

Voters, Candidates, and  
Campaigns in the New  
Information Age

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**VOTERS, CANDIDATES, AND CAMPAIGNS  
IN THE NEW INFORMATION AGE**

(DRAFT)

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"Popular government," wrote James Madison, "without popular information or the means of acquiring it, is but a prologue to a farce or a tragedy, or perhaps both." The notion that democracy requires an informed citizenry if it is to be both responsive and responsible is imbedded in the theory and practice of American politics. Nowhere is this assumption more central than in campaigns and elections. The periodic selection and reevaluation of public officials is the keystone of representative democracies. Campaigns and elections also serve as periods of broader reflection and debate, in which the citizenry's attention is collectively drawn to a consideration of public matters (McWilliams, 1981). And despite often depressingly low turnout rates, voting remains the single most common form of political participation in the United States (Verba and Nie, 1972: 31).

Not surprisingly, therefore, the questions of how informed the American public is, and how it becomes informed, have been central to the implementation of democratic politics in America. The rights to free speech and a free press, prominently guaranteed in the First Amendment to the U.S. Constitution, capture the twin roles that information is assumed to play: the public needs the opportunity to learn about the actions and motives of its political leaders, and to communicate its views to each other and to its leaders. Democracy requires more than the *right* to political expression and information, however; it also requires the *means* to exercise that right. Indeed, it is hard to imagine how modern democracies could exist without the ability to communicate quickly across diverse social groupings and geographic areas. Developments in communications technology — from the printing press to fiber optics — have gone hand-in-hand with developments in democratic politics.

Communications technologies are not simply neutral conduits, however. Each new

form of communication has altered the way in which citizens and elites interact during campaigns, driven in part by the nature of the technology itself, and in part by competing motives for its use. Communications technologies vary in important ways: the speed with which information is provided; the form the information takes; the range of information provided; the cost of producing and consuming the information; the scope of the audience; the extent of interaction between producer and consumer; and so forth. In addition, the goals of citizens, interest groups, public officials, and the media regarding the uses to which technology should be put often vary, with short term goals of profit, entertainment, reelection, and self-interest conflicting with broader notions of the public good. In short, changes in communications technology, even those that appear on the surface to be consistent with the consensus goal of an informed, engaged citizenry, raise important issues of access and control that need to be carefully considered.

In this chapter I consider these issues as they relate to the "new information technology" and its current and future use in campaigns and elections. The next section provides a brief overview of what is meant by "the new technology" and its relevance to the conduct of campaigns and elections. The following three sections explore the specific use of the new technology by the key actors in campaigns and elections: candidates, journalists and voters. The chapter concludes with a discussion of the implications of the new technology for elections and democratic governance in the United States.

## **WHAT IS "THE NEW TECHNOLOGY"?**

Defining the new technology is no simple task. New forms of communication seldom

replace older ones: the advent of print did not eliminate the importance of the spoken word; nor did the development of broadcasting eliminate print. Rather, new technologies interact with older ones to produce hybrid forms of communication. For example, print, the telegraph, and the photograph combined to restructure the form, content, and reach of newspapers (Emery and Emery, 1988: 115-171). Radio had a similar impact on the spoken word (Delli Carpini, 1993). And television combined visual and oral information into a new way of communicating (Meyrowitz, 1985). In addition, changes in communications technology combine historic breakthroughs with gradual changes, making the delineation of "new" and "old" somewhat arbitrary.

Nonetheless, recent advances in communications have allowed for unprecedented recombinations of oral, written, and visual information. According to Jeffrey Abramson, Christopher Arterton, and Gary Orren six related, though sometimes contradictory properties distinguish new technologies from older forms of communication (1988: 4-5; 32-65). First, they dramatically increase the volume of information that can be exchanged. Second, they make it possible to exchange information with little regard for "real" time and space. Third, they increase the consumer's control over what messages are received and when they are received. Fourth, they increase the sender's control over who receives what message. Fifth, they decentralize control over mass communications. And sixth, they allow for greater and more timely two-way interactions.

While numerous technologies might reasonably be described as sharing these properties (Abramson, Arterton, and Orren, 1988: 5), several are central to recent and likely future changes in the conduct of campaigns and elections: cable, video cassette recorders,

computers, satellites, cellular phones, faxes, "beepers," and fiber optics. In conjunction with each other and with older forms of media, they have revolutionized the way in which candidates, journalists, and voters interact in campaigns and elections.

### **Candidates and the New Technology**

The goal of a campaign, from the point of view of a candidate, has not changed over the past 200 years — to convince a plurality of voters that your specific platform, general vision, and personal qualities are preferable to those of your opponents. Achieving this goal has always required the use of mediating institutions; even in the earliest U.S. elections candidates for all but the most local offices could interact personally with only a small percentage of the citizenry. In the 19th and early 20th Centuries the central mediators were political parties and the print media. Political parties provided a degree of programmatic coherence to candidates running with their endorsement, as well as campaign workers and surrogate speakers to spread the word about the candidates' qualities (Burnham, 1970). Newspapers, which were largely affiliated with the political parties or specific ideological camps for most of the 19th Century, also spoke to the positive qualities of their favored candidate and the programmatic and personal shortcomings of the opposition (Emery and Emery, 1988: 89-243).

With the rise of a more independent press, advances in electronic communication, and the decline of political parties, candidates found themselves in a campaign environment that was at the same time more hospitable and more threatening to their electoral chances. Partially freed from the constraints of the party organization, they could develop platforms

and images that were more tailored to their own strengths and to the views of their specific constituencies. The telegraph, radio, and television also allowed them greater, quicker, and more direct access to the public. However, a more independent press meant less control over the way in which their views and images were presented. Candidates increasingly developed a dual strategy, one designed for using the "paid media" (political ads or "polispots") and one designed for the "free media" (newspaper, radio, and television news coverage). The former required the ability to determine the form and content of messages that would appeal to voters, and to get those messages to as many voters as possible. The latter required, in addition to designing messages that would appeal to voters, packaging those messages in ways that would pass through journalistic filters as unscathed as possible (Salmore and Salmore, 1985: 115; 145-166).

Recent advances in technology have aided candidates in this dual strategy. By providing new and more efficient ways to determine the public's wants, to test the appeal of particular messages, to identify and reach different segments of the electorate, and to monitor the success and failure of various strategies, candidates are better able to tailor their messages in ways that resonate with citizens. In addition, new technologies allow candidates to provide information to journalists in a way that increases their control over how those messages are presented. And, perhaps most importantly, the new technology has allowed candidates to bypass journalistic filters, blurring the distinction between paid and free media.

### *Campaign Research*

A key component of any campaign is collecting information about your opposition,

about your candidate, about the issues, and about the public. New technology has greatly enhanced this process. For example, as early as 1984 the Republican National Committee devoted 1.1 million dollars to the development of its "Opposition Research Group' (ORG). ORG members sifted through thousands of publications and documents, collecting information on potential opponents to Ronald Reagan. The information was entered on a mainframe computer and organized in a way that allowed easy access and retrieval by non-experts. By the time he was established as the Democratic challenger to Reagan, ORG had collected 75,000 items on Walter Mondale, including 45,000 direct quotes (Abramson, Arterton, and Orren, 1988: 92). This information, updated every 24 hours, was then used throughout the campaign to attack the Democratic candidate or challenge his campaign statements.

More recent advances have eased this process of information gathering. On-line databases such as *Nexis* allow campaign organizations to easily access any story written over the last decade in hundreds of local and national publications, eliminating the laborious task of searching through actual texts. The development of powerful laptop computers and high speed modems has all but eliminated the need for mainframe computers and allowed greater flexibility in when and where information is accessed and used. On-line services (for example, *America Online*, *CompuServe*, *GEnie*, *The Well*, and *Prodigy*) provide access to government publications, the full texts of presidential statements or federal court decisions, the major wire services, daily newspapers, academic and historical material, and the like, aiding in the development of not only opposition research, but also of the candidate's image, policy statements, and position papers. An even larger array of databases can be accessed



through the *Internet*, the federally funded computer network that spans nearly 50 countries and connects over 5,000 smaller networks, one and a half million computers, and 10 million users (Rittner, 1993: 18).

### *Fund Raising and Targeting Potential Supporters*

The new technology also aids in the process of fund raising and targeting supporters. For example, during the 1988 Democratic primaries callers could dial a "900" phone number and hear a prerecorded message from Jesse Jackson, for which they were automatically billed \$20. And during the 1992 primary campaign Jerry Brown received an estimated 5 million dollars in pledges from 250,000 callers to his "800" number (*The Freedom Forum*, 1992b: 28). Ross Perot also made extensive use of an "800" number for fund raising in 1992. In addition to the funds directly provided by these numbers, they allow candidates to provide information to voters, while at the same time identifying self-proclaimed supporters for future contact via phone or the mail.

Other mailing lists, often compiled through computer and laser scanning technology, allow candidates to target potential supporters based on their reading preferences, consumption patterns, or place of residence. Indeed, one of the major benefits of "800" and "900" numbers, candidate e-mail addresses, call-in talk shows, and on-line forums (discussed below) is the identification of potential supporters. For example, the Perot Committee, using a caller-recognition system and a data matching service, was able to compile a large database that combined individual callers' phone numbers with demographic information about the communities in which they lived. This allowed the Perot campaign not only to identify *actual* supporters, but also to identify the *types* of individuals and communities from

which future support might be drawn (Arterton, 1993: 88-89).

Computers have also enhanced the ability of campaign organizations to use aggregate data to identify areas of support and opposition. For example, during the 1993 mayoral race in New York City, the Dinkins campaign used census, registration, and prior voting data to divide census tracts by their levels of likely support. Limited campaign resources were then targeted to those communities viewed as having the greatest potential for improvement.

### *Finding the "Hot Buttons": Voter Response Analysis*

In addition to identifying potential areas of support, the new technology has added to candidates' ability to develop messages that strike a "responsive chord" (Schwartz, 1973) with voters. While the use of images and sounds have always been an important part of campaign advertising (Diamond and Bates, 1993), advances in computer graphics and video techniques have greatly improved the quality (and potential effectiveness) of these polispots. In addition, such spots can be produce much more quickly than in the past, allowing candidates to rapidly react to changes in the political environment or to actions or comments made by the opposition. For example, in 1992 the Clinton campaign was able to script, produce and air a campaign commercial responding to a Bush attack on his record within 24 hours.

The effectiveness of ads has also been enhanced by increasingly sophisticated tests of voter perceptions and viewer responses. The combination of opinion polls, focus groups, and audience response technology has proven a powerful tool in creating ads that raise issues of concern to the public in a way that is often emotionally charged. For example, the decision by the 1988 Bush campaign to attack Michael Dukakis for his vetoing of the

mandatory pledge of allegiance bill, his opposition to mandatory sentencing for drug offenders, and, especially, the Massachusetts prison furlough program that existed while he was governor, was based largely on the results of a 1988 focus group conducted in Paramus, New Jersey (Kolbert, 1992: 20). The focus group revealed that while voters did not react very negatively to any one of these issues, their combination led them to serious doubts about Dukakis's leadership ability and political ideology.

While most focus groups are decidedly low tech, they are increasingly combined with "Continuous Online Audience Response" (COAR) technology to better gauge participants' emotional responses to issues and ads. COAR systems are the sophisticated stepchildren of the "Lazarsfeld-Stanton Program Analyzer," developed in the mid-1940s (Biocca and David, 1992). Advances in computer technology and video graphics have made their use much more common (and valuable) in market and candidate research. While the specifics vary, typically a group of participants are brought together to view a video clip or campaign commercial. Each individual has a small "dial box," on which there is a knob and several settings. The settings correspond to a scale (for example, from strongly dislike to strongly like) with the middle position being neutral. Participants move the dial as they view the video or ad, and their second-by-second responses are immediately summarized and plotted on a graph, which is instantly superimposed on a television image of the video and recorded on videotape (this graph is *not* visible to the participants themselves). Consultants can then determine how the group as a whole or specific types of voters reacted to particular points in the video, using this information to refine the form and content of a candidate's message. This technology was used by both the Clinton and Bush campaigns to gauge voter reactions

to Bush's 1992 State of the Union Address (Kolbert, 1993: 18-20).

Computer assisted interview (CATI) systems have also aided in the conduct and analysis of poll data, allowing campaign organizations to track voter reactions to the events of a campaign, and to adjust their strategy and messages accordingly. For example, tracking polls were instrumental in the Clinton campaign's decision to delay the airing of their more positive "vision" ads late in the 1992 campaign and to respond directly to the negative ads being aired by the Bush campaign.

### *Reaching the Voter*

At the heart of any campaign is contact with voters. The new technology has greatly enhanced the ability to do this both at a mass and more targeted level. As mentioned above, the use of "800" and, less frequently, "900" numbers has allowed candidates to speak "directly" to a large number of self-selected voters in a way that appears more personal than traditional forms of mass communication. While these messages often address specific issues and policies deemed of interest to a segment of the public, they also provide a closer sense of connection with the candidate as an individual. This connection need not always be positive, however. For example, during the 1992 presidential campaign, maverick Republican Floyd Brown (creator of the infamous Willy Horton ad) provided voters with a "900" number that allowed callers to listen to excerpts of the alleged conversations between Bill Clinton and Gennifer Flowers.

Appearances of the candidates on radio and television talk shows have served a similar purpose to "800" and "900" numbers, allowing voters to talk directly with candidates and their surrogates. Talk shows have the added benefit of being "live" conversations that

can be heard not only by the caller him or herself, but also by the often sizable viewing and listening audience. In addition, television talk shows add visual cues to the interaction. And as mentioned earlier, callers can be identified through the use of caller-recognition systems, which, in conjunction with data matching services can provide a wealth of information regarding actual and potential supporters. This information can then be used for developing both mass communications strategies and more targeted approaches to contacting voters.

In recent elections the logic of telephone contact has been extended to the personal computer, with citizens able to communicate with candidates and office holders on-line. During the 1992 Democratic primaries, Jerry Brown spent an hour at the *CompuServ* headquarters, "chatting" interactively with users who were on-line at the time (*The Freedom Forum*, 1992b: 31). And the Clinton campaign provided on-line information regarding the candidate and his policies through a number of large (*CompuServ*, *Prodigy*) and lesser known electronic bulletin boards, a practice that has continued during his presidency. The implications of this growing interactivity for voters will be discussed below. From the point of view of the candidates, however, it serves two important functions. First, it provides detailed information to a small but potentially important and self-motivated group of voters. Second, it provides the campaign with useful, detailed information regarding the views of the public towards the candidate and the issues of the day. In theory, the other "on-line" behavior of users who contact a candidate (for example, what other bulletin boards and services they use, what screens they look at, what messages they send) can be matched to their political views, allowing campaigns to develop a sophisticated profile of supporters and detractors, as well as a strategy of how best to contact and appeal to them (to date, this

information has been treated as proprietary by the computer services and has not been shared with candidate organizations).

Candidates have also made increasing use of videocassettes to provide their message directly to voters. For example, during the 1992 New Hampshire primary the Clinton campaign distributed 30,000 video tapes to undecided voters (Arterton, 1993: 92). The tapes, which were delivered door-to-door, featured ten minutes of Clinton talking about his life and views. Ross Perot also made extensive use of videotapes during his independent run for the presidency: over 300,000 copies of three different tapes, ranging in price from \$9.95 to \$19.98, were made available to interested citizens (*The Freedom Forum*, 1992b: 32).

Satellite feeds also provide a channel by which candidates can access a segment of the voting public without passing through traditional journalistic filters. Private residents and public facilities equipped with a satellite dishes can, by tuning to the right coordinates, directly access live or prerecorded messages from the candidates, a technique used by all three campaigns during the 1992 presidential campaign. The audience for such direct access is limited — an estimated 3.7 million home viewers have satellite dishes. Nonetheless, this potential nationwide audience was deemed large enough for *USA TODAY* to list the specific satellite coordinates for watching a Perot "town hall meeting" held in Orlando Florida along with their regular TV listings for the day (*The Freedom Forum*, 1992b: 32).

Satellite transmissions, videocassettes, electronic bulletin boards, talk shows, and "800" numbers all require that the citizen be able and willing to reach out for the information being provided by the candidates. Such audiences, while relatively small, are made up of a disproportionate number of community leaders, campaign contributors, and voters, making

them especially valuable and influential. Further, the information garnered from this segment of the electorate can be useful in developing more mass oriented strategies, such as targeted mailings and campaign advertisements. In addition, the increase in television channels brought about by cable and, in the near future, by fiber optics, allows for a middle ground between the very large but relatively undifferentiated audience provided by broadcast television, and the very homogeneous but relatively small audiences provided by computer bulletin boards, and the like. Messages can be tailored to large but distinct audiences such as those for *MTV*, *The Christian Broadcasting Network*, and *The Black Entertainment Network*, and even more specifically aimed at the audiences for particular shows, allowing an unprecedented blending of personal and mass communication — and persuasion.

### ***Rapid Response***

The new technology has not only enhanced the ability of campaigns to gather information from and about voters, and transmit information back to those voters, but has also aided in communication within the campaign organization itself. Laptop computers, cellular phones, faxes and "beepers" have allowed campaign strategists to stay in touch with each other and their candidate, allowing for almost instantaneous adjustments in strategy as new events unfold. The Clinton campaign perfected this rapid response approach, monitoring the wire services and 24 hour news networks like *CNN*, and shadowing the opposition campaigns. This information was then used to adjust both broad campaign strategies and immediate candidate statements, thus refining the art of spin and damage control.

On several occasions this technique was used to make changes in Clinton's public statements literally moments before they were delivered. Similarly, media consultants at Clinton Headquarters in Little Rock would routinely monitor satellite feeds from the campaign's own cameras, which were set up to allow television stations around the country to select clips for their evening news broadcasts. If they noticed that the picture was less than optimal (for example, that it showed a sparse crowd or if Bush or Perot supporters could be seen in the shot), they would contact the on-site advance staff via cellular phone to adjust the picture as it was being shot. (Arterton, 1993: 92).

Even the interactive use of computer bulletin boards has been utilized by campaign consultants. For example on-line forums (*Election Techniques, Consultant*) available through the *Internet* allow political consultants to exchange notes and ideas regarding their general profession and specific issues tied to particular campaigns (Rittner, 1993: 345; Smith and Gibbs, 1994: 575).

### **Journalists and the New Technology**

In many ways, the new technology offers the news media the same opportunities and pitfalls presented to campaign organizations. Armed with faxes, cellular phones, "beepers," computers, and modems, journalists have been freed from many of the standard constraints of time and space, creating what has been called a "virtual newsroom" (*The Freedom Forum*, 1992c: 70). Journalists have access to the same data bases and on-line services available to campaign consultants, allowing them to research their stories in ways that can augment traditional news sources and put events in historical and social perspective. But the new



information environment has changed rather than eliminated the on-going battle between campaign organizations and journalists for control of the media message, and to date it is unclear who is winning this battle.

### *On-Line Journalism*

According to a survey of 104 print and broadcast journalists who covered the 1992 presidential campaign, the media has definitely entered the computer age: While on the campaign trail, ninety percent of those interviewed made use of portable computers; 84 percent used modems for computer to computer communications; 83 percent used faxes; 60 percent connected to the newsroom computer via data networks; 50 percent used electronic "beepers;" 47 percent used voicemail to communicate with the newsroom; 46 percent used cellular phones; 40 percent used their computers to access electronic libraries through the newsroom computer; and 25 percent connected with commercial databases to conduct research (*The Freedom Forum*, 1992c: 72). This electronic network has facilitated the journalistic pursuit in three ways: it allows for access to a greater and more diverse range of sources; it allows for greater flexibility in how information is presented; and it frees journalists from many of the physical constraints of time and place, allowing for more up-to-date reporting.

The most evident impact of new technology on the way journalists' cover campaigns is the ability to communicate quickly with the newsroom and to do so from a much wider range of locations than was previously possible. Using faxes and/or computer-to-computer transmissions (most commonly through *Telnet*, *CompuServe*, and the *Associated Press Network*) reporters can file stories, update facts, edit copy and so forth much closer to the

filing deadlines than has ever been the case. Cellular phones and "beepers" mean that journalist's and reporters can remain in regular contact with the home office, and vice versa. This allows journalists greater flexibility in following candidates, other campaign principals, and potential leads.

One of the most common complaints of journalists using the new technology is the difficulty, especially in out of the way places, in finding reliable hookups for electronic transmission. During the 1992 presidential campaign, reporters for the *Boston Globe* took the electronic filing of stories to a new level by connecting to the home computer via cellular phone, thus eliminating the need to be directly wired. This innovation, likely to be used more extensively in the future, further frees reporters from time and space limitations.

In addition, the use of modems allows journalists to combine face-to-face sources with information pulled off the wire services, the news organization's main computer, commercial data bases (such as *Nexis*, *VuText*, and *Dow Jones*), and/or more consumer-oriented services such as *Prodigy* and *CompuServe*. For example, the *Federal News Service* (FNS) is a privately owned electronic service that provides "verbatim transcripts of all presidential statements, briefings by the White House, State Department and other departments, as well as statements, speeches and interviews of major policy makers" (*The Freedom Forum*, 1992c: 77). These databases and wire services serve to shape story ideas, suggest leads, and provide factual information and quotes. The new technology can also be used to provide background information to correspondents in the home office: as a *Washington Post* article noted, "ABC, CBS, and NBC have staffed most of the primaries with young producers who gather endless tidbits for computerized memos fed to the star correspondents back in

Washington" (July 12, 1992).

Electronic sources are also available through facsimile technology. Newsletters and resource sheets such as *Hotline* and *Campaign Countdown* provide daily or weekly transmissions that summarize and excerpt from the national print and broadcast media, giving journalists "useful nuggets, from the latest campaign ads and tracking polls to TV pundit predictions to Jay Leno's one-liners" (the *Washington Post*, July 12, 1992).

A few journalists (about 10 percent according to *The Freedom Forum* survey) also use database and spreadsheet software such as *Lotus*, allowing them to engage in more statistically oriented research and to produce graphs and charts for inclusion in their stories. At this level, journalists are as much social scientists as news reporters, approaching the kind of "scientific" or "precision" journalism advocated by John Dewey (1927) and Philip Meyer (1991).

### *The Presentation of Information*

Besides aiding in the gathering and exchange of information, the new technology has affected the way in which information is presented. Using computer graphics, the media can more effectively present statistical and visual information, and is more likely to do so than ever before. While some of the use of graphics (especially in television news) is more form than substance, much of it is quite informative and allows for the presentation of often complex material in more readily accessible ways (Tufte, 1983). This is especially true for the presentation of survey data, where pie charts, histograms, and trend lines have allowed for a much greater degree of detail and the putting of information into useful contexts. Graphics also aid in the presentation of background information such as maps and sidebars

that provide historical, biographical, or contextual information not normally considered "news," but valuable for readers and viewers who may not have their own store of information to draw on.

The ability to transmit photographs and video electronically (via satellite or fiber optics) has also made visual material much more accessible to both print and visual news organizations. Electronic transmission has also extended the range and audience of major news outlets. National newspapers like *USA TODAY*, and the national editions of *The New York Times* and *Washington Post* are made possible because of satellite technology, as are 24 hour news services like *CNN* and *C-SPAN*, and "superstations" like *TBS* or *WOR*. A number of daily newspapers are also available electronically through on-line services such as *Prodigy* and *CompuServ*.

#### *Shaping the Media Environment: Candidate Organizations*

In theory, the new technology, by expanding the information resources of the media and by freeing them from some of the traditional constraints of time and space, allows journalists greater independence in "deciding what's news." While true in many ways, campaign organizations and other political groups have used the new technology to influence what is reported and how it is packaged. For example, campaigns now regularly provide "actualities," or prerecorded "soundbites" that are made available to radio stations through "800" numbers. Through these numbers, news organizations can rerecord messages from the candidates or their surrogates, and then use the recordings in their daily news broadcasts.

Video News Releases (VNRs) provide a similar service for television. VNRs are prepackaged videos produced by candidate organizations and sent directly to news stations

in the form of videotape or satellite transmission. While VNRs allow local stations to air material that is likely to be different from that presented by the networks' national news, it allows candidates much greater control over the images and text that is broadcast, thus blurring the line between free and paid media. While local news organizations are often reluctant to use these videos on the air, economic and production advantages led about 12 percent of local stations to do so during the 1992 campaign, up from about 3 percent in 1988 (*The Freedom Forum*, 1992a: 41). While the majority of stations airing VNRs edit them, the fact that the initial video is controlled by the candidates themselves raises troubling issues regarding the independence of news coverage.

More common than VNRs is the use of satellite interviews with the candidates or their surrogates (*The Freedom Forum*, 1992a: 37). Forty four percent of a random survey of news directors said their stations had conducted at least one such interview during the 1992 campaign, up from 20 percent in 1988 (The average number of interviews was four). These remote interviews allow candidates to attend to local politics and issues without requiring a physical presence in the community, again combining the advantages of reaching a large audience with the ability to tailor messages to particular localities. In turn, local media outlets get the advantage of "directly" interviewing candidates, thus providing a spin on the campaign that differs from that provided by the networks and national media. The candidate organizations usually cover the cost of the satellite link, so, coupled with the savings introduced by not having to send a crew to interview the candidate "in the flesh," this approach is very cost effective. However, while satellite interviews allow reporters some control over the news product, candidates are better able to shape the results, especially

since local anchors and reporters are often less schooled in interviewing national candidates than are more seasoned national reporters.

Campaign organizations also directly feed information to journalists via faxes. Aided by computerized phone lists and automated dialing, campaign releases are now routinely broadcast simultaneously to hundreds of news organizations, journalists, and columnists. While this "service" provides the media with easy access to the campaigns, it also gives greater "spin control" to the campaign organizations, who can react to new events or breaking issues with lightning speed (*Campaign Magazine*, February 1992). Campaign organizations have even taken advantage of journalist's use of electronic "beepers," using them to quickly contact individual reporters or to assemble the campaign press corp for an important announcement or statement — what one campaign operative has termed "calling home the cows" (*The Freedom Forum*, 1992c: 78).

### ***Shaping the Media Environment: The Public***

New technology has also given a greater, if sometimes distorted, voice to the public in news coverage of campaigns and elections. The greater use of polls in general and "instant polls" in particular has made the public an important player in "spin control." While computer assisted interviews has allowed media organizations to conduct scientifically accurate polls in a very quick time frame, polls and forums that require "800" or "900" number call-ins are much less likely to be representative of the general public, and thus are more troublesome. For example, a 1993 *Times Mirror* survey found that callers to talk radio shows were disproportionately male, Republican, and conservative (p. 10). Similarly, the use of "people-on-the-street" interviews (which have been increasingly supplemented with

"families-in-the-home" interviews and on-the-air focus groups) to gauge the public's reaction to campaign events, while providing useful personal insights, can often misrepresent the reactions of the broader public they are implicitly standing in for.

The COAR technology used by candidate organizations has also been used by the media as a way of gauging public reaction to campaign events. On at least three occasions during the 1992 campaign, national news outlets (*ABC*, *CNN*, and *MTV*) broadcast the computer printout of citizens' moment-by-moment reactions to the presidential debates. For example, during the debate held in Richmond, Virginia, *ABC's Nightline*, a local *ABC* affiliate, and several local newspapers commissioned Virginia Commonwealth University to conduct a COAR study with 100 undecided voters. Newspaper reporters, *Nightline* personnel and reporters for the local TV sponsor, watched the debate live on a monitor on which the instant response data was superimposed. Academic experts who were experienced in the use of the technology and in the interpretation of the quantitative data were available for consultation with the reporters.

Excerpts from the videotape formed the basis for *Nightline's* (and the local affiliate's) coverage of citizen reaction to the event. The newspaper reporters constructed a running graphic of responses to the entire debate, annotated with excerpts of what was being said at the high and low points, and published the graph on their front page the next morning. The following day, the data were used to identify individuals who had changed their minds during the debate. Newspaper reporters used interviews with several of these people as the basis for a followup story (Delli Carpini, Holsworth, and Keeter, 1992).

Even election night coverage has been affected by the new technology. The use of exit polls, combined with computer technology that allows for the rapid aggregation, analysis and dissemination of the data gathered from them, has allowed the media to go beyond their traditional role of reporting actual vote counts. Throughout the evening research analysts sitting at computer terminals in New York City analyze and interpret voting patterns, feeding information to both the network anchors and their nationwide affiliates. Requests (from the networks or their affiliates) for specific breakdowns of the vote or of public opinion can be made directly to these analysts, allowing different localities to put their own "spin" on stories of relevance to their particular audience. The use of computer graphics allows for the presentation of this data in more accessible, often visually arresting ways.

This technology has also allowed the media to forecast the outcome of elections before the actual votes have all been counted, and in the case of presidential races, to do so before the polls have closed in a number of states, raising concerns about the impact of these predictions on turnout, voter attitudes, and the actual outcomes of other races taking place in those states (Delli Carpini, 1984). The print media also takes advantage of this technology, with the next morning's editions filled with statistical breakdowns of how different segments of the public voted, and why they voted as they did.

Without question, technologies and techniques from scientific polls, to "800" numbers, to focus groups, to continuous on-line response analysis have give citizens greater say in how campaigns are covered and interpreted. However, because they provide immediate, often instantaneous reactions to the event in question, they can miss the more deliberative nature



of public opinion which evolves over a longer period of time. While shifts in opinion can be captured in later polls and the like, the tendency of the media to move on to new events limits the likelihood of this kind of overtime analysis.

### *Democratization or the New Pack Journalism?*

While campaign organizations use the new technology to influence how their (and their opponents') candidates are presented by the media, this is not to suggest that they always succeed in this endeavor. As noted above, the new technology has given the media a wide array of independent sources to draw on, and the means to access them quickly and efficiently. The increased use of "truth boxes," in which the news media periodically deconstructs campaign advertisements for their factual accuracy and production techniques demonstrates the how the new technology has also strengthened the media's hand in the battle for control over campaign messages. In addition, the competitive nature of elections allows journalists to play candidate organizations — and the information they provide — off each other. And the use of public opinion polls and other means of citizen input provides an additional voice in the determination of newsworthiness: the failure of the Bush campaign (and the media) to make a major issue out of Clinton's marital indiscretions, avoidance of the draft, and close encounter with marijuana was at least partially driven by evidence of the public's disinterest in these topics, and their growing disgust with this kind of negative campaigning.

Nonetheless, for all the changes introduced by new technology, the extent to which it has produced a wider array of information or simply a new mechanism by which the traditional tendency towards pack journalism occurs is unclear. While the new technology

has eased the pressures of deadlines, it has not eliminated them, leading many to suggest that the real power of this technology has not been fully exploited. In addition, with new resources comes an explosion of information that makes it difficult for journalists to prioritize information.

Ironically, the dependence of journalists on the same databases and services means that the content of news stories tends to vary less than one might expect, and has led some journalists to suggest that it has increased, rather than decreased the centralization of information and thus the tendency towards pack journalism (*The Freedom Forum*, 1992c: 76). This problem is exacerbated by both the lack of technical skills on the part of many journalists and the constant feeding of information by the candidate organizations themselves. The ability to share textual and video information, and the costs savings introduced by this ability, has led media organizations to "pool" their limited resources, by, for example, sharing camera crews and conducting a single exit poll on election night. Under the pressures of information overload and still real deadlines, reporters and journalists often take the path of least resistance, which can mean a dependence on the often technically superior and well packaged information provided by candidate organizations themselves. And, despite occasional public rebellions against negative campaigning, standard operating procedures that emphasize horserace over substantive issues and conflict over deliberation or information means that much of the new technology continues to be used to enhance coverage of scandals, conflict, campaign strategy, and bottom line poll results. Indeed, even when the media attempts to act responsibly — as when they deconstruct campaign advertisements in print or on the evening news — it is

unclear whether such coverage works to inoculate citizens against misinformation and manipulative images, or simply increases the audience for them and further enhances the candidate organizations' ability to control the campaign agenda (Jamieson, 1992: 123-162).

### **Voters and the New Technology**

In theory at least, the lynchpin of campaigns and elections are the voters themselves. The new technology has changed voters' role in this process, though it has done so differently depending on where on the socioeconomic ladder one is positioned. It is at this level that the new technology offers the most promise, and also raises the greatest concerns for access.

### ***Access to the Information Super Highway***

According to a survey conducted by the *Times Mirror Center*, there is tremendous variation in the use of technology by citizens (1994). Television is, of course, almost universally found in households. In addition, about 86 percent of households also have a videocassette recorder. About 63 percent of households have access to cable, with these households about evenly split between those with basic service and those with premium service. Almost a third of American households now have a computer, and slightly more than one-in-ten households are equipped with computers *and* modems. Six percent of households have fax machines. And 4 percent are connected to satellite dishes.

Not surprisingly, there are significant economic biases in who is and is not "wired" to the new technology. For example, among households earning over \$50,000 a year, 75 percent have cable, 56 percent have a home computer, and 27 percent have a modem.

Among families earning between \$20,000 and \$29,000, however, only 58 percent have cable, 23 percent have a computer, and 7 percent have a modem. More dramatically, while over one-in-five college graduates from households earning over \$50,000 a year have and use a modem at home, a mere 1-in-50 non-college graduates with family incomes less than \$30,000 a year do so. There are also significant differences between men and women and between whites and blacks in both computer and modem ownership, with whites and men more likely than blacks and women to own them. Thus, the public is dramatically divided in how the new information technology impacts on their lives.

Evidence suggests that there are also regional and local disparities in access to the information superhighway. For example, a March 1994 *New York Times* article reported that while half the population of Palo Alto, California has home computers, modems *and* access to the *Internet*, significantly less than 10 percent of Chicago residents can make this claim.

#### *The Information Elite: Using Computers and Modems*

Those who have a home computer and modem have potential access to the same range of information available to both journalists and campaign organizations, though the cost of many professional on-line services is prohibitive. The most common on-line services are *Prodigy* (with 1.5 million users), *CompuServ* (with about 1 million users), and *America On-Line* (with about 170,000 users). These services provide a range of governmental, political, news-oriented, and educational databases, as well as a host of electronic bulletin boards that allow users to discuss political and social issues. They also allow for communications with officeholders, government agencies, and, increasingly, candidates. And they offer services that allow voters to access the policy platforms, backgrounds, and (if

applicable) voting records of candidates for major office. More detailed information and databases can be reached through the *Internet*, though to date few of the major on-line services provide full access to this network (though all are moving in this direction).

While there are no reliable numbers regarding how many users take advantage of specific services, more general information regarding computer/modem use provides some evidence. According to a 1994 *Times Mirror* poll, about 75 percent of on-line users have sent and received electronic mail. Seventy four percent have done research for work or school. Fifty eight percent have participated in on-line forums and discussion groups. And 34 percent have accessed news databases. While undoubtedly a relatively small percentage of these activities directly involve the politics of campaigns and elections, much of what is accessed or exchanged is likely to be of at least indirect political relevance.

Significantly, modem users are more politically informed than non-modem users, suggesting that being "on-line" does increase the store of information citizens can bring to their political activities. The *Times Mirror* survey included a set of five political questions that prior research suggests serve as a good indicator of more general knowledge about national politics (Delli Carpini and Keeter, 1993). While 63 percent of modem users were able to correctly answer at least four of these questions, only 50 percent of a demographically equivalent sample of non-modem users could do so. Since research suggests that more informed citizens have different opinions than less informed citizens, are more politically active, and are more likely to use their issue stands in determining their vote (Delli Carpini and Keeter, forthcoming), this finding suggests both the promise of the new technology and the dangers of its being available to only a select percentage of the

public.

Also significant was the finding that while there are significant class, gender, and race biases in who has modems, among those who have them there are very few systematic differences in use. Put another way, once they have a modem, women, blacks, and lower income individuals are about as likely to use them as are men, whites, and upper income individuals, and tend to use them in the same way. Thus, the real problem appears to be getting modems and computers into the household, rather than a resistance to using the technology itself. Also encouraging was evidence that the gender gap in computer use was much less pronounced among teenagers than older adults.

#### *The Partially "Wired:" 800 Numbers and Cable*

Cable and "800" numbers provide access to campaigns and elections to a much broader segment of the population than do computers and modems. Most basic subscriptions to cable include 24 hour news services like *CNN*, non-partisan political channels like *C-Span*, partisan or ideological talk shows such as *Rush Limbaugh*, and specialty news provided by networks like *The Christian Broadcasting Network* and *The Black Entertainment Network*. Most also include local public programming that provide forums and news about local issues, and that put local spins on national issues. As discussed above, call in shows such as the *Larry King Live*, news "call-in polls," and stand alone "800" numbers also provide citizens with the means to gather information and have their opinions heard.

In addition to the use of "800" numbers by candidate organizations, special interest groups, and the media, non-partisan and "good government" groups have also turned to this

technology as a means of educating the public. During the 1992 campaign the *Center for National Independence in Politics* initiated *Project Vote Smart*, which provided a national "voter's research hotline" where callers could ask volunteers for information about candidates for Governor, the Congress, the Senate and the Presidency. Information made available included biographical background, campaign finance history, key issue positions, addresses and phone numbers of campaign offices or district and Washington offices, voting records for incumbents, performance evaluations by special interest groups of varying ideological stripes, and information on how and where to register and vote (*Center for Independence in Politics*, 1993).

It is hard to pinpoint exactly how frequently these services are taken advantage of, though again there is some evidence on this. Despite difficulty in advertising the project and the "800" number, *Project Vote Smart* received over 200,000 calls from March 16 through November 3, including 34,000 on election day alone. A 1993 *Times Mirror* study found that 61 percent of the public listens to talk radio at least occasionally, 11 percent have attempted to call in, and 6 percent have successfully made it on the air. And when, during the 1992 presidential campaign, one of the networks experimented with a sophisticated "800" poll that allowed callers to use their touch-tones phones to answer a series of opinion and demographic questions, the system was literally overwhelmed by the millions of callers who attempted to participate.

### *Citizens as Political Consumers*

The civic advantages to the kinds of technology, databases, and services described above are in the range of information provided, the ability of citizens to access information

of their choosing, the ability to access information when it is of most relevance, and the ability to interact with the media, candidates, and each other. For the vast majority of citizens however, politics remains a much more passive activity, with most information being gathered through the traditional sources of television and print. This does not mean that such citizens are unaffected by the technological revolution taking place, however. As noted above, candidate organizations, special interest groups, and the media have used the new media to change the form and content of traditional information sources. Thus, even those who sit down to read a newspaper or watch the evening news are receiving information that has been shaped by the new technology, and thus are affected, at least indirectly, by this new technology. In addition, the use of information gathering devices by both candidates and the media means that the information being presented reflects, even if in sometimes distorted and insidious ways, the preferences and views of citizens.

However, evidence suggests that the same citizens who are willing and able to take advantage of the new media are also the most likely to use traditional news sources (*Times Mirror*, 1994). These citizens are also better equipped to process and use information in their political calculus, and more likely to give money, become involved in campaigns, and vote. And since evidence suggests that the political opinions and behaviors of informed citizens are more stable, consistent, and instrumentally rational, the impact of lesser informed citizens is often diluted even when they do participate (Delli Carpini and Keeter, forthcoming). Finally, the views of direct participants in the new exchange of information are more likely to shape the strategy of both candidates and news organizations. Thus, citizens who are less actively involved in either the production or consumption of political



information, remain at the margins of the technological revolution, and thus, at the margins of the political process itself.

### **Summary and Conclusions: The Costs and Benefits of the New Technology**

There is no doubt that the new technology has already changed the conduct of campaigns and elections in the United States. Candidate organizations have used it to refine their research on issues, opponents, the electorate, and the candidate him or herself; to improve fund raising capability; to develop campaign messages that resonate with voters; to deliver messages whose form and content are tailored to audiences of various sizes and perspectives; to bypass traditional journalistic filters; to package information in ways that will appeal to journalistic norms and standard operating procedures; and to communicate internally in ways that allow for a more flexible, responsive campaign strategy.

The news media, too, have used the new technology in a variety of ways: to ease the constraints of time and space associated with researching, writing, filing, and editing stories; to increase the range of sources drawn on; to check facts; to do more sophisticated analyses of data; to improve the form in which information is presented; to lessen the dependency on the home office while increasing the ability to interact with it; to increase the reach of their publications and broadcasts; and to include the public in the development and substance of campaign stories.

Finally, the new technology has changed the way voters participate in campaigns. Greater control over the form, content, and timing of information has allowed a small but growing part of the electorate to essentially create their own media. The ability to interact

with candidates, the news media, and each other provides a richer, more direct engagement in the campaign and allows citizens to shape the way in which campaign organizations and the news media conduct themselves. While the percentage of citizens who are able to take full advantage of this technology is relatively small, a much larger portion of citizens can and do approach this level of engagement and influence through the more mass-oriented technologies and techniques of "electronic town hall meetings," talk shows, "800" numbers, and the like. And the more sophisticated use of public opinion polls and market research techniques, coupled with the changes that have occurred in the collection and presentation of information by candidate organizations and the "traditional" news media, means that even those who remain at the margins of the new technology still both influence and are influenced by the changing information environment.

While the nature of campaigns and elections has clearly changed, for the most part the questions raised by the new technology are similar to those that have always been asked about the conduct of campaigns and elections: Is the amount and type of information sufficient for citizens to make a reasoned, informed choice about who should lead the country? Who controls the information that is available? Who has access to this information? Does the information serve to educate the public or simply manipulate them?

### *Volume and Content*

There is no question but that the amount of information available to candidate organizations, the media, and the electorate is greater today than at any point in history. What is also clear is that much of this information provides the kind of detailed, issue-oriented material that can enhance the citizenry's ability to cast informed, reasoned votes.

The ten-fold expansion of channels that fiber optics portends offers the promise of even more political and politically-relevant information. However, the explosion in information has put an added burden on candidate organizations, journalists, and especially, the public to sort through the chaff so as to find the wheat, leading some critics of the new media environment to suggest that we may be "informing ourselves to death" (Postman, 1990). In addition, with the increase in political information has come what is at least an equal increase in diversionary information: computer games, entertainment videos, home shopping networks, and the like. Indeed, it is likely that while the *absolute* amount of political information is increasing, the *relative* amount of such information is shrinking.

Perhaps more importantly, changes in the form and content of information is making the very distinction between "news" and "entertainment" obsolete. The addressing of social and political issues on primetime television shows; the use of actual news footage in such shows; the rise in television docudramas; the proliferation of "entertainment news" shows; the growth in "reality programming" such as *America's Most Wanted*, *Cops* and *The Court Channel*; the use of dramatic recreations, film and entertainment television clips, and arresting graphics on the news; the rise in talk show politics; the appearance of candidates on *MTV*, and so forth, all raise complicated issues regarding how citizens learn about politics and what, specifically they learn (Delli Carpini and Williams, 1994).

### *Access*

The new technology introduces substantial financial and informational costs. Because candidate organizations, media outlets, and citizens vary in their ability to pay these costs, serious questions arise regarding the extent to which campaign information, and thus

election outcomes, will be determined less by the issues and more by the relative abilities of candidate organizations to successfully use the new media. In addition, socioeconomic differences in the ability to fully exploit the new technology, if not systematically addressed, raises the familiar specter of a bifurcated electorate of information "haves" and "have nots."

The steady decline in the financial cost of new technology suggests that current disparities in elite and public access may be a temporary aberration. However, it is unclear whether computers, modems, and the like will ever become as universal as the television and telephone — already there is evidence that the penetration of cable into new markets has dropped well below predicted growth rates. In addition, the new technology, unlike mediums such as broadcast television, allow for a range of uses that vary in the skill and finances required to use them, making the simple presence of the requisite hardware in a campaign office, journalist's hands, or the home a relatively poor indicator of equal access. And the pace at which new applications and technologies develop raises the real possibility that inequitable access to information may become a permanent condition of modern society.

### *Control*

The ability of candidates, the news media, and citizens to access detailed information from a host of sources promises a more democratic exchange of information. However, the quality of this exchange remains dependent on the range of information made available, and the relative accessibility of that information. The decisions as to what kinds of programming will be available on basic, premium, and pay per view cable; what data bases and electronic bulletin boards will be accessible through the major on-line service providers; which books,

government documents, wire services, and newspapers will be available electronically; and so forth, are of critical importance.

Advances in fiber optics that will soon allow for geometric increases in the choices available on television, the steady expansion of databases available through on-line services, and the development of more "user friendly" access to the information that is available suggest that the issue of control may become less serious over time. However, the fact that much of the new technology is driven by economic rather than civic motives means that the incentive to devote energy towards the development of easily accessible and directly political information sources will not be automatic. Further, to the extent that candidate organizations, elected officials, special interest groups, and even major news outlets become the major sources for political information, the possibility for distortions in the ideological and economic balance of what can be accessed remains an issue of concern.

### *Education versus Manipulation*

The last point raises what is in many ways the central issue in the use of new technology in campaigns and elections, and more broadly, in democratic governance. Politics is a complex mix of reason and emotion; of what, in theory, we believe it is right to do and what our inclinations lead us towards. Opinions about the major issues of the day, and about the best ways to address these issues are unstable at best, subject to significant shifts depending on the context in which they are considered and the deep-seated values and beliefs that are tapped (Bennett, 1980; Connolly, 1983).

The new technology provides a public space in which these complex, shifting, often contradictory views can be discussed. It also provides access to facts and opinions that can

be used to tether these discussions to the material world, giving the citizenry a common pool of information from which to draw. However, the new technology also reveals our wants, desires, beliefs, and prejudices in ways that make us subject to unprecedented manipulation. Campaign organizations, special interest groups, and media outlets, can — and have — used this information to appeal to, reinforce and even create these wants, desires, and prejudices.

While the sheer number of information sources helps guard against this kind of manipulation, increased control by the public over which information sources they turn to, coupled with the refined ability of campaign organizations and the news media to target audiences with carefully crafted messages raises the possibility of an informationally-segregated citizenry in which different groups come to view the political world in starkly different terms. And while evidence suggests that fears about the fragmentation of the public are overstated (Neuman, 1991), and that users of the new technology are also the most common users of the traditional media (*The Times Mirror*, 1994), the future of the mass audience is by no means clear.

In the end the new technology, in and of itself, will be neither a cure for the shortcomings of electoral politics in America, nor the cause for the exacerbation of these shortcomings. This chapter began by stating that a democracy requires not only the *right* to information and expression, but the *means* to exercise that right. A close examination of how the new technology has been used suggests that to this we must add the *will* to use those means — among candidate organizations, the news media, and the public — for civically appropriate ends.

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