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Old and New Media: Competition and Political Space

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Introduction: 'It's the Conversations'

Classically, election analysis, especially studies on voter choice, is focused on demographics and polling. Attention is also paid to news and media exposure – whether candidate coverage, commercials, talk radio and the like may be significant factors behind gaining an image of the candidate, understanding the substance of the campaign, and swaying the voter. Candidate communication strategies and media bias of one form or another remain the object of critical study of 'media effects.' Referenced in such popular books as *The Tipping Point*, the studies on the changing facial expressions of TV news anchormen as they speak of the candidates are one case in point.[1] These are among the various efforts ultimately to account for fact and knowledge gaps between voter ideas about candidates' positions and the actual stands.

Recently, analysts are turning to the role of conversations.[2] (In new media analysis, online discussion lists, chat as well as blogs often stand in for 'conversation.'[3]) Inspired by the 'ignition' of the grassroots by the Howard Dean campaign's (and moveon.org's) "meet-up's," the first articles about peer-to-peer voter decision-making are appearing. Conversations at 'house parties' and other informal gatherings may over-determine one's image of a candidate, one's understanding of substance, and also prompt voter 'network effects,' where, for example, one votes against one's self-interest not because of 'knowledge gaps' but for reasons accounted for by network communication theories of contagion and/or balance.[4] (I vote this way because friends of friends do, or because these particular people do.) Most recently in the realm of political analysis, conversations are said to mitigate against 'old media effects,' or, as one author has put it, "limit elite influence."[5] In all, to create indications of voter choice and to understand the role of media effects, election analysts now weigh demographics and poll results as well as communication strategies, media bias, and conversation.

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[1] H.S. Friedman, T.I. Mertz and M.R. DiMatteo, "Perceived Bias in the Facial Expressions of Television News Broadcasters, *Journal of Communication*, 30, 1980, 103-111; B. Mullen et al., "Newscasters' Facial Expressions and Voting Behavior of Viewers: Can a Smile Elect a President?" *Journal of Personality and Social Psychology*, 51 (2), 1986, 291-295; M. Gladwell, *The Tipping Point*, Boston, MA: Little, Brown and Co, 2000; and R. Coleman and D. Granberg, "Visual Bias and Other Factors Affecting Voting Behavior," *AEJMC Archives*, 116(1), September 2002, http://list.msu.edu/cgi-bin/wa?A2=ind0209a&L=aejmc&F=&S=&P=16758, accessed on 7 January 2005.

[2] J.N. Druckman and K.R. Nelson, "Framing and Deliberation: How Citizens' Conversations Limit Elite Influence," *American Journal of Political Science*, 47 (4), October 2003, 729-745.

[3] W. Sack, "What Does a Very Large-scale Conversation Look Like?" *Leonardo: Journal of Electronic Art and Culture*, 35(4), August 2002, 417-426.

[4] P. Monge and N. Contractor, *Theories of Communication Networks*, New York: OUP, 2003.

[5] V. Krebs, "It's the Conversations, Stupid! The Link between Social Interaction and Political Choice," in M. Ratcliffe and J. Lebkowsky (eds.), *Extreme Democracy*, online book, 2004, http://www.extremedemocracy.com, accessed 6 January 2005.

The Dean campaign both used new media and appeared to work with a set of new media-style assumptions, more in the vein of an NGO than a governor's office scripting events for journalists (though that was taking place, too). Taking into account the role of raising funds on the campaign Web site; of volunteer bloggers keeping a running record of the campaign at blog.deanforamerica.com; of newsletter emailing; of tell a friend software use; of text-messaging alerts; of Dean Internet TV; of concerted chat room, message board, and newsgroup participation; and of dean2004.meetup.com in organizing campaign workers, finding hosts and guests for house parties, and eventually (and rather hopefully) building voter bases and swaying other voters through social network effects, the general feature of the Dean campaign may have been its new media style, one based more on 'info-sharing' and 'personalization' than on a proverbially message-disciplined culture, run centrally and perceptibly by such single communications strategy figures like a Dick Morris or a Karl Rove (though there was some of that, too, in the form of Joe Trippi).[6] The Dean campaign may be held up as an effort that paid considerable attention to not old but new media effects.

The Dean campaign had its headquarters in Burlington, Vermont, which coordinated the official content and event scheduling. But their method, to a degree, approached new media-style franchising, which typically encourages the rise of decentralized, network-based groups, which fill in 'the content' within the formats afforded by the new media 'tools.' It is a model of practice, whereby once the kit is available, one can start one's own network node, create and release one's own content, and share one's own innovations with the network. Dean's campaign did not quite go as far as that. But supporters' event and independent content creation were recognized by the campaign. There were open databases of house parties and supporters to meet socially, without a script. There were independent student Websites and listservs, receiving links from the official Dean site. And there were Dean Team Leader pages on the main campaign site, with personalized content (and the meter showing the leader's progress in meeting a fund-raising commitment).

Dean's campaign was peculiar. To new media analyst, Clay Shirky, the Dean campaign used social software 'organically,' Kerry's and Clark's less so, belatedly and more leadenly.[7] The approach to organizing is described in a December 2003 *Washington Post* article.

> Debbye Butler, one of the early volunteers for the New Hampshire campaign: "It's empowering, how decentralized the campaign is. Usually you walk into the campaign office and they say, 'Come on Tuesday. We need someone to make phone calls,' or 'We need someone to foot-canvass.' Here you walk in and they say, 'What do you want to do? What do you think will work in your ward?' You get engaged, you feel ownership over the campaign. You feel like you're a part of it because you are a part of it."[8]

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[6] J. Hall, "Coverage of George W. Bush," *The Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics*, 8(2), April 2003, 115-120.

[7] Clay Shirky, "Exiting Deanspace," *Corante Many 2 Many*, Group Weblog, 3 February 2004, http://www.corante.com/many/archives/2004/02/03/exiting_deanspace.php.

[8] *Washington Post*, 9 December 2003, http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A47440-2003Dec8.

The same article also alludes to the difference between scripting, and the more open-ended conversation format, where beneficial network effects are assumed.

> "We build on the assumption that each individual matters," says Karen Hicks, the campaign's state director. "We want to learn as much as possible about each person's experience, their story, their values and their social connections because these things become the campaign -- they are the campaign."[9]

Personalized messages are delivered socially, ideally by someone you know, if, indeed, there are any messages at all. The intriguing assumptions made by the Dean campaign are that the message is your own (not headquarters'), that you choose how to be involved (as opposed to volunteering for pre-set jobs – though there were plenty of those), and that conversation and social network effects would supplant old media effects. Although it is easy to overemphasize the new media – the social software and Web-based technology - one point to be made is that the Dean campaign rested on new media-style assumptions, based less on the concerted repetition of talking points to broadcast media, than on the tools that would customize staff and voter participation and contribution. In some sense, their 'preferences' were taken into account, if the software analogies should be pushed that far. Most importantly, the campaign assumed that a Dean 'voter network' would grow through tool-enabled socializing; the other campaigns, more likely than not, were still employing the outdated candidate as product model, where the most important medium is TV, not the Internet.

Media Contests

The Dean campaign should be sited in a media contest, where new media lost, unexpectedly. Compare the thoughts of *Vote.com* author Dick Morris in August 2003 with those of one blogger, recounting a speech he made at the ConConUk technology and politics gathering (in February 2004). Both phrase the campaign in terms of a media contest. Dick Morris wrote:

> The larger message of the Dean candidacy is that the era of TV-dominated politics is coming to a close after 30 years. With dwindling audiences and an increasingly sophisticated electorate, the 30-second ad and the seven-second sound bite are losing their power to control the political dialogue.[10]

And the blogger, after Dean's campaign collapsed:

> The ability of tight, focused political messages carried via mass media to deliver votes does not seem to be threatened by the net in any meaningful way at this time. I'd love to see any evidence to contradict this. I want to believe that TV can be bypassed....[11]

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[9] *Washington Post*, 9 December 2003, http://www.washingtonpost.com/ac2/wp-dyn/A47440-2003Dec8.
[10] Dick Morris, "Dean's Internet Revolution," *Frontpagemag.com*, 6 August 2003, http://www.frontpagemagazine.com/Articles/ReadArticle.asp?ID=9252.
[11] Steiny, "CONCONUK Speech," 24 February 2004, http://radish.hosted.doosh.net/steiny/mt/archives/000032.html.

At stake in the Dean campaign was bypassing broadcast TV as well as other old media. (The Dean site, unlike, for example, georgewbush.com, never provided tips for calling in on talk radio or providing text that could be pasted into letters to the editors of local newspapers. See table one.) Given the collapse of Dean's candidacy following the repeated televising of his scream after the Iowa caucuses, there is a certain poignancy to any campaign's efforts to create and position itself within a new, alternative, non-televisual political space, however much 'new media' music samplers and photoshoppers participated in the ridicule.

Table 1: Online newspapers publishing georgewbush.com's AstroTurf letter to the editor, containing the text, "This issue is just one more example of how our President is providing the courageous leadership America needs." Source: Google, 8 January 2005.

Pittsburgh Tribune Review
Pittsburgh, PA
Sep 9 2003

Naples Daily News
Naples, FL
Sep 10 2003

The City Newspaper
Nashville, TN
Sep 12 2003

Contra Costa Times
Walnut Creek, CA
Sep 19 2003

Courier Journal
Florence, AL
Oct 1 2003

Santa Monica Mirror
Santa Monica, CA
Oct 29 2003

The Post and Courier
Charleston, SC
Nov 12 2003

The Valley News
Fulton, NY
Nov 15 2003

Northern Colorado Courier
Fort Collins, CO
Dec 2 2003

Tuscaloosa News
Tuscaloosa, AL
Jan 21 2004

The Sun-Times
Heber Springs, AR
Feb 24 2004

The Daily Reflector
Greenville, NC
Feb 27 2004

Rhino Times
Greensboro, NC
Feb 26 2004

North County Times and
The Californian
San Diego, CA
Feb 29 2004

Journal Times Online
Racine, WI
Feb 29 2004

The Daily News
Longview, WA
Mar 1 2004

Corpus Christi Caller-Times
Corpus Christi, TX
Mar 3 2004

*Marshfield News Hera*ld
Marshfield, WI
Mar 6 2004

Inland Valley Daily Bulletin
Ontario, CA
9 Mar 2004

Times Recorder
Zanesville, OH
Mar 10 2004

Villager Journal
Sharp County, AR
Mar 10 2004

Urban Tulsa Weekly
Tulsa, OK
Mar 11 2004

Colorado Springs Independent
Colorado Springs, CO
Mar 11 2004

Chapel Hill News
Chapel Hill, NC
Mar 12 2004

The Herald-Star
Steubenville, OH
Mar 13 2004

The Pueblo Chieftan
Pueblo, CO
Mar 14 2004

Cibola County Beacon
Grants, NM
Mar 23 2004

Western Queens Gazette
Queens, NY
24 Mar 2004

The Tribune
San Luis Obispo, CA
Mar 25 2004

The Union-Recorder
Milledgeville, GA
Mar 29 2004

Williston Pioneer Sun News
Williston, FL
Apr 7 2004

La Crosse Tribune
La Crosse, WI
Apr 21 2004

Hattiesburg American
Hattiesburg, MS
Apr 24 2004

Manitowoc Herald Times Reporter
Manitowoc, WI
Apr 28 2004

The Shawnee News-Star
Shawnee, OK
May 15 2004

Salt Lake City Weekly
Salt Lake City, UT
May 20 2004

Free Times
Columbia, S.C.
Jul 14 2004

Bowling Green Daily News
Bowling Green, KY
Aug 6 2004

The Voice of Buffalo
Buffalo, NY
Summer 2004

Rockbridge Weekly
Lexington, VA
2004 (no specified date)

Crucially, there was another, larger media contest (running parallel with the campaigns) that played out daily in the blogsphere. A particular portion of the blogsphere - a dominant, political sub-sphere[12] - relied on different assumptions about the importance of old media. While the Dean campaign was striving to increase its voter base with software-enabled socializing and the development of formats for potential voters to feel more comfortable about what in the end is candidate selection, the blogsphere was seeking, not so much to bypass, but to consistently penetrate 'mainstream media.' The Dean campaign wanted out (so to speak), in a kind of 'we, the media' approach (to use the title of Dan Gillmor's popular book). The blogsphere wanted in, under the assumption that the mainstream media were far more significant than house parties, tell-a-friend, and political Flash movies.

Perhaps surprisingly, the political blogsphere employed old media assumptions, purposively following the news, critiquing the coverage, pointing to any and all recognition by the news of the blogsphere's revelations as well as attributions of revelations. (Some received press accreditation for major campaign events such as the national party conventions.) Regularly the blogsphere either lamented not having enough evidence to make it in mainstream media, or complained about being ignored when they did (as in, for example, the famous bulge appearing under Bush's jacket during his first debate with Senator John Kerry). The relationship between the blogsphere and the mainstream media I am describing is not at all unusual. To gain a sense of the blogsphere's treatment and discussion of the "mainstream media" along the lines above, query any blog engine for the term, and analyze key words in context. MSM or m.s.m., the short-hand, may be the more telling query.

To argue that one significant role of the political blogsphere in the U.S. elections was to maintain assumptions about the importance of old media as a space of politics and further a change theory based on exposure to mass media as opposed to growth of social networks is also to say that the two new media environments (Dean campaign and the political blogsphere) have swapped places. In some sense, the Dean campaign had become increasingly independent new media, and the blogs had become increasingly dependent on old media. The switch is all the more striking for one normally would think of the blogsphere as a competitor to mainstream media, with an epistemological culture distinct from that of older media forms.

As bloggers research the digitized media for evidence (e.g., about the Bush bulge), finding pictures new and old of bulges (and discover White House 'site scrubbing' of pictures and videos along the way) - and once what the blogsphere has dug up is generally 'known' (and stored in individual site archives as well as in dedicated repositories as bushwired.blogspot.com, bushiswired.com (now up for sale) and isbushwired.com (posting stopped on 7 November 2004)) - it is often talked about as blogsphere knowledge. Not having heard of the bulge is one thing, but if one equates the blogsphere with ideas like a bulging defibrillator (and 'supporting evidence' such as Bush's postponement of his annual

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[12] Analysis of the dominant political blogsphere could be accomplished through link and textual analysis. For a longer discussion, see R. Rogers, "Poignancy in the U.S. political blogsphere," *Aslib Proceedings*, forthcoming. Common understandings of the dominant political blogsphere, gained from bloggers as well as blog engines' rankings, begin with the daily kos and atrios (on the left) and instapundit and sullivan (on the right), which are the four political bloggers in Technorati's top 15. Common Dreams, the NGO news filter, rounds out the 15; little green footballs comes in at 20, and wonkette at 30.

physical examination until after the elections), then one could be accused by that sphere of not understanding its epistemic culture. That George W. Bush had spittle beneath his lower lip for a portion of the second debate may not mean that the bulge visible beneath his jacket in the first debate is a defibrillator. The blogsphere had 'gone there' briefly, but returned to the theory that Bush had an earpiece and a bulging receiver, and was being prompted to say particular things by a coach. That would explain his sudden "Let me finish!" utterance in the first debate, when no one had interrupted him and his time had not nearly expired. The defibrillator theory has been off the table for months! The enhanced photographs of Bush's back during the first debate made by the NASA scientist pretty much settled it. To the blogsphere, mainstream media were too scared to run the story, even though the credible evidence is there (as opposed to being 'out there' somewhere).

David Lindorff, the author of the most recent piece concerning the relationship between mainstream media coverage and the blogsphere's evidence, introduces the vetted view of the bulge, two typical relationships between old media and the blogsphere, one normal route from blogsphere to mainstream media (Salon.com) as well as the latest in the revelatory. A seminal blogger in the Bush bulge story points to how well-known Lindorff's piece is, in the political blogsphere.

David Lindorff:
> Almost as astonishing as the likelihood that President Bush cheated and wore a device - most likely a wireless magnetic induction hearing device - during his three presidential debate appearances - and definitely lied about what was under his jacket - is the fact that the nation's two leading newspapers, the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post*, had the story but failed to report it in any serious way.
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> While both papers did mention the issue once it had appeared in Salon.com, both, along with the rest of the mainstream media, also treated it as a joke, an "internet conspiracy," which was the line put out by the White House and Bush/Cheney campaign in an intense campaign designed to keep the potentially explosive story from going anywhere.
>
> Now, in an article in Extra!, the media criticism journal published by Fairness and Accuracy in Reporting, the inside story of the killing by senior editors of this important story about presidential cheating is exposed….[13]

Joseph Cannon:
> There's little point in my directing your attention to a story that Buzzflash has pushed so heavily, since nearly everyone reading these words also reads that site. But just in case you missed it, David Lindorff has THE last word on the bulge, and how it might have changed the election.[14]

During the elections, unusually, the mainstream, instead of being a separate sphere, was being critiqued for their refusal to accept blog knowledge as a primary source. Blogs had

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[13] David Lindorff, "How the New York Times Killed the Bush Bulge Story," counterpunch.org, posted 5 February 2005.
[14] Joseph Cannon, "Bulge," cannonfire.blogspot.com, posted 5 February 2005.

been commentators. In the election period, blogsphere success, it could be said, was booked only by old media confirmation. One read the news not only to comment upon it, but also to see which stories have made it to that sphere, as opposed to being only in the blogsphere. During the campaign, especially, it appeared the blogsphere could not do without news – something that is recognizable if we look at the blogsphere's celebrated cases. Did the (right-wing) blogsphere take down the CBS news anchorman and certain managers and editors around him (over the fake memo showing George Bush's absence from the national guard)? Mainstream reporting of the blogsphere appears more crucial.

In any case, previously, the blogsphere was viewed less as primary source than as an information recommendation culture of great interest to readers. Once aggregated by engines such as technorati, blogpulse and waypath, or projects such as allconsuming, the blogsphere became a new kind of collective, aggregated source - one freed from the 'tyranny of (old media) editors,' to put it one way, or one that had its own elitism. It competed with old media's vetting practices that would result in picks recommended by virtue of review (positive or negative) in the feuillton. It competed with the weekly reviews, where particular news stories of the past week are highlighted; the blogsphere had its own news story picks (with a far shorter refresh schedule than old media), and those recommended were the ones most discussed as opposed to the ones published by given reputable authorities, and tipped for prizes, for example. The blogsphere told of different books, different news stories and other kinds of recommended reading than the old media, although such impression has yet to be researched.

A second contribution of the blogsphere, apart from a recommendation culture (largely derived from engine-makers' recognition of its 'filter' genre as opposed to its journal, notebook and other types), is a contribution to politics different than the one that takes the detour via the news. With regard to the political contribution of the blogsphere, elsewhere I have argued that it provides a particularly poignancy to social issues, distinct from the news.[15] The poignancy, it was found in a small case study on a mini-blogsphere's substantive contribution to the debate surrounding the FCC's proposed relaxation of media concentration rules, derived from the terms significantly associated with the issue in a mini-blogsphere and a mini-news sphere (i.e., those blogs and those news outlets doing the issue).[16] Where news offered procedural terms, blogs offered Oprah Winfrey and Howard Stern, figures held up as indecent in letters of complaint to the FCC. Whilst news seemingly would not make such a leap of reasoning, to blogs, perhaps, media concentration ultimately would take them off the air.

The question to be asked now, however, is what an event gains by taking the detour to the blogsphere, as opposed to moving straight to the news. For the debate on the floor of the House of Representatives on the certification of the Electoral College vote, the blogsphere was used as a tainting mechanism for otherwise well-documented findings (in the Conyer report) made with and without the blogsphere. Must the blog stories make the mainstream

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[15] R. Rogers, "Poignancy in the U.S. political blogsphere," *Aslib Proceedings*, forthcoming.

[16] The notion of a mini-blogsphere additionally rests on the extent to which the set of blogs doing an issue are interconnected by links and/or by textual referencing. Blogs also make be 'connected' together through common references to a third party, e.g., all blogs linking to or referencing a particular piece in the *New York Times*.

media for them to matter (to the blogsphere and beyond)? As we witness the integration of blogs more generally in news, to some the question may be without relevance. In part, news may be going to the blogs. But it is perhaps the spherical separation, combined with an increasing exposure to the distinctiveness of the blogsphere, that is of relevance here.

Whether or not the blogsphere should be critiqued for its dependency on old media is less germane than its contribution to the status of Web knowledge, a subject not often addressed. In some sense the blogsphere unfies the new and old media through (however unequal) references to both, moving, for example, the David Lindorff piece, published across NGO media monitoring Websites, to the status of what is currently known about the bulge, readying it anew for mainstream penetration. Furthermore, like the Web, the blogsphere appears to have longer attention spans, as well as greater memory, than news, changing ever so slightly the epistemological conditions under which politics moves on, or is allowed to. Whilst the blogsphere, like certain TV talk shows, does regularly participate in the culture of scandalization by 'outing' people and things through background and fact-checking, thereby widening the circle of practitioners of that political technique and in that particular kind of political conversation, it also should be thought of as a space that gradually may reorient 'Internet stories' from being 'too fresh to be true,' to being 'too known to be untrue.' Careful study of the documentation culture of the blogsphere is in order.

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