and the other being to appeal to audiences by delivering compelling and relevant content. In this case, it was advantageous to continue circulating the “Ground Zero Mosque” trope after it had become part of public discourse, as politicians and protesters utilized the term in their own speech. Yet, this came with a cost, being that some of the facts of the matter were lost through using this name, thereby running contrary to one of the values implicitly included in Corporate Media’s news production – namely, news organizations presumptively are bound by journalistic norms, which require telling the truth. While perpetuating the use of the term falls more under the category of partial (and perhaps inadvertent) misrepresentation, the incident highlights one way that media unintentionally circulate bad

²⁹⁸ Cook 126-127

²⁹⁹ Some did not – namely, those media outlets who were currently employing the strategy of pandering to a target audience. In these cases, to elect to correct these statements would be counterintuitive and against their overriding strategy, whereas stoking the flames of the debate (even with incorrect assertions) would continue to drive up audience numbers.

assumptions due to their influence in political discussions. In other words, though the manifest consequences of covering the Ground Zero Mosque Story involved bringing salient information to the attention of the public, the latent consequence ended up being the reinforcement of incorrect assumptions about the project itself.

Case Two: Meat Dress for Justice (Lady Gaga VS. DADT)

What the “Ground Zero Mosque” represents in terms of Government and Corporate Media manipulating the American Political Media System, Lady Gaga’s foray into politics, a la the debate over Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell, represented for traditionally non-political forces using the system to further their own goals. In this particular case, a pop starlet catapulted herself into the spotlight and demonstrated the potential for individuals to gain entry into political debate through use of new media constructs and attention-getting savvy.

Don’t Ask, Don’t Tell (commonly abbreviated DADT) is the colloquial phrase used to refer to Pub. L 103-160 (10 U.S.C. § 645), which formally prohibited homosexual individuals from serving in the armed forces, under the grounds that inclusion of such individuals would undermine unit morale. Further, DADT mandated that existing soldiers who made homosexual preferences known would be summarily discharged. The law was passed under the Clinton Administration, and became a hotly debated issue during Barack Obama’s presidential candidacy. In May of 2010, Congress voted to repeal the act, which cleared the way for the Senate to deal with the issue. The Senate didn’t have a scheduled vote until September of 2010, but the attention paid to the issue, particularly after the overturn of California’s Proposition 8 in August, was enormous.

Lady Gaga is not someone who was associated at all with politics or the military. She did, however, have a tremendous fan base of LGBTQ or LGBTQ-friendly youth. Gaga’s own persona was built more around the idea of fame, pride and spectacle, with a slight hint of aggression. Gaga’s rise as a successful musician was facilitated by public stunts and outrageous outfits and her dialogue with her fan base was (and continues to be) incredibly complex. Calling her fans “her little monsters,” Lady Gaga preaches self-love and pride regarding any sorts of “differences,” simultaneously implying that the “differences” she refers a) concrete and permanent and b) something considered by the rest of the world to be inherently negative traits. This worked particularly well when communicating to her LGBTQ fan base, who are regrettably bombarded with cultural indications that their sexual preference is an abomination or a choice (and a bad one at that). Telling her fans to raise their claws high, early Gaga said she accepted her “freaks” as they were, indicating that she might be the only person (or certainly the only pop star) in the world to offer such acceptance. Many of her fans call her “Mother Monster.” It’s the sort of material, frankly, that a psychoanalyst would have a field day over.

The choice, then, to involve herself in the DADT debate was a natural one for Gaga, having already

been familiarized with the gay rights movement. She took to her Twitter account after the overturn of Proposition 8, and began making numerous statements, videos and calls to action for her followers, intent on transitioning from starlet to pop-star-activist hybrid. Gaga met with members of the Servicemembers Legal Defense Network, a group that was pushing for repeal of DADT as well, and even brought several former members of the military as her dates to the MTV Video Music Awards. Her efforts culminated in September of 2010, when she headed up a rally in Portland, Maine. Dressed as a cartoonish politician, she read a speech in which she likened the rights of the Constitution to the foods in a cafeteria, going so far as to state, “Equality is the prime rib of what we stand for as a nation. Shouldn’t everyone deserve the right to wear the same meat dress that I did?” Public messages were sent to Senators John McCain, Scott Brown, Olympia Snowe and Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid, who actually responded to Gaga’s messages on Twitter.

All of this was only possible because Lady Gaga used the American Political Media System to her advantage. Gaga was already practiced in directing the public’s attention at herself through Corporate and Independent Media and upped the ante by pushing for a political cause. She was correct in assuming the media would take note of her statements – media cover celebrities of all types – but took a calculated gamble in assuming her political actions would stay in the press. After all, pop culture celebrities make political statements frequently, but few are able to not only maintain attention but generate an air of credibility while doing so. Corporate Media, as we know, have conflicting dominant strategies within the American Political Media System, one of which strengthens their ties to Government and Business and the other of which focuses on providing engaging and profitable content. Lady Gaga, already a figure covered by the media, astutely called her fan base to action, having them forward links, post personal videos, and send e-mails to their Senators. In this way, the Organized and Unorganized public were digitally demonstrating that they found Gaga’s efforts to be compelling and worthy of attention. The question, then, became this – what would happen if a celebrity took up a cause and proposed real solutions while providing her fans with mechanisms to immediately and consistently demonstrate public support? Would Corporate media take any more note than if the celebrity were calling for complex or vague causes, like “tolerance,” “reduced oil dependency” or “foreign aid”? The answer is a resounding yes, with an addendum – not only would the Corporate Media respond, but representatives of the Government would respond as well. Gaga’s case is only one out of dozens that have excellently demonstrated this ability – for a truly hair-raising case, we need turn no further than Pastor Terry Jones of Florida, who threatened to burn Korans while Gaga was campaigning against DADT and followed through on his promise in late-March of 2011, sparking multi-day waves of violence in Afghanistan after video of said burnings were posted to his church’s website and his personal Twitter and Facebook accounts. The conclusion to be drawn

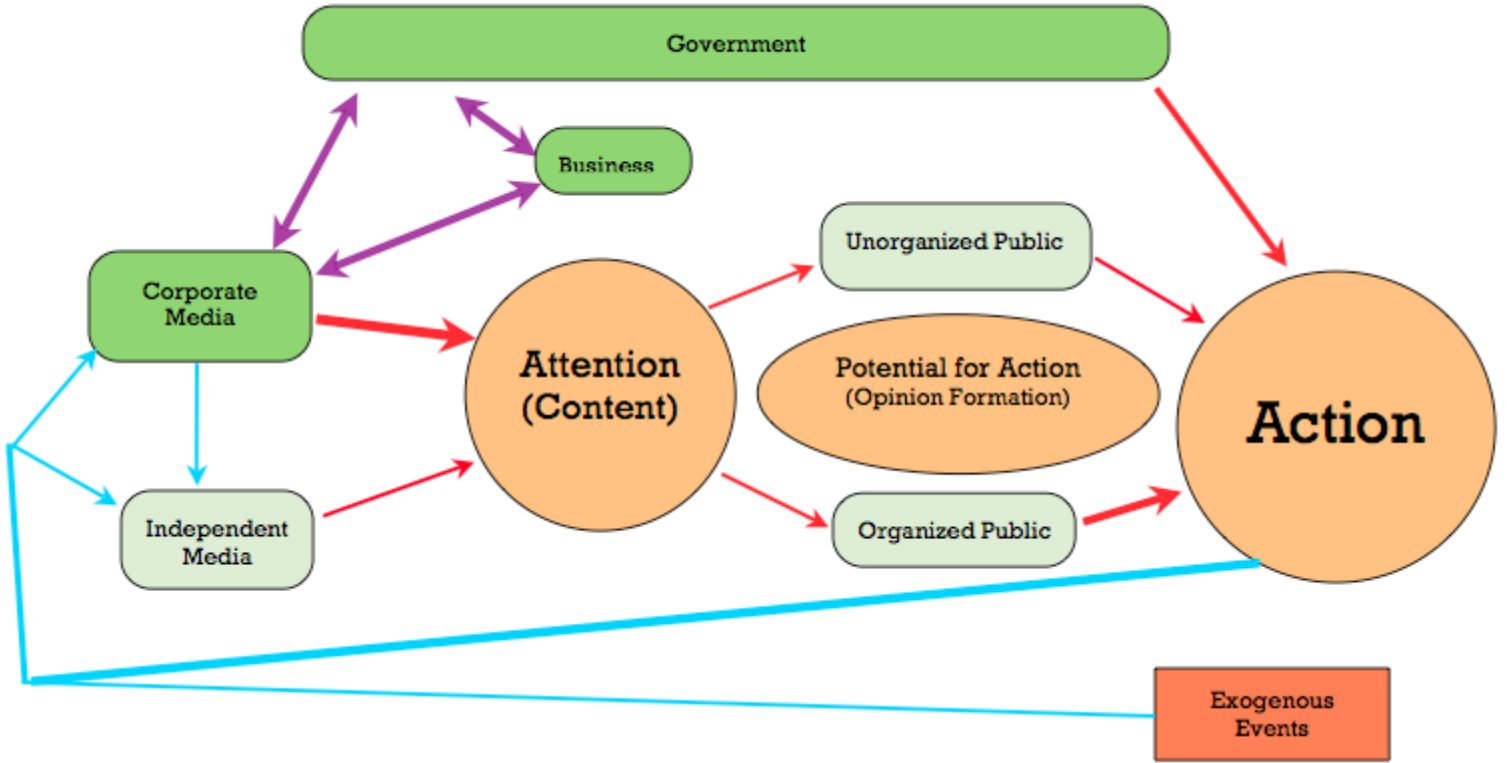
here is that social media tools have the potential to provide individuals with the means to jump into political debate in earnest, essentially hijacking the attention of the Corporate Media, if they can demonstrate that media audiences would be interested in their story.

Conclusion

Understanding the manner by which popular political opinion is produced and circulated in the contemporary United States is critical, not only for individuals working in media and politics but for citizens in general. The information and narratives that circulate through public discourse are the products of exogenous events and citizen action, itself a product of messages being pumped out by corporate and government interests. It is tempting to look at the way the American Political Media System works and denounce it as being myopic and inescapably cyclical. I believe, however, that understanding the American Political Media System for what it is – namely, an effort on the part of multiple parties to satisfy specific interests related to influence and power – enables actors within the system to act more strategically and, if they so choose, to invest in movements that would change the dynamics of the system as a whole.

Many of the tactics employed by media bodies, political figures and representatives of the general public, ranging from tailoring media content to audience interests or promoting more provocative narratives with shorter shelf-lives, are effective in satisfying the immediate goals of various actors. As I've attempted to point out, these actions are not without their consequences, some of which have the potential to quite literally wreck havoc throughout the world. Politicians need to consider the impact of rapid-fire, dirty political tactics that are leveraged through the media. Corporate media ought to reevaluate their reactive strategies in the face of digital developments, particularly those that force media providers to pander to their audiences. And the public should seek to expand their frame of reference and information outside the United States, in order to liberate themselves from the tropes that dominate American political thought. Individuals within the public should also begin to broaden their definitions of political or public discourse and consider the larger ramifications of attention-grabbing, agenda-stealing behaviors. Because popular political sentiment is produced in a predictably cyclical fashion, the actions of each entity affect what sentiments are spread and what actions are produced. Dissatisfied individuals ought to seek to affect not only the opinions circulated by the American Political Media System but should also attempt to alter the system itself. Ultimately, through the pursuit of expanded frames of reference and more reasoned political discourse, all of the actors within the system have the potential to change what Americans believe and how Americans come to believe it.

Appendix I: The American Political Media System



The American Political Media System

Sarah Lefkowitz

KEY

- ⇒ = System of Influence on Corporate Media
- ⇒ = System of Media influence on Political Action
- ⇒ = "Raw" content input into Media sources

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