

LEADING THE PUBLIC THROUGH THE NEW MEDIA

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The White House communications environment has undergone a sea change. The president cannot depend on reaching the fragmented and ideologically insulated audience for news. Although the White House has embraced the latest technology to take its case to the people, it mostly reaches its base. Moreover, the opposition is able to exploit the same tools and audience characteristics to challenge the White House and reinforce the tendencies of its adherents. And in the unkindest cut of all, true believers among Democrats push back against the president. In addition, there is little evidence that the president can use the new media to mobilize his supporters to pressure Congress for change.

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Despite all their efforts to lead public opinion, presidents do not directly reach the American people on a day-to-day basis. For more than two centuries the primary intermediary between the president and the public has been the press, first newspapers and then radio and television. It was the traditional news media that provided people with most of what they knew about chief executives, their policies, and their policies' consequences. The press, in turn, found coverage of the president indispensable in satisfying its audience and reporting on the most significant political events.

The White House communications environment has undergone a sea change, however. The president cannot depend on broadly focused newspapers, network television, and radio to reach the public. In response, the White House has embraced the latest technology to take its case to the people. At its core, the new modes of communication offer an opportunity to bypass the press and communicate directly with the public.

These changes raise a host of important questions on how it impacts the president's relations with the traditional media and the nature of the media's coverage of the president. For this paper, however, the key question is whether advances in technology makes it easier for the president to lead the public. I explore the challenges the new communications environment presents for the White House and the potential for the president to exploit the new media to signal likely supporters and reinforce their predispositions to back his initiatives.

The Fragmented Audience

One of the most salient characteristics of the modern media environment is its fragmentation. Reflecting on the presidency as recently as the tenure of Ronald Reagan, Barack Obama's press secretary, Jay Carney, observed, "You would reach almost every voter in the

country. And that’s not even remotely the case now. The only way you get that many eyeballs at one time is to have an enormous event, something like killing bin Laden.”¹

“Like any period of tumultuous change, it’s not a happy one,” adds Obama’s former communications director Anita Dunn. “This idea that somehow there’s a bully pulpit that can be used effectively,” Dunn says, “to communicate with everybody in this country at the same time and get them all wrapped around one issue – it’s very much an idea whose time has passed.”² “That’s why we do all the unorthodox stuff, putting him [the president] in unusual places,” Carney said – like Obama’s appearance on the Web series *Between Two Ferns*—“just to try to reach people where they are. Because where they’re not is watching the news or reading the newspapers.”³

Wide viewership was common during the early decades of television. Presidential speeches routinely attracted more than 80 percent of those watching television.⁴ Things have changed, however. Audiences for presidential speeches and press conferences have declined steadily since the Nixon administration in the early 1970s.⁵ Only 40 million viewers saw at least part of George W. Bush’s first nationally televised address on February 27, 2001, compared with 67 million viewers for Bill Clinton’s first nationally televised address in 1993.⁶

Barack Obama attracted more than 52 million viewers to his nationally televised first address in February 2009, which occurred during a severe economic crisis. The size of his audience dropped off substantially, however. When he spoke on behalf of his health care reform proposal the following September, for example, he drew only 32 million viewers, a typical audience for his national addresses (Table 1).

Insert Table 1

The root cause of this drop in viewership is access to alternatives to watching the

president provided by cable, the Internet, and television.⁷ Almost all households receive cable service and also own a DVD player⁸ (providing yet additional opportunities to avoid watching the president). Dozens of new networks have no news departments and thus run entertainment programming during important speeches, provide yet additional distractions from the president.

Television is a medium in which visual interest, action, and conflict are most effective. Unfortunately, presidential speeches are unlikely to contain these characteristics. Only a few addresses to the nation—such as President George W. Bush’s address to a joint session of Congress on September 20, 2001—occur at moments of high drama.

The public’s general lack of interest in politics constrains the president’s leadership of public opinion in the long run, as well as on any given day. Although they have unparalleled access to the American people, presidents cannot make much use of it. If they do, their speeches will become commonplace and lose their drama and interest. That is one reason why presidents do not make formal speeches to the public on television very often—only four or five times a year, on average.⁹ Recent presidents, beginning with Richard Nixon, have turned to radio and midday addresses to supplement their prime-time televised addresses,¹⁰ although media coverage of these addresses has diminished over the years.¹¹

In addition to the challenge of attracting an audience for the president’s television appearances, the White House faces the obstacle of obtaining television coverage in the first place. Traditionally, presidents could rely on full network coverage of any statement they wished to make directly to the American people or any press conference they wished to be televised. The networks began to rebel against providing airtime in the 1970s and 1980s when one or more of them occasionally refused to carry an address or a prime-time press conference held by Presidents Ford, Carter, Reagan, or Bush. Bill Clinton encountered so much resistance

from the networks to covering his speeches and press conferences that he held only four evening press conferences in his eight years in office (only one of which all the networks covered live) and made only six addresses on domestic policy, all of them in his first term.

In the two months following the terrorist attacks on the United States on September 11, 2001, George W. Bush received plenty of prime-time coverage for his speeches and a press conference. By November 8, however, most networks viewed the president's speech on the U.S. response to terrorism as an event rather than news and did not carry it. Nearly a year later, on October 7, 2002, Bush made his most comprehensive address regarding the likely need to use force against Saddam Hussein's regime in Iraq. Nevertheless, ABC, CBS, NBC, and PBS chose not to carry the president's speech, arguing that it contained little that was new. The traditional broadcast networks also chose not to carry Barack Obama's address on immigration on November 20, 2014.

The president has a problem sending his signals more indirectly, as well through prime-time presentations. The audience for the network evening news broadcasts declined to 22.6 million people in 2013, and the audience for prime-time cable news dropped to about 3 million.¹² Between 2003 and 2013, daily newspaper circulation dropped nearly 10 million to 46 million – a drop of 17 percent; Sunday circulation dropped 7 million to 50 million – a drop of 15 percent. Thus, the Obama White House had to innovate to reach the public and survive in this new communications environment.

Reaching the Audience

Although technological change and corporate resistance have made it more difficult for the president to attract an audience on television, other changes may have increased the White House's prospects of reaching the public. Teddy Roosevelt gave prominence to the bully pulpit

by exploiting the hunger of modern newspapers for national news. Franklin D. Roosevelt broadened the reach and immediacy of presidential communications with his use of radio. More recently, John F. Kennedy and Ronald Reagan mastered the use of television to speak directly to the American people. Now Barack Obama has positioned himself as the first Internet president.

It is a good thing he has. The Pew Research Center reports that

The vast majority of Americans now get news in some digital format. In 2013, 82 percent of Americans said they got news on a desktop or laptop and 54 percent said they got news on a mobile device. Beyond that, 35 percent reported that they get news in this way “frequently” on their desktop or laptop, and 21 percent on a mobile device (cellphone or tablet).¹³

The Internet, which emerged in 2008 as a leading source for campaign news, has now surpassed all other media except television as a main source for national and international news. More people say they rely mostly on the Internet for news than say they rely mostly on newspapers (although people often turn to the Web sites of traditional news sources for their news).¹⁴ Young people are even more likely to report that they rely on the Internet as a main source of national and international news.¹⁵

The 2008 Campaign

Realizing that they could no longer depend on reaching the public through the traditional media, Obama’s 2008 election campaign team made great efforts to put the candidate’s messages directly in voters’ inboxes, social-media feeds, and television sets. Significant strategy announcements were often made in the form of videos, with campaign manager David Plouffe speaking straight into the camera, rather than through news releases or strategic interviews.¹⁶

Obama announced his intent to seek the presidency via Web video, revealed his vice presidential selection via text message, recruited about 13 million online supporters during the campaign, and used the electronic medium to sidestep mainstream media and speak directly with voters throughout the primaries and general-election campaign. This practice forged a firsthand connection and may have encouraged some supporters to feel they had a greater stake in the campaign's success. Some Obama videos became YouTube phenomena: millions of people viewed his speech on the Rev. Jeremiah A. Wright Jr. and race in America and his victory speech in Grant Park on November 4, 2008.

The new administration was oriented to exploiting advances in technology to communicate more effectively than ever with the public. Bush State Department spokesman Sean McCormack started filing posts from far-flung regions during trips with his boss, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. On October 31, 2008, McCormack unveiled "Briefing 2.0" in the press briefing room of the State Department in which he took questions from the public rather than the press and then put the session on YouTube.¹⁷

The Obama White House wanted to do more. "It's really about reaching an extra person or a larger audience of people who wouldn't normally pay attention to policy," said Jen Psaki, a spokeswoman for Obama's transition team. "We have to think creatively about how we would do that in the White House, because promoting a speech in front of 100,000 people is certainly different than promoting energy legislation."¹⁸

Videos

On November 18, 2008, about 10 million of Barack Obama's supporters found an e-mail message from the president-elect's campaign manager, David Plouffe. Labeled "Where we go from here," Plouffe asked backers to "help shape the future of this movement" by answering an

online survey, which in turn asked them to rank four priorities in order of importance. First on the list was “Helping Barack’s administration pass legislation through grassroots efforts.”¹⁹

Plouffe’s e-mail message revealed much about Barack Obama’s initial approach to governing. Even before taking office, the president-elect began making Saturday radio addresses—but with a twist. In addition to beaming his addresses to radio stations nationwide, he recorded them for digital video and audio downloads from YouTube, iTunes, and the like. As a result, people could access them whenever and wherever they wanted. “Turning the weekly radio address from audio to video and making it on-demand has turned the radio address from a blip on the radar to something that can be a major news-making event any Saturday we choose,” declared Dan Pfeiffer, the incoming White House deputy communications director. Videos are also easy to produce: a videographer can record Obama delivering the address in fewer than fifteen minutes.²⁰ After his inauguration, the White House put the president’s Saturday videos on both the White House Web site and a White House channel on YouTube.

The Obama White House produces and distributes much more video than any past administration. To do so, it maintains a staff devoted to producing online videos for whitehouse.gov, Obama’s YouTube channel, and other video depots. A search for “Barack Obama” is stacked with videos approved and uploaded by the administration (which viewers may not realize). When filming a presidential speech, the production team tailors the video to the site, with titles, omissions, crowd cutaways, highlight footage, and a dozen other manipulations of sound and image that affect the impression they make, including applause that is difficult to edit out.²¹ The president’s YouTube channel had more than 650 video uploads in its first year alone.²²

The administration provides an extensive blog (The White House Blog) offering short stories accompanied by photos and videos. In addition, the White House streams live events and provides podcasts of speeches, remarks, events, and briefings. The administration also introduced *West Wing Week*, a video blog consisting of six-to seven-minute compilations that appear each week on the White House's Web site and on such video-sharing sites as YouTube. The items offer what a narrator on each segment calls "your guide to everything that's happening at 1600 Pennsylvania Avenue."

The White House has adopted other strategies such as hosting an animated page on BuzzFeed, letting Obama appear on the Internet show *Between Two Ferns*, and encouraging the president and others to pose for "selfies" and other funny pictures. In hopes of it going viral, White House staff members promote such content to popular sites such as Upworthy, which is known for its eye-catching headlines.

Messaging

"What's the first page on Google and Bing look like?" asked Dan Pfeiffer, the president's senior adviser and longtime communications strategist. "Let's take Benghazi," referring to the partisan battle over the administration's response to the attacks on U.S. facilities in Libya in 2012. "Is it five things from *Free Beacon* and *Breitbart*? Or is it something from the *New York Times* or is it from the *New Republic*?" If the administration's perspective is not well represented in the Google search results, "we have to ask: Does it mean we need to do a better job of getting our message out?"²³

Pfeiffer maintained that the White House is not bypassing traditional media such as news conferences and other events. But he said it's more important than ever to do late-night comedy and daytime talk shows, ESPN, and MTV. "It used to be that Ronald Reagan or, to a lesser

extent, Bill Clinton could give a national address,” he said. “We don’t have that option. We have to go where the public is.”²⁴

The Obama White House has tried to flood niche media markets via blogs, Twitter feeds, Facebook pages, and Flickr photo streams.²⁵ To exploit more fully developments in communications technology, the White House established an Office of New Media. It regularly alerts its more than 5 million Twitter followers of the president’s policy stances.²⁶ When he nominated Sonia Sotomayor to the Supreme Court, Obama sent a video appealing for support for his candidate to the huge e-mail list accumulated during his campaign and the Democratic Party’s own lists. The e-mail message included a directive from the president to share his views via Facebook, Twitter, and other Web connections.²⁷ Obama’s Twitter feed, reaches more people than all of the nightly news broadcasts combined and more than the total circulation of the 75 largest daily papers.

In addition, the White House tracks journalists’ tweets for comments it might view as inaccurate, incomplete or unfair, as well as for clues about what the press is reporting and how it might portray the president or the administration. An aide then flags the tweets in mass emails to more than 80 Obama aides, who then respond, sometimes with “obscenity-laced yelps of outrage.”²⁸

The Obama administration has shown some deftness at catering to a nonstop, Internet- and cable-television-driven news cycle. For example, the White House went to great lengths to project an image of competence in U.S. relief efforts in Haiti, in implicit contrast to the way the Bush administration handled Hurricane Katrina and its aftermath. The administration and the military set up a busy communications operation with twenty-five people at the American Embassy and in a cinder-block warehouse at the airport in Port-au-Prince, Haiti’s capital. The

public relations team released a torrent of news releases, briefings, fact sheets, and statements, including a “ticktock” (a newspaper term of art for a minute-by-minute reconstruction of how momentous events unfolded), a link to a Flickr photo of a meeting on Haiti in the Situation Room, presided over by the president, a video of American search teams rescuing a Haitian woman from a collapsed building, and a list of foreign leaders he had telephoned.²⁹

Politico.com is a prominent face of the new media at the White House. It is a bulletin board of the stories on which the media is focused and what is happening in Washington on a given day. The White House starts communicating with Politico early in the day to try to influence what others will view as important. It also uses Politico as a forum to rebut directly its adversaries in front of the rest of the news media.³⁰

Internet Interviews

Obama made the case for his economic agenda in a variety of forums, including the *Tonight Show*, *60 Minutes*, and a prime-time news conference. On March 26, 2009, he added a new arrow to his quiver. The president held an “Open for Questions” town hall meeting in the East Room of the White House. Bill Clinton and George W. Bush answered questions over the Internet, but Obama was the first to do so in a live video format, streamed directly onto the White House Web site.

For more than an hour, the president answered questions culled from 104,000 sent over the Internet. Online voters cast more than 3.5 million votes for their favorite questions, some of which an economic advisor who served as a moderator then posed to the president. The president took other queries from a live audience of about 100 nurses, teachers, businesspeople, and others assembled at the White House.

The questions covered topics such as health care, education, the economy, the auto industry, and housing. In most cases, Obama used his answers to advocate his policies. Although the questions from the audience in the East Room were mostly from campaign backers, the White House was not in complete control of the session. One of the questions that drew the most votes online was whether legalizing marijuana might stimulate the economy by allowing the government to regulate and tax the drug. (The White House listed the question on its Web site under the topics “green jobs and energy” and “budget.” White House officials later indicated that interest groups drove up those numbers.)³¹

We do not know the impact of this event on public opinion. It is clear, however, that it would be wrong for the White House to assume that the use of new technology and “average” Americans translates into more persuasive communications, especially if the mainstream media write about the event.³²

On February 1, 2010, the president sat for a first-of-its-kind group interview with YouTube viewers, who submitted thousands of questions and heard the president answer some in a live Webcast. YouTube viewers voted for their favorite questions, and Steve Grove, the head of news and politics at YouTube, selected the ones to ask in the half-hour session.

On April 21, 2011, Obama sat down with Facebook founder Mark Zuckerberg and answered questions from Zuckerberg and Facebook users. The president next turned to Twitter. On July 6, 2011, he held the first Twitter town hall meeting, live from the East Room of the White House. The hour-long session involved the president answering questions submitted by Twitter users and selected in part by 10 Twitter users around the country picked by Twitter. Twitter’s chief executive, Jack Dorsey, moderated the session. The president also answered questions in a town hall meeting on LinkedIn on September 26, 2011.

Specialized News

The fragmentation of the media has provided the White House opportunities to tap into the market for specialized news. For example, the Obama administration holds regular question-and-answer Webcasts, “Open for Questions,” with policy officials on White House.gov. In addition, the president has granted interviews to Web sites that are largely ignored in Washington but have large online audiences, such as Zillow for housing or WebMD for health-care news.

In early May 2014, Obama and his staff spent hours giving top weather forecasters the royal treatment—a briefing in the Roosevelt Room with multiple cabinet secretaries and senior officials on a major new report on climate change, plus Rose Garden interviews with the president. The explanation for this outreach effort is that Americans have more trust in meteorologists than in political figures or the mainstream media to discuss climate change.³³

The White House has made special efforts to speak directly to the huge and politically powerful audience of Latinos. A multimedia public relations campaign pushing for an overhaul of the nation’s immigration system—delivered in Spanish and in English daily—reached millions of Hispanics across the country. The president sat for six lengthy interviews on Telemundo and Univision in January, March, and May 2013. In addition, Cecilia Muñoz, the director of the White House domestic policy council appeared on the networks regularly, and the president’s weekly Internet address was matched each Saturday by a corresponding one in Spanish by an administration official. Online, the White House office of Hispanic media posted messages on Twitter in both English and Spanish from @Iacasablanca, which had more than 40,000 followers.³⁴

Local News

Another way to reach the public is when they are watching local television news. Nearly three-quarters of Americans watch local television news at least once a month, more than watch the network news.³⁵ Once the Washington press reports an issue, it tends to drop it and move on to the next one; however, repetition is necessary to convey the president's views to the generally inattentive public. Moreover, the Washington press tends to place more emphasis on the support of, or opposition to, a program than on its substance, although the White House wants to communicate the latter. The Washington- and New York-based national media also have substantial resources to challenge White House versions of events and policies and to investigate areas of government not covered by briefings or press releases. As a result, the White House caters to the local as well as the national media.

During the rollout for the Affordable Care Act in the autumn of 2013, Obama and members of his Cabinet visited nine of the top ten cities with the highest concentration of the uninsured, while senior administration officials held almost daily conference calls with reporters in nearly a dozen states to challenge Republican governors who refuse to expand Medicaid and pointing out the consequences of such actions for the citizens of those states. Organizing for Action took a similar approach, holding protests—some only attended by a dozen or so people—that won coverage on the local pages of the nation's small-town newspapers.³⁶

The White House invites local editors, reporters, and news executives to Washington for exclusive interviews and briefings by the president and senior administration officials. Recent presidents have also arranged to be interviewed from the White House by television and radio stations through satellite hookups, and the White House provides briefings for the local press using the same technology. It also sends administration briefing teams around the country to

discuss the president's policies with local media representatives and provides press releases, speeches, other documents, and audio clips for local media.

Contemporary presidents also meet frequently with journalists representing local media during their trips around the country. These efforts enable the White House to tailor unedited messages for specific groups and reach directly into the constituencies of members of Congress while reinforcing its policy message. Naturally, presidents hope to create goodwill and to receive a sympathetic hearing from journalists who are grateful for contact with the White House and, perhaps, susceptible to presidential charm.

There are limits to the utility of such efforts, however. Bill Clinton took office with an antagonistic attitude toward the national media, which he planned to bypass rather than use as part of his political strategy. As he told an audience of journalists shortly after taking office: "You know why I can stiff you on press conferences? Because [talk-show host] Larry King liberated me by giving me to the American people directly." After a rocky start in his press relations, Clinton's orientation changed. He found that he could not avoid the national press, which remains the primary source of news about the federal government. "I did not realize the importance of communications," he confessed, "and the overriding importance of what is on the evening television news. If I am not on there with a message, someone else is, with their message."³⁷

Another problem is the diminishing number of local news outlets. The Pew Research Center reported in 2014 that a fourth of the 952 U.S. television stations that air newscasts do not produce their news programs. Additional stations have sharing arrangements where much of their content is produced outside their own newsroom, and such arrangements are increasing.³⁸

The Insulated Audience

Although technology provides the theoretical potential for the White House to communicate more effectively to greater numbers of people, other features of that same environment create obstacles to successfully realizing that potential. According to Obama press official Reid Cherlin, “people are increasingly getting information from an atomized, partisan, choose-your-news smorgasbord, where you’re as likely to process the State of the Union through your brother-in-law’s Facebook rants, the tweets of a few favorite reporters, and the top 17 GIFs of Nancy Pelosi blinking as curated by BuzzFeed.”³⁹

Cherlin is correct. Americans increasingly read and view material that matches their political beliefs. Newspaper editorial pages always offered different takes on the news, but now cable news networks and an extraordinary range of Websites do as well. Moreover, the algorithms of search engines and social media guide people toward material that is likely to reinforce their views. Ideological insulation poses a new challenge for White House communications, a challenge that cannot be overcome by simply communicating in different venues.

The Web was an enormous asset for reaching young people in the 2008 campaign. By his second term, the president was faced with an ideologically fragmented media that made it more difficult to reach the public. “In every year, this project gets harder, the media gets more disaggregated, people get more options to choose from, and they self-select outlets that speak to their preconceived notions,” said Pfeiffer.⁴⁰

He was correct. On November 28, 2012, the White House created a hashtag of “#my2k” to represent the estimated \$2,000 in increased taxes an average household was potentially facing unless Congress acted to prevent the country going over the fiscal cliff. The Pew Research

Center studied a network of 688 Twitter users who tweeted a message that mentioned “my2k” starting January 6th and ending on January 8th, 2013. It found two large dense groups of people talking about the same subject but not connecting to each other or using the same words, URLs, and other hashtags. More generally, Twitter conversations around political issues often quickly polarize into disconnected groups with people citing different information sources to make their case.⁴¹

Thus, although the Internet offers new opportunities for the president to reach the public, it also fragments the president’s audience, making it more difficult to reach those predisposed to oppose the president with unfiltered messages. The obverse of this situation may seem to be that the president can now reach those predisposed to follow his lead in a context that facilitates reinforcement of those predispositions. Such a conclusion is only partially true, however.

Active Supporters

On the positive side are those most committed to the president’s programs. When the Obama White House texts its supporters, it is preaching to the choir. Such communications are useful because perhaps the first rule in the politics of coalition building is solidifying the core. Moreover, committed congregants can be very helpful evangelists. The explosion of social media, the fragmentation of news, and the erosion of the institutional press not only provides ample opportunity for the expression of partisan views, it also actively encourages it. Backing your friends and belittling your enemies is a healthy business model, one rewarded by a torrent of clicks, retweets, “likes,” and links.

In early May 2014, Republicans used a newly released email to once again attack the president on the administration’s handling of the attack on U.S. diplomatic mission in Benghazi, Libya. However, the White House had plenty of help in answering critics. The *New Republic*’s

Brian Beutler dismissed Benghazi as “nonsense.” *Slate*’s David Weigel, along with *The Washington Post*’s *Plum Line* blog, debunked any claim that the new email was a “smoking gun.” *Media Matters for America* labeled Benghazi a “hoax.” *Salon* wrote that the GOP had a “demented Benghazi disease.” *Daily Kos* featured the headline: “Here’s Why the GOP Is Fired Up about Benghazi—and Here’s Why They’re Wrong.” *The Huffington Post* offered “Three Reasons Why Reviving Benghazi Is Stupid—for the GOP.”⁴²

On issues ranging from health care reform to Syria, such aid has become typical. When critics attack the president, progressive bloggers jump to his defense. Moreover, they employ sharper arguments than the White House. Although presidential administrations have relied on friendly opinion-shapers since 1789, no White House has ever enjoyed the luxury of having its arguments and talking points advanced on a day-by-day, minute-by-minute basis. No longer must it await the evening news or the morning op-ed page to make its case and answer its critics.

Naturally, the White House is attentive to its blogging supporters. It should not be surprising that the administration holds off-the-record briefings, sometimes with Obama in the room, for select progressive bloggers from outlets such as *TPM* and *ThinkProgress*. Moreover, the press pool that takes turns covering the president up close now includes Web-only publications like *Talking Points Memo*, the *Huffington Post*, BuzzFeed, and the *Daily Caller*.

Resistance

Widespread home broadband and mobile access to the Internet has created the potential for people to communicate easily with each other as well as to receive communications from leaders. Conservatives have exploited this technology to reinforce their and Republicans’ opposition to the Obama administration. Indeed, nothing has served conservative organizers better than Barack Obama, whom they have vilified as the devil incarnate. The fragmented news

audience has allowed Fox News and conservative radio hosts to dominate the cable and radio airwaves. The ideological segmentation of the audience has allowed conservative discourse to go largely unanswered in many venues, which will not feature the president's responses. Moreover, conservatives employ the same range of videos, emails, tweets, and blogs as the White House and its supporters. All of these developments make leading the public more difficult for the president.

Also important, has been the potential for *liberals* to use the new technologies to oppose the president's pragmatism and tendencies toward moderation. Americans glory in the freedom to dissent that is at the heart of blogging. Even during the transition, there were hints of conflict within the base. Candidate Obama allowed his supporters to wage an online revolt—on his own MyBarackObama.com Web site—over his vote in favor of legislation granting legal immunity to telecommunications firms that participated in the Bush administration's domestic wiretapping program. President-elect Obama, however, did not provide a forum for comments on his YouTube radio address, prompting grumbling among some that YouTube without comments was no different from radio.⁴³

Internet users are creative, however. The day after Obama announced that the Rev. Rick Warren would deliver the opening prayer at his inauguration, a discussion forum focused on community service instead filled with pages of comments from people opposing the choice. In early January, visitors to Change.gov, the transition Web site, voted a question about whether Obama would appoint a special prosecutor to investigate possible Bush administration war crimes to the top of the questions submitted to the new administration. Progressive Web sites blasted the new administration's efforts to dodge the issue. Within a day, MSNBC's Keith Olbermann picked up the story. A day later, Obama was compelled to answer the question in an

interview with ABC's George Stephanopoulos, who quoted it and pressed Obama with two follow-ups. Obama's answer, which prioritized moving "forward" but did not rule out a special prosecutor, made the front page of the January 12 issue of the *New York Times*.

Dissent among liberals did not end with the transition. For example, MoveOn.org, one of Obama's staunchest supporters during the 2008 campaign, called on its members in April 2010 to telephone the White House and demand that Obama reinstate the ban on offshore oil drilling that he had ended.⁴⁴ It has not been supportive of the president's more aggressive foreign policy actions, and criticized him on everything from immigration to net neutrality.

Missing the Congregation

The Democratic choir is composed of true believers. They do not represent most of the Democratic congregation, and, as we have seen, sometimes the flock contains skeptics. Most of those predisposed to support the president rarely if ever, view a White House video or watch a presidential interview on the Internet. A perusal of the official White House Channel on YouTube tells the story. Most videos have no more than a few thousand viewers, and this in a nation of 320 million people. A study found that between May 2009 and November 2010, no video of the president's radio addresses had more than 100,000 views and most had close to 20,000.⁴⁵ Many more people receive White House emails and tweets, of course, but we know little about the effects of these messages. There is reason to be skeptical about their impact, however.

Mobilizing Supporters

Reaching people is useful for political leaders, but mobilizing them is better. David Plouffe's emphasis on helping the Obama administration pass legislation through grassroots

efforts indicates a desire to use public backing to move Congress to support the president's program. According to Andrew Rasiej, co-founder of the Personal Democracy Forum, a nonpartisan Web site focused on the intersection of politics and technology, Obama "created his own special interest group because the same people that made phone calls on behalf of him [in the campaign] are now going to be calling or e-mailing their congressman."⁴⁶ A Pew study during the transition found that among those who voted for Obama, 62 percent expected to ask others to support at least some of the new administration's policies.⁴⁷

Plouffe did not take a formal role in the White House until 2011. He did, however, remain as an advisor and began overseeing the president's sprawling grass-roots political operation, which at the time boasted 13 million e-mail addresses, 4 million cell phone contacts, and 2 million active volunteers.⁴⁸ More than 500,000 people completed surveys following the election to express their vision for the administration, and more than 4,200 hosted house parties in their communities. On January 17, 2009, Obama sent a YouTube video to supporters to announce plans to establish Organizing for America (OFA), which was to enlist community organizers around the country to support local candidates, lobby for the president's agenda, and remain connected with his supporters from the campaign. There was speculation that the organization could have an annual budget of \$75 million in privately raised funds and deploy hundreds of paid staff members. It was to operate from the Democratic National Committee headquarters but with an independent structure, budget, and priorities.⁴⁹ (By 2010, OFA had virtually supplanted the party structure. It sent about 300 paid organizers to the states, several times the number the national party hired for the 2006 midterms.)⁵⁰

During the transition, the Obama team drew on high-tech organizational tools to lay the groundwork for an attempt to restructure the U.S. health care system. On December 3, 2008,

former Democratic Senate majority leader Thomas Daschle, Obama's designee as secretary of Health and Human Resources and point person on health care, launched an effort to create political momentum when he held a conference call with one thousand invited supporters who had expressed interest in health issues, promising it would be the first of many opportunities for Americans to weigh in. In addition, there were online videos, blogs, and e-mail alerts as well as traditional public forums. Thousands of people posted comments on health on Change.gov, the Obama transition Web site, which encouraged bloggers to share their concerns and offer their solutions regarding health care policy.⁵¹

According to Rasiej, "It will be a lot easier to get the American public to adopt any new health-care system if they were a part of the process of crafting it." Simon Rosenberg, president of the center-left think tank NDN, was more expansive: "This is the beginning of the reinvention of what the presidency in the 21st century could be. This will reinvent the relationship of the president to the American people in a way we probably haven't seen since FDR's use of radio in the 1930s."⁵²

Democratic political consultant Joe Trippi took the argument a step further, observing, "Obama will be more directly connected to millions of Americans than any president who has come before him, and he will be able to communicate directly to people using the social networking and Web-based tools such as YouTube that his campaign mastered." "Obama's could become the most powerful presidency that we have ever seen," he declared.⁵³ Republican strategist and the head of White House political operations under Ronald Reagan, Ed Rollins, agreed. "No one's ever had these kinds of resources. This would be the greatest political organization ever put together, *if it works*" (italics added).⁵⁴

Organizing for America

Whether it would work was indeed the question. The Organizing for America team held several dry runs to test the efficacy of their volunteer apparatus, including a call for supporters to hold “economic recovery house meetings” in February to highlight challenges presented by the recession. The house parties were designed to coincide with the congressional debate over Obama’s stimulus package and had mixed results. Although OFA touted the 30,000 responses the e-mail drew from the volunteer community and the more than 3,000 house parties thrown in support of the stimulus package, a report in McClatchy Newspapers indicated that many events were sparsely attended.⁵⁵

The first major engagement of OFA in the legislative process began on March 16, 2009. In e-mail message was sent to volunteers, asking them to go door to door on March 21 to urge their neighbors to sign a pledge in support of Obama’s budget plan. A follow-up message to the mailing list a few days later asked volunteers to call the Hill. A new online tool on the DNC/OFA Web site aided constituents in finding their congressional representatives’ contact information so they could call the lawmakers’ offices to voice approval of the proposal.

The OFA reported that its door-to-door canvass netted about 100,000 pledge signatures, while another 114,000 signatures came in through its e-mail network. Republicans scoffed at the effort, arguing that this proved that even the most die-hard Obama supporters were uncertain about the wisdom of the president’s budget plan. Several GOP aides noted that the number of pledges gathered online amounted to less than 1 percent of the names on Obama’s vaunted e-mail list. The *Washington Post* reported that interviews with congressional aides from both parties found the signatures swayed few, if any, members of Congress.⁵⁶

By June, OFA was the Democratic National Committee's largest department, with paid staff members in thirty-one states and control of the heavily trafficked campaign Web site. Public discourse on health care reform was focusing on the high costs and uncertain results of various proposals. Remembering the "Harry and Louise" television ads that served as the public face of the successful challenge to Bill Clinton's health reform efforts, the White House knew it had to regain momentum. Thus, the president e-mailed millions of campaign supporters, asking for donations to help in the White House's largest-ever issues campaign and for "a coast-to-coast operation ready to knock on doors, deploy volunteers, get out the facts," and show Congress people wanted change. The DNC deployed dozens of staff members and hundreds of volunteers to thirty-one states to gather personal stories and build support.⁵⁷

In late June, the DNC reported roughly 750,000 people had signed a pledge in support of the president's core principles of reducing cost, ensuring quality, and providing choice, including a public insurance option; 500,000 volunteered to help; and several hundred thousand provided their own story for the campaign's use. OFA posted thousands of personal stories online to humanize the debate and overcome criticism of the president's plan. It also trained hundreds of summer volunteers and released its first Internet advertisement—a Virginia man explaining that he lost his insurance when he lost his job.⁵⁸ As the health care debate intensified in August, the president again turned to the OFA for support. Obama sent an e-mail to OFA members: "This is the moment our movement was built for," he wrote. He also spent an hour providing bullet points for the health care debate during an Internet video. OFA asked its volunteers to visit congressional offices and flood town hall meetings in a massive show of support.⁵⁹ There is no evidence that this show of strength ever materialized.

By August, Organizing for America reported paid political directors in forty-four states. Nevertheless, it had to moderate its strategy. In response to Democrat complaints to the White House about television commercials on health care, climate change, and other issues broadcast in an effort to pressure moderates to support the president's proposals, the group started running advertisements of appreciation. It also found that its events around the country were largely filled with party stalwarts rather than the army of volunteers mobilized by the 2008 campaign.⁶⁰

Despite some success in generating letters, text messages, and phone calls on behalf of health care reform, OFA was not a prominent presence in 2009.⁶¹ In response to the lack of action, in 2010 organizers held hundreds of sessions across the nation intended to re-engage the base from 2008.⁶²

In a video to members of OFA in April 2010, Obama delivered an appeal saying that the Democratic majority in Congress—and his agenda—depended on their roles in that year's midterm elections. The recorded message was part of a new effort by the Democratic National Committee to impress upon Democrats—particularly those occasional voters who were likely to cast ballots only in presidential races—the importance of the midterm elections for the House and Senate.

At the end of 2010, OFA launched a public relations offensive to demonstrate support for repealing “don't ask, don't tell.” The group ran online advertisements and staged events in the home states of moderate Republican senators inclined to support the repeal bill. OFA volunteers delivered petitions with tens of thousands of signatures to wavering senators in an effort to build momentum for repeal—and to try to show them that they were safe politically if they voted to overturn the ban.⁶³

Overall, however, OFA had to be a disappointment to the White House. In the midterm elections, OFA tried to rally its network of millions of Obama supporters to help Democratic candidates across the country, but the group was not very successful. Aside from a handful of victories, such as Senate Majority Leader Harry Reid's reelection in Nevada, most OFA-backed candidates lost.⁶⁴ The president also received help from an array of interest groups, such as Health Care for America Now, a progressive coalition that deployed 120 paid organizers to forty-three states, staged events, and launched ads in a number of states.⁶⁵

Organizing for Action

In 2013, the administration tried again. It named its grassroots operation Organizing for Action (OFA) and did not turn it over to the DNC. The president's campaign manager in 2012, Jim Messina, chaired the operation, and a small group of former campaign advisers oversaw it. The aim of the group was to promote the president's policies and give Democratic activists and other allies a way to rally behind his agenda.

OFA had access to the Obama campaign's data on voters, including e-mail addresses and social network information. In theory, OFA had a grassroots army of 2.2 million volunteers, and social media assets that included 33 million Facebook friends, 26 million Twitter followers, and 17 million e-mail subscribers. As an outside group, OFA could raise money, broadcast television ads, and otherwise run a political campaign on issues without running afoul of government guidelines that prohibit directly advocating for legislation. The president put it to work right away, running ads in the constituencies of 13 Republican members of Congress on behalf of his proposal for background checks for gun purchasers.

On June 14th, 2013, Organizing for Action mobilized more than a thousand people to attend nearly 80 public events around the country to commemorate the six-month anniversary of

the December 2012 Newtown shooting incident. The group hosted scores of “action planning sessions” and celebrated events that earned local news coverage. It also hosted informational phone banks, and collected 1.4 million signatures for a pro-gun control petition with the intent of pressuring Congress.⁶⁶

On the day after the Senate voted down all efforts to strengthen gun control laws, OFA executive director Jon Carson sent an email to the group’s members vowing that “Those senators who decided that not crossing the gun lobby was more important than making our kids and communities safer — OFA supporters will call them out and hold them accountable to their constituents.”⁶⁷

OFA’s pledge to punish senators presented a difficult test, given that many of the senators voting no were in deep-red states where Obama lost badly. Nevertheless, there is little evidence of any success at all. As one reporter put it, “The group did not sway a single vote for the background check proposal, and was not able to make any of those who voted against it feel any heat.” Even in states Obama carried handily, such as Ohio and New Hampshire, the group could not hold big rallies, blanket the airwaves with TV ads, or motivate enough supporters to match the volume of phone calls from pro-gun advocates.⁶⁸

More broadly, OFA focused on promoting legislation on climate change, gun control, economic policy, and immigration in six states that Obama won in 2012 year but that were represented by at least one GOP senator: Illinois, Maine, Pennsylvania, New Hampshire, Ohio and Nevada. It was also targeting the red states of Arizona and Georgia, whose senators could be persuaded to back parts of the president’s agenda, group officials said. OFA planned to hold 500 events focused on immigration by the end of May,⁶⁹ and it also emphasized defending the

Affordable Care Act and claimed to have held over 3,000 community events in support of enrollment in the new health insurance exchanges.⁷⁰

A study of January 30, 2009 to August 7, 2014, found that 180 times during the period of January 30, 2009 to August 7, 2014, OFA sent its members emails, encouraging them to contact representatives regarding presidential priorities and engage in mass persuasion campaigns in their neighborhoods.⁷¹ There is little evidence of any notable consequences from these and other efforts (although such impact is inherently difficult to measure). Most of the activity appeared to be in Democratic areas, and the scale of nearly all the activities appeared to be small.⁷² Even ardent Obama fans could not make a strong push for him on the off-time from their regular jobs, and they lacked the resources to mount the kind of field or messaging operation that made the 2012 campaign effort so successful.⁷³

By mid-2014, OFA was telling its donors that it would stop requesting large contributions and began shedding much of its staff.⁷⁴ The promise of exploiting technology to mobilize supporters behind White House initiatives had yet to be realized.

Conclusion

Technological developments such as email, the ease of uploading videos and photos via YouTube and Flickr, and social media sites like Facebook and Twitter have fundamentally changed the relationship between the president, the media, and the public. Reporters are no longer the only—or even necessarily the main—conduit through which news flows. Now the White House has the potential to bypass the press and communicate directly and appealingly with the public.

These technological advancements offer the president opportunities to compensate for the declining audience for presidential messages over the traditional media and be better positioned

to reinforce the views of those predisposed to support him. Reinforcing co-partisans' views can be an advantage to the president, albeit it a modest one.⁷⁵ Given available information, it is not possible to determine the contribution, if any, of the new media to the reinforcement of supporters' views. It is likely to be small, however. Most presidential communications to the public go to true believers, not to the broader pool of potential supporters. The most balanced conclusion is that the impact of the new media on the president's ability to govern is marginal.

To make matters worse for the president, audience fragmentation and ideological insulation make it more difficult to reach the bulk of the population. Moreover, the opposition is able to exploit the same tools and audience characteristics to challenge the White House and reinforce the tendencies of its adherents. And in the unkindest cut of all, true believers among Democrats push back against the president's moderate tendencies, and there is little evidence that the president can mobilize his supporters to pressure Congress for change.

Table 1
Audiences for Obama Nationally Televised Speeches and Press Conferences

<u>Date</u>	<u>Venue</u>	<u>Topic</u>	<u>Audience Size</u>
February 9, 2009	White House	Press conference	49.5 million
February 24, 2009	Joint Session of Congress	Overview of administration	52.4 million
March 24, 2009	White House	Press conference	40.4 million
April 29, 2009	White House	Press conference	28.8 million
July 22, 2009	White House	Press conference	24.7 million
September 9, 2009	Joint Session of Congress	Health care reform	32.1 million
December 1, 2009	USMA, West Point	Afghanistan	40.8 million
January 27, 2010	Joint Session of Congress	State of the Union Message	48.0 million
June 15, 2010	Oval Office	Gulf of Mexico oil spill	32.1 million
August 31, 2010	Oval Office	End of Iraq War	29.2 million
January 12, 2011	Tucson, Arizona	Memorial for shooting victims	30.8 million
January 25, 2011	Joint Session of Congress	State of the Union Message	42.8 million
March 28, 2011	National Defense University	Libya	25.6 million
May 1, 2011	White House	Death of Osama bin Laden	56.7 million
June 22, 2011*	White House	Troops cuts in Afghanistan	25.4 million
July 25, 2011	White House	Debt Limit	30.3 million
September 8, 2011	Joint Session of Congress	Jobs Proposals	31.4 million
January 24, 2012	Joint Session of Congress	State of the Union Message	37.8 million
May 1, 2012^	Afghanistan	War in Afghanistan	NA
September 6, 2012	Charlotte, North Carolina	Acceptance of Democratic Nomination	35.7 million
January 21, 2013+	Capitol	Inaugural Address	20.6 million
February 12, 2013	Joint Session of Congress	State of the Union Message	33.5 million
September 10, 2013	White House	Syria	32.3 million
September 27, 2013^	White House	Budget	NA
September 30, 2013^	White House	Budget	NA
October 16, 2013	White House	Budget/government shutdown	
November 23, 2013^	White House	Iran Nuclear Capability	NA
January 28, 2014	Joint Session of Congress	State of the Union Message	33.3 million
September 10, 2014	White House	Islamic State of Iraq and the Levant	34.2 million

November 20, 2014‡	White House	Immigration	13.8 million
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Source: Nielsen Company

* Univision did not carry the speech

^ Not delivered in prime time; no audience ratings.

+ Not delivered in prime time

‡ ABC, CBS, and NBC did not broadcast the speech

Notes

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