OPPORTUNITY 08
Independent Ideas For Our Next President

Reaching American Voters

Strengthen Candidates' Traditional and New Media Approaches

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Summary

News media coverage affects the American Presidential selection process in several important ways. It influences public opinion, sets the agenda for public debate by spotlighting some issues and ignoring others, and educates the public. Important changes are taking place in the news media and in the ways the public uses the news media. Fewer Americans read newspapers or watch the evening network newscasts; audiences for all-news cable channels are generally believed to be stagnant; and most local newspapers have cut back on national and international news coverage. Meanwhile, more of us, especially if we're young, obtain our news from the Internet. Finally the number of Americans who distrust the news media—who don't believe what they read and see—is stunningly large.

Presidential candidates, as well as the next President, will need to explain policies and proposals on many complex issues. This paper offers specific recommendations about how to do so effectively through the news media, such as:

- educate reporters about complex issues
- never lie and never cover up
- get off the defensive and go on the offensive
- put out the bad news yourself

The rising influence of the Internet can be a two-edged sword: while it offers an important new way for candidates to reach voters directly, it also provides a platform for a new cadre of critics and near-instant diffusion of any misstatement or mistake.

Context

The Importance of a Working Relationship with the Media

The new President elected in 2008 will probably be granted the traditional "honeymoon" by the news media. But that period of favorable and forgiving coverage usually doesn't last more than a few weeks or months. For the President's policies and proposals to be fairly conveyed to the public and policymakers over the long run—in the United States and around the world—requires development of an on-going working relationship with the media, because:

- *Media coverage influences public opinion.* President George W. Bush showed that he recognizes the influence of media coverage on public opinion—particularly negative coverage—when he banned news cameras from capturing the arrival of flag-draped caskets of military personnel killed in Iraq
- *The "spotlight effect" of news media coverage—focusing intensely on one issue or a very few issues at a time—sets the national agenda.* Unfortunately, the issues the media choose to spotlight often are titillating, scandalous, or relatively unimportant. Recent examples include the Congressman Mark Foley scandal, the Terri Schiavo right-to-die case, and the Laci Peterson disappearance. Public officials trying to respond to the ever-shifting spotlight will find that the media's intense interest often lasts only a short time before shifting to the next hot topic.
- *The news media fulfill an educational function.* What the public knows and, to a large extent, what policymakers know about important issues facing the country comes primarily from what they see on television, hear on the radio, and read in newspapers, magazines, and on-line.
- *A large majority of journalists frequently reach the same conclusion at the same time about the cause, meaning, and impact of news developments.* This "common wisdom" or, less flatteringly, "herd mentality" in part springs from the tendency of journalists to talk mostly to other journalists, with whom they often share a similar background, education, lifestyle, and ideological outlook.

The number of American voters who will see a Presidential candidate in person during the 2008 campaign is miniscule compared with the tens of millions who will receive their information about candidates through media coverage and the Internet. For that reason, the media's focus on the "horse race" aspects of presidential campaigns—who's ahead, who's behind in the polls—rather than on candidates' positions on specific issues is worrisome. In fact, says one long-time, high-level journalist and diplomat, who now oversees a Washington think tank, "Many in the media have an interest in covering politics as combat rather than as a deliberative process."[1]

Efforts by the 2008 Presidential candidates to define themselves to voters through the news media—and, after the election, efforts by the new President to announce and explain various actions and policies—will be complicated by major changes in the media and in public attitudes toward it.

The News Media Are Undergoing Rapid Change

"Journalism is going through this great period of transition and dislocation," according to Tom Rosenstiel, director of the Project for Excellence in Journalism at Columbia University. "The potential opportunities actually look very promising. The question is economic."[2] The project has reported that the circulation of English-language newspapers in the United States declined 11 percent since 1990, while the circulation of Spanish-language newspapers more than tripled in that same period, and the combined circulation of "alternative weeklies"—usually free tabloids—more than doubled in just one year. Local newspapers are focusing more on hometown and regional stories and less on national and international news. The *New York Times*, the *Wall Street Journal*, and the *Washington Post* are among the very few newspapers that still devote considerable resources to national and international news coverage. Meanwhile, only half as many voters primarily relied on newspapers for information about the 2006 mid-term elections as did in 1996.

[1] Strobe Talbott, President of the Brookings Institution, formerly a top-level journalist with *Time* Magazine for more than two decades, and Deputy Secretary of State.
[2] The report, titled "The State of the News Media," was published in 2004 by the Project for Excellence in Journalism.

The audience for the nightly newscasts on the three major broadcast networks—NBC, CBS, and ABC—has steadily declined. While there is some disagreement over whether the audience for the all-news cable channels has grown or remained stagnant, the number of people watching those channels is small—usually fewer than a million viewers each—except during major news developments, like 9/11 or the beginning of the war in Iraq.

A 2006 survey by the Pew Research Center for The People & The Press found that, on a typical day, barely more than half the adult population—57 percent—watched some television news, only 40 percent read a newspaper, and 36 percent listened to news on the radio. Nineteen percent said they got no news at all the day before they were polled.

Both casual observation and careful studies show that more and more Americans are seeking their news from the Internet. In the Pew poll, 23 percent of respondents said they went online for their news on a typical day, and that number is growing steadily. Indeed, 15 percent of respondents said they got most of their information about the 2006 congressional elections from the Internet—more than double the proportion in the 2002 mid-term elections. The majority of online resources tapped were the websites of traditional television sources (60 percent), local news organizations (48 percent), major national newspapers (31 percent), or news portals like Google News or Yahoo! News that compile these sources (60 percent), versus issue-oriented websites (24 percent), blogs (20 percent), candidates' websites (20 percent), or email listservs (10 percent).

The amount of time spent pursuing these news sources is precisely proportional to age. According to the Pew survey, people over 65 spent the most time obtaining news from various sources—an average of 79 minutes a day—while those 18 to 29 spent the least time, 49 minutes a day. In fact, people in this youngest group were more likely to play video games on a typical day than read a newspaper. People ages 30 to 34 spent the most time getting news online and people over 65 the least.

The Pew pollsters found that 70 percent of television journalists and 60 percent of newspaper and magazine journalists believe the growth of the Internet as a news source has increased the amount of misinformation reaching the public. It's easy to understand that attitude. Whereas the traditional mainstream media—newspapers, magazines, radio, and television—all follow established procedures for editing, fact-checking, and offering balanced viewpoints, no such procedures apply to many Internet news sites. Rather, "On the Internet, everyone is a reporter," is a popular and accurate assessment.[3] Any blogger can write anything—true, false, or slanted—and it zips around the Web to a potential audience of billions in nano-seconds. In fact, the Pew research found that 20 percent of Americans obtained news and information about the 2006 election campaign from blogs.

Politicians, policymakers, and policy advocates in every corner of the globe are learning to use the power of bloggers in promoting a candidacy or a cause and in attacking opponents. (Information about free-market economics and political democracy, which has reached millions of China's citizens via the Internet, is credited with creating pressure on Chinese leaders to move the country away from rigid communism.) The easy access to the Internet that allows anyone to become a reporter allows candidates to create their own websites, blogs, and on-line chat rooms—replete with audio and video clips and advanced graphics—to promote themselves and their proposals and to obtain feedback on their ideas from constituents.

If today "everyone is a reporter," the burgeoning use of cell phone cameras allows everyone to be a photographer, too. Pictures—often embarrassing or politically harmful—can document events anywhere, any time and, like words, be transmitted instantaneously around the world. Cell phone photos of Saddam Hussein's hanging, transmitted from a makeshift gallows in Baghdad, brought Iraq to the brink of all-out Sunni-Shi'a sectarian warfare. The most recent Pew post-election survey found that 13

[3] CNN's website, for example, provides detailed instructions for users to submit stories, voice reports, photos, videos, and blog comments for publication: http://www.cnn.com/exchange/ireports/toolkit/.

percent of Americans ages 18 to 29 said they got news from cell phones, PDA's (personal digital assistants), or podcasts.

Finally, the line between news and entertainment in the American media is blurring. Almost 20 percent of Americans reported they got at least some information about the 2006 campaign from satirical websites like *The Onion* and *The Daily Show*. A Pew poll on media use in the 2004 election found that more than half of Americans ages 18 to 29 at least sometimes obtained election information from entertainment television—shows hosted by Jay Leno, David Letterman, and Jon Stewart, as well as MTV and *Saturday Night Live*. No wonder most recent Presidential candidates have concluded that they must appear on one or more of these programs in order to appeal to younger voters.

Among broadcast news sources, the CBS Sunday night program *60 Minutes* and the CNN all-news cable channel scored highest for credibility, but that wasn't very high: only one-third of the Pew survey respondents said they believed all or most of what they saw there. The least credible broadcast news sources were National Public Radio and MSNBC; only about one in four people said they believed all or most of what they heard from those sources.

In some ways, Americans are becoming more like Europeans in their choice of news sources—favoring those print and broadcast outlets that they perceive as mirroring their own ideological viewpoints. For instance, Republicans were much more likely to watch the Fox News Channel, and Democrats were more likely to watch CNN. Self-described Democrats favored the *CBS Evening News* and NPR, while Republicans said they regularly tuned in to *The O'Reilly Factor* and Rush Limbaugh. Similarly, 70 percent of voters who supported President George Bush in the last election named the Fox News Channel as their main source of campaign news, while only 26 percent relied primarily on CNN. Among John Kerry's supporters, the findings were just the opposite—67 percent named CNN as their main source of campaign news, and only 21 percent followed the campaign on Fox.

Perhaps the most stunning finding from the Pew survey was that 53 percent of those polled agreed with the statement, “I don’t trust the news.”

Given the above findings and trends, what do news executives, reporters, editors, and producers think about their profession? They believe American journalism is in a downward spiral. A 2004 Pew survey found that an astoundingly high 86 percent of journalists are concerned that news outlets avoid complex issues. Half of those polled said the 24-hour news cycle—created by the deadline-every-minute demands of all-news cable channels and the Internet—is weakening reportage. More than half said their profession is too timid in its watchdog role and complained of “increasingly sloppy reporting.” And, two-thirds blamed bottom-line financial pressures for the perceived decline in the quality of coverage by newspapers, magazines, networks, and local stations.

The News Media’s Shortcomings

As one of my successors as White House Press Secretary, Larry Speakes, is fond of saying: “You don’t have to love reporters. You don’t even have to like reporters. But you sure as hell do have to feed reporters.” Meaning, feed them information. Candidates who want to “feed” their messages effectively through the news media to the public—without getting their hand bitten off —must recognize and understand the media’s shortcomings and folkways.

What used to be a healthy degree of skepticism among reporters is now too often a kind of blind cynicism and negativity, a broad assumption that public officials are almost always lying and covering up damaging information, a sense that nothing is what it appears on the surface. That attitude became ingrained after the presidencies of Lyndon Johnson and Richard Nixon—the era of the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal.

The development of 24-hour all-news cable channels and the Internet also have had a profound effect on what is considered news, how it’s processed, and how it’s

transmitted. Miniscule developments are blown up into major stories and repeated incessantly. Many of the less-savory tactics of the scandal-mongering tabloid press have crossed over into the mainstream press—publishing gossip as news, focusing on the private lives of public figures, treating unconfirmed rumors as facts. The false rumor that Presidential candidate Barak Obama had attended an Indonesian *madrassa*—picked up not only by various online sources, but also Fox News—is only one recent example of the hunger for headlines overtaking reality. Many such stories appear initially in blogs, and it is not uncommon to see a "news" story attributed to "unsubstantiated rumors circulating on the Internet." In a roundup of reactions to President Bush's 2007 State of the Union address, the *Washington Post* quoted postings on two blogs (the *Huffington Post* and one anonymous) and the *Newsweek* magazine website. Reporters seeking a multitude of views on an important issue—or, in this case, speech—can now find them with a few keystrokes, making it all too easy not to "consider the source."

Previously, most reporters worked to make one deadline a day—usually around 6:30 in the evening, when the network and local newscasts aired and the presses rolled for the first edition of morning newspapers. Now, with the rise of all-news cable channels and the Internet (and staff cutbacks in many newsrooms), there is irresistible pressure on correspondents to report developments before there is time to check facts, provide explanatory background, or seek responsible conflicting viewpoints. There are many memorable examples of journalists' squirming in this "deadline every minute" environment, including correspondent Charles Bierbower, standing on the sidewalk in front of the Supreme Court, live on CNN, trying to make sense of the complex 82-page ruling he had just been handed in the *Bush* v. *Gore* 2000 Presidential election case.

Of course, the 24-hour news cycle also puts demands on government officials and candidates to do something or say something about an unfolding crisis almost instantly. Previously, they could take hours to gather the facts, consult, weigh their options, and create a coherent response, while still making the nightly network newscasts and the morning newspapers.

With so much airtime to fill and demands to build audience, journalists are pressured to go beyond their traditional role of just reporting the facts—the Who? What? Where? When? and Why?—of a story, and speculate and opine. Anchors on the cable news channels must fill 60 minutes of airtime every hour, 24 hours a day and frequently fall back on asking reporters at the scene of a story to "guess" what will happen next, to "predict" the effect of the latest development, to share their "feelings" about what's going on at the scene. During the 2004 election campaign, a CNN reporter in North Carolina was asked on the air to "predict" the outcome of that state's primary election—ten minutes before the polls closed. Anchors with strong personalities—that is, colorful opinions—attract viewers and, in turn, advertising dollars.

Finally, with endless hours of airtime to fill, the cable news channels fill many of those hours with "debates," often pitting a pundit from the far left of the political spectrum against one from the far right. The participants are allowed—indeed, encouraged—to interrupt and attack each other, often reducing their exchanges to incomprehensible shoutfests. These face-offs, which have contributed to today's nasty and divisive tone in American politics, rarely provide useful information to help citizens understand complex policy issues or the politicians advocating them.

The News Media's Strengths

Despite the above litany of shortcomings, the news media can be an invaluable tool for policymakers and candidates. They give officials the means to communicate instantly with their own citizens, with an audience around the world, with allies, and with adversaries. Newspaper and broadcast coverage enable officials to announce and explain their strategic and tactical decisions and to recruit domestic and international support for those decisions.

On occasion, official have even used the news media to communicate directly with adversaries—terrorists, hostage-takers, hijackers, and hostile nations—when no other direct communications channel was available. President Gerald Ford did so, when he used the White House press corps to warn Cambodian hijackers of the American cargo

ship *Mayaquez* to release the vessel and crew or face military attack. And when then-Secretary of State James Baker stood in a hangar in Saudi Arabia and gave a pep talk to American bomber pilots about to take off for a raid against Iraqi fortifications during the first Gulf War, his message—carried live by CNN—was really directed to one man watching the television coverage in a bunker in Baghdad: Saddam Hussein. Further evidence that government decisionmakers sometimes rely on news media coverage for up-to-the-second information from trouble spots around the world is the installation of multiple television sets—tuned to all-news satellite channels—affixed to the walls of the National Security Council situation room in the lower level of the White House's West Wing.

Seizing the Media Opportunity

Despite the many opportunities that the news media provide to officials to communicate important messages to a wide variety of audiences, large and small, at home and abroad, many policymakers and even politicians remain wary of journalists and are hostile and defensive when dealing with them. They have adopted this strategy believing that the less they say to the news media, the less critical the coverage will be. But that's wrong.

As described earlier, the news media cannot be shunned. They play central roles in the public policy and electoral processes, by informing the public and decisionmakers, setting the policy agenda, and influencing public opinion. Newspapers have columns to fill; television and radio stations have timeslots to fill; and, Internet information sources have an unlimited "news hole." Policymakers and candidates actually put themselves at greater risk of criticism by avoiding reporters. At the very least, if politicians don't explain and promote their proposals and positions in a positive way, their opponents certainly will take the opportunity to define those proposals and positions in a negative one. If politicians and policymakers don't give journalists information to fill their broadcasts and news columns, they will find information elsewhere—information that may be incomplete, misleading, and counterproductive to the politician's aims.

That's the "why" of dealing with the news media. Here is the "how" of dealing with the news media.

Ten Ways to Deal Effectively with The News Media

Never Lie and Never Cover Up

The reason is practical as much as moral—you will get caught. Then the fact that you were trying to hide something will be far more damaging than whatever it was you didn't want to acknowledge. Additionally, exposure of a lie or a cover-up will undermine your future credibility. The cardinal rule for policymakers and candidates is: The cover-up always gets you in bigger trouble than the original mistake.

Pay Attention to the Internet

As detailed previously, more and more people obtain their news from the Internet. In the preliminaries to the 2008 Presidential election, a number of candidates acknowledged the growing importance of the Internet by announcing their candidacies online. But it's important to remember that while there are many reputable Internet news sites that exercise editorial procedures as rigorously as do the traditional news media, there are many more bloggers and self-described "journalists" who use the Internet to advocate their own positions on issues and to attack those with opposing views, often in extremely harsh terms. Use the Internet for your own advantage and let its strengths—immediacy, interactivity, multimedia capability—work for you. Start your own website. This will allow you to communicate directly to all the audiences you are trying to reach without having your message filtered by anyone else. Launch a blog to explain and discuss your positions on important issues. Participate in respectable chat rooms. Hire some people who are savvy about the mores of the Web. Make sure your website content, design, and technology are kept up-to-date.

Make Your Story Visually Interesting

Stories that produce irresistible TV footage and newspaper photos—announcing a new environmental protection plan against the backdrop of a beautiful national park, unveiling a proposal to help the poor at a drab low-income housing project—will be on

the nightly television news and the front page of the morning newspaper. These are photo opportunities— "photo ops." The same stories, announced via a routine press release or at a briefing, may get a few paragraphs on the inside pages of the newspaper. Remember, in trying to persuade the news media to circulate your story, you must overcome a cynical bias among journalists: "Good news is no news."

Educate Reporters and the Public

Policymakers almost always know more about their issues than do average citizens, or the reporters responsible for informing them. Therefore, you should make a serious effort to educate reporters and, through them, their readers, viewers, and listeners—particularly about complex issues. Educated and informed reporters almost always produce more accurate and insightful stories. One useful tactic is to hold educational background briefings for reporters on issues or contemplated actions *not* then in the news, so that later, when they *are* on the front burner, the reporters will have the necessary information to produce factual, knowledgeable stories.

Watch What You Say

You may spend 20 minutes talking to a reporter, then see the whole interview reduced to a four- or five-word quote in the ultimate story. Maybe those four or five words don't accurately reflect what you believe. Maybe they make you look bad or give an impression you never intended. If so, you shouldn't have said them. Never say anything to a reporter you don't want to see pulled out of context, standing all by itself, on the front page or the evening newscast. A useful technique is to imagine what you want the headline in the newspaper to say or what you would want the anchorman to say, then choose words that give you the best chance of getting that headline and that sound bite. And, no matter what a reporter promises, remember you are never "off the record." Sometimes reporters get their juiciest quotes as they are putting on the coats or the cameraman is packing up. Interviewees believe the interview is over, they let down their guard, and the reporter says, "So tell me, just between us . . ."

Listen Carefully to Reporters' Questions

Before answering, correct any false premise in the query. For instance, a reporter may preface a question by saying, "It's well known that you are strongly opposed to . . . "

Or, he or she may attempt to paraphrase your answer by saying something like, “In other words, what you’re telling me is . . . ” If the reporter’s formulations do not accurately reflect your viewpoints, correct them before answering. Otherwise, the reporter will assume you agree with his or her summary of your beliefs.

Never Say “No Comment”

Even when asked a tough or embarrassing question, don’t say it. These days, “no comment” is practically the same as a confession of guilt, and it marks you as a media neophyte.

Have an Explicit Communications Strategy

It’s too late to start planning your communications strategy and tactics after a crisis or a public policy debate has started. Early on, a campaign should develop a media strategy that includes a “crisis communications” plan, should designate a knowledgeable spokesperson, should create a reasonable strategy to handle leaks, and should have a system for quickly contacting key news outlets should be in place early on.

Get off the Defensive and Go on the Offensive

Print and broadcast reporters will fire negative questions at you for as long as you let them. To avoid spending most of an interview or news conference defending yourself from journalistic accusations, make sure you have in mind three or four positive points you want to make in an interview or news conference. And be sure you make them. More than once. Sometimes this will require that you use a technique called “The Swipe,” meaning you “swipe” aside yet another accusatory question by saying something like, “I think I’ve already answered that one, but let me tell you this . . . ” And then make one of your positive points.

Put out the Bad News Yourself

And the sooner the better. That’s a very difficult rule for most politicians and candidates to follow. But, in the long run, if you’ve made a mistake or done something you shouldn’t have, admitting it quickly and publicly is the least harmful course of action. If you’ve made such a mistake, acknowledge it yourself. Give all the

background and facts. Explain your error fully to colleagues and recruit them to defend you. Bad news is almost always less harmful when it is revealed by you than when it is revealed by an investigative reporter or political opponents.

Concluding Observations

Candidates who follow these recommendations consistently, perfect their ability to deal with journalists, and form relationships of trust with reporters, will nevertheless be burned on occasion. They will be misquoted or not quoted at all. Their proposals and positions will be mischaracterized or misunderstood. Their opponents' statements will be accepted without skepticism—or without the reporter calling for a rejoinder. Their critics will leak harmful information to reporters, who will allow them to conceal their identity behind the mask of "anonymous sources." News stories about them will be sensationalized, or just plain wrong.

At these times it may help to remember that "media relations" is all about "relations." Candidates shouldn't risk destroying good relations by an angry and defensive (and possibly quotable!) response. Nor can they practicably swear off dealing with reporters. Although sometimes it seems like an onerous task, they must continually work to develop good on-going relationships with journalists, so that when a reporting problem arises on the media side, or a crisis develops—and it eventually will—on the candidate's side, the reporter is more likely to trust and believe the candidate.

The hard fact of contemporary political life is that, in order to reach key audiences, policymakers and politicians must tell their stories, explain their policies, and defend their actions through traditional news and information intermediaries. And, the increasing popularity of the Internet as an information source provides new mechanisms to make their case directly to voters.

About the Author and the Project

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Ron Nessen is Journalist in Residence at Brookings. He was Press Secretary to President Gerald R. Ford. A former journalist, Nessen was a writer and editor at United Press International and national correspondent for NBC News. He also served as vice president news at the Mutual Broadcasting System, a worldwide radio network.

Opportunity 08 aims to help 2008 presidential candidates and the public focus on critical issues facing the nation, presenting policy ideas on a wide array of domestic and foreign policy questions. The project is committed to providing both independent policy solutions and background material on issues of concern to voters.

Additional Resource

Surveys on news media issues conducted by the Pew Research Center For The People & The Press are available at http://www.people-press.org