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Communicator-in-chief: presidential use of television past, present, and future

Jenna Wasson
Colby College

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**Communicator-in-Chief:
Presidential Use of Television Past, Present, and Future**

Government Senior Honors Thesis

Jenna Wasson
April 15, 2002

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Preface

This thesis seeks to determine how television has changed as a communication medium for presidents over the past half century. An evaluation of the evolving ways presidents use television to communicate with and to build support from the American people has been conducted. Presidential communication strategies have been identified by drawing primarily from primary sources written by presidents and White House staff.

Television technology and the television audience have changed over the years. Presidents have taken a more pro-active, aggressive role in their efforts to harness television for their own purposes. Why have these changes occurred? What impact have these changes had on presidential leadership capabilities? What benefits and drawbacks do they have for presidents trying to communicate with the American people? And finally, what will the presidential strategy for effective political communication be in the future?

I am grateful to my thesis advisor, Professor G. Calvin Mackenzie for his continuous guidance and valuable insight. I would also like to thank Mr. Ronald Nessen, Mr. Dan Harris, Mr. Stephen Hess, and Mr. Thomas Giarrosso for their willingness to spend time in conversation with me about this subject of presidential use of television. I am also grateful to Professor Samuel Kernell for providing me with data from Nielsen Media Research on presidential viewing audiences and to the library staff at Colby College, the GAR Library, and the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum. Finally, I would like to thank Mr. James Teeters for his “technical support” and most importantly my family and friends for their unconditional support.

Chapter 1

Television: the Evolving Medium

On April 30, 1939, RCA President David Sarnoff made a historic telecast from the New York World's Fair and stated,

"Now we add radio sight to sound...It is with a feeling of humbleness that I come to this moment of announcing the birth in this country of a new art so important in its implications that it is bound to affect all society. It is an art which shines like a torch of hope in a troubled world. It is a creative force which we must learn to utilize for the benefit of all mankind."¹

The very next day, television sets went on sale to the public. From that day on, television would have a profound impact upon American culture.

Attempting the "impossible"

The invention of television was a cooperative effort by a number of geniuses; yet, Philo Farnsworth stands out among these inventors as the true father of television. At the age of thirteen, Farnsworth began spending hours in his attic working on his dream of developing the first electronic television picture. Yet many people were doubtful that Farnsworth's dream would actually become a reality. Pern Farnsworth, Philo's wife, stated, "Very few people thought that Phil could do it. He spoke to the heads of the electrical departments at Berkeley and Stanford. Both gave him the advice... 'You are attempting the impossible.' "²

Yet by 1927, when Farnsworth was only twenty-one years old, his seemingly "impossible" dream became a sensational reality. Farnsworth waited to perfect his picture and finally showed his invention to his backers in 1928. During Farnsworth's

years of work, the backers would always taunt him and ask when they were going to "see some money in the gadget." On the day Farnsworth presented his electronic picture to the backers, they once again asked him, "Farnsworth, when are we going to see some money in this gadget?" Without a word, Farnsworth put in a slide, and a picture of a dollar sign appeared on the television screen before the backers' eyes.¹³ This dollar sign was just a hint at the multi-billion dollar enterprise that would unfold in the following years.

Emergence of the television industry

RCA President David Sarnoff's excitement for television represented the high hopes of everyone involved in the television industry. Yet the initial public response to the sale of television did not reach expectations when televisions went on sale in April of 1939. The high price for a set and the looming prospect of World War II had a detrimental impact on the new medium. RCA's TRK-12 went on sale for \$600 (about \$7,000 today) when the average income for Americans was only \$1,906 per year. Although the cost was later reduced to \$395 (about \$4,500 today), the sales were still not impressive; only 7,000 television sets were sold between 1939 to 1941. And when the United States entered the war, television was put on hold.⁴

In the years from 1942 to 1945, all television production was banned.⁵ Instead of producing television sets, electronic companies began producing military supplies. Over 550 electronic companies, including General Electric, Bell Labs, and RCA, all played a

¹ Jeff Kisseloff, *The Box: An Oral History of Television* (New York: Viking, 1995), p. 51.

² Kisseloff, p.27.

³ Kisseloff, p. 27.

⁴ www.tvhistory.tv.

role in the war effort. Although limited broadcasting was allowed to continue, a lack of employees forced many of the stations to close, leaving only DuMont on the air.⁶ Once the war ended, the television industry was slow to revive. Even by 1947, there were only 7,514 televisions operating in the major city of Chicago. The average daily viewing audience in the fall of 1947 was less than 96,000 viewers.⁷ Yet after 1947, the industry began to gain momentum. Metal antennas began to appear on the rooftops of homes, and according to television historian Jeff Kisseloff, the RCA service truck driver "generally received the same hearty welcome that the local hero got upon his safe return from overseas." "Television had finally arrived," Kisseloff declares, "and the life in the home, around the country and around the world was about to be changed forever."⁸

By the 1950s, the industry was booming; television was becoming more accepted and more affordable. In 1948, there were only 350,000 sets in operation around the country, and 27 different stations in 18 cities were in operation. An average of 3.47 people watched television each night per television set, and of the 42 hours per week available for viewing, owners watched an average of 17 hours.⁹ Yet, according to Figure 1.1, by 1950 there were 3,880,000 sets in American homes, and by 1963 the number of sets exploded to 50,300,000. As Figure 1.2 reveals, the number of televisions quickly plateaued at near-saturation, and today approximately 98% of American homes have at least one television.

Figure 1.1 goes here

Figure 1.2 goes here

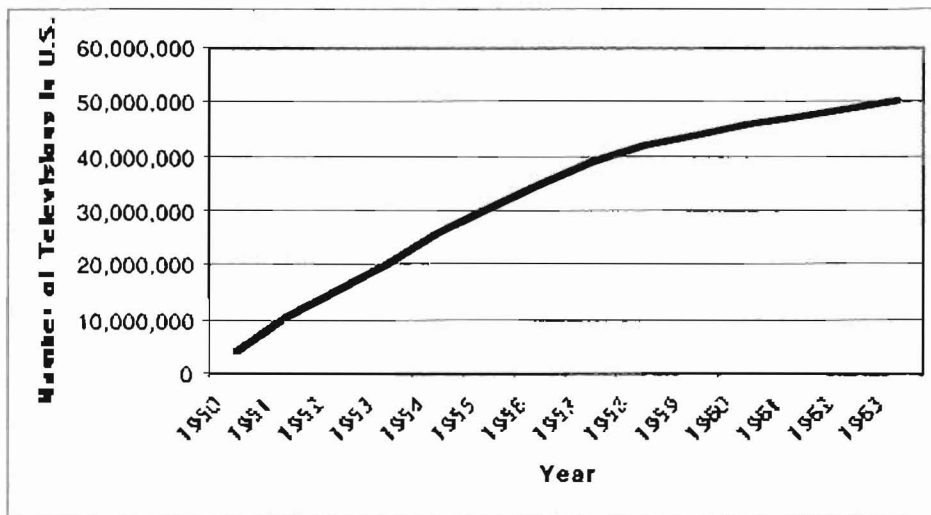
⁵ www.tvhistory.tv.

⁶ Kisseloff, p.93.

⁷ Kisseloff, p.33.

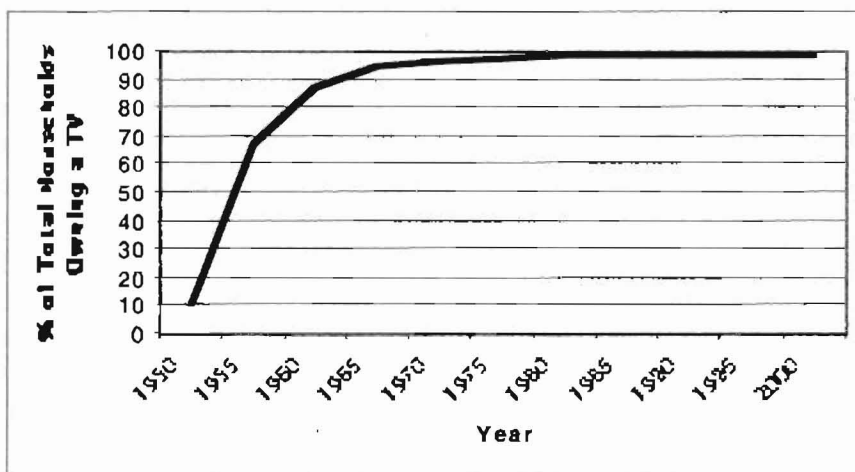
⁸ Kisseloff, p. 120.

Figure 1.1: Number of Televisions in America 1950-1963



Source: Cobbett, Steinberg. *TV Facts*. New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1985. p 86.

Figure 1.2: Percent of Households with Television Sets 1950-2000



Source: "Television Set Ownership." www.tvhistory.tv

Figure 1.1 Number of Televisions in America 1950-1963

<u>Year</u>	<u>Number of TV Households</u>
1950	3,880,000
1951	10,320,000
1952	15,300,000
1953	20,400,000
1954	26,000,000
1955	30,700,000
1956	34,900,000
1957	38,900,000
1958	41,920,000
1959	43,950,000
1960	45,750,000
1961	47,200,000
1962	48,855,000
1963	50,300,000

Source: Cobbett, Steinberg. *TV Facts*. New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1985. P. 86.

Figure 1.2. Percent of Households with Television Sets, 1950-2000

<u>Year</u>	<u>% of total households</u>
1950	10
1955	67
1960	87
1965	94
1970	96
1975	97
1980	98
1985	98
1990	98
1995	98
2000	98

Source: "Television Set Ownership." www.tvhistory.tv

Network domination

By 1950, television was beginning to get a firm foothold in American culture and the networks began to dominate this new multi-billion dollar industry. Even by the end

⁹ www.tvhistory.tv.

of 1949, 92 of the 98 operating stations were network affiliated. Eleven years later, more than 96% of the 515 operating stations were network affiliated.¹⁰ The three major networks, National Broadcasting Company (NBC), Columbia Broadcasting System (CBS), and American Broadcasting Company (ABC) took control of television by pursuing highly efficient practices and by using the ratings as a guide to their programming.¹¹ With the help and credibility of its parent company RCA, NBC became the new network leader. Frank White served as the network's president in the 1950s, but the driving force behind the success of NBC was chairman of the board David Sarnoff. Because of Sarnoff's leadership and expertise, NBC became known as the "entertainment champion of the first half of the 1950s."¹²

Striving to surpass NBC was rival network CBS and its president Frank Stanton and its chairman of the board William Paley. The second-place status of CBS did not last long due to the network's ability to attract popular stars and to create hit programs. Chairman Paley stated, "In 1955 CBS became by far the leading network in popularity...Being the most popular network was a nice position to be in, and though we could hardly expect to stay there undisturbed forever, we would always try."¹³ And, Paley attempted and tried to sustain this status by recruiting stars regardless of the cost. He became known for his "raids" on NBC's talent and stopped at nothing to please his growing audience.¹⁴

ABC was the struggling third network. Although a merger with United Paramount Theaters in 1951 saved ABC, it nonetheless had difficulty competing with the

¹⁰ J. Fred MacDonald, *One Nation Under Television* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), p.65.

¹¹ MacDonald, p. 61.

¹² MacDonald, p.65.

¹³ William S. Paley. *As It Happened: A Memoir* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1979). p.242.

network giants of NBC and CBS. Even by 1954, only 40 of the 354 operating U.S. stations were affiliated with ABC, compared to the 164 stations affiliated with NBC and the 113 stations affiliated with CBS. Furthermore, ABC accounted for only 11% of the industry total, whereas NBC and CBS accounted for 39% and 46% respectively. Yet ABC was able to survive through these early years and grow to become a strong competitor.¹⁵

Unfortunately, DuMont was a smaller network that could not survive among NBC, CBS, and ABC. The network lacked program development strategies and the ability to attract popular entertainers. Even if DuMont had the luck to attract a star, NBC or CBS would simply outbid DuMont to bring the star to their networks.¹⁶

The three network giants easily crushed local stations that were not affiliated with any of them, and their power strengthened into the 1960s. The affiliation with a network was more "glamorous and attractive" and most stations opted for popular network programs as opposed to local programming.¹⁷ Chairman E. William Henry of the Federal Communications Commission stated in the mid-1960s that the NBC, CBS, and ABC dominated "virtually all programming which the American public sees during their prime evening hours." He went on to state that in a report conducted by the FCC Office of Network Study, it was concluded that the three networks dominated 75% of prime time programming in 1957. By 1965, this percentage grew to 93%, leaving just 7% of prime time scheduling coming from independent stations.¹⁸ Furthermore, Henry revealed that the 1964 gross revenues of the three networks were \$ 929 million. He stated, "This

¹⁴ MacDonald, p. 66.

¹⁵ MacDonald, p. 67.

¹⁶ MacDonald, p. 67.

¹⁷ MacDonald, p. 87.

amounted to 52 percent of the television broadcast total – more than all of the nation's 560 other television stations put together!"¹⁹

The networks' profits grew rapidly in the 1970s. There were 434 half-hour weekly network programs in 1960, and by 1976 this number grew to 540 half hour programs. In 1976, 59 percent of U.S. households were tuned into one of the three networks.²⁰ And, during the 1978-80 season, 91% of Americans watching television during prime time were tuned into NBC, CBS, or ABC.²¹ With such complete dominance by all three networks, even the network making the smallest profits was still making millions of dollars.

Despite the prosperous environment for all, an intense rivalry continued to exist among the three networks, and this domination and rivalry aroused much debate. In 1970, FCC Commissioner Nicholas Johnson spoke of the "failure of television." Norman Lear described network television rivalry as "the most destructive force in television today." President of Universal Television Frank Pierce stated that "if the heavy emphasis on ratings" and the desire "to acquire greater and greater profits" were diminished, the networks might "feel a little more free to put on something they thought was good."²² Despite this criticism, NBC, CBS, and ABC continued to flourish. The networks' remarkable ability to understand, to take advantage of, and to even mold audience preference was the key to their amazing success.²³

¹⁸ E. William Henry, "The 50-50 Rule," *Television Quarterly*, Fall 1965, p. 8.

¹⁹ Henry, p. 10.

²⁰ Nielsen Media Research.

²¹ MacDonald, p. 200.

²² Neil Hickey, "The Changing Shape of TV," *TV Guide*, April 22, 1978, p. 9-10; see follow up articles, *ibid.*, April 29, 1972, and May 6, 1972.

²³ MacDonald, p. 203.

Yet the prosperity of the networks could not last forever. Viewers began to become dissatisfied with the networks by the late 1970s. *TV Guide* reported in 1979 that 44% of Americans were unhappy with network programming. This dissatisfaction can be attributed to the lack of variety among programming. *TV Guide* writer Myles Callum stated that a "single audience" did not exist, but that "there is only a diverse, demanding, fascinating galaxy of demographic groups and subgroups, in short, many audiences, each with its own profile, passions, and peeves." The American people had been subjected to "homogenized programming" for the past thirty years and were now growing restless and looking for a change.²⁴

Growing demands for more diverse programming, coupled with the emergence of some promising new technologies, posed profound challenges to the networks in the 1980s. J. Fred MacDonald, a professor of history at Northeastern Illinois University, states, "At exactly the moment American video was realizing its greatest financial achievements and weathering its most intense and broad-based criticism, it was rapidly losing control over its future." The technological advancements began to erode the network audience in the 1970s, and by the 1990s "network television was well beyond its prime and unable to maintain its dominating role in the new television order."²⁵

Technology poses as a threat to the networks

Color television technology was the one technological advancement that did not have a negative effect upon the network's domination. After much debate, the FCC allowed for the adoption of color technology on December 17, 1953, and stations began

²⁴ Myles Callum, "Exclusive Poll: What Viewers Think About TV," *TV Guide*, May 12, 1979, p. 6-12.

²⁵ MacDonald, p. 218.

to make the transition from black and white to color. By 1957, 106 of the 108 stations in the top 40 cities had adopted color capabilities. Yet color programming was slow to gain popularity. By 1965, CBS had only 800 hours of color programming for the entire year, and ABC had only 600 hours. Manufacturers were also reluctant to embrace the new color technology because the market for black and white television was still so profitable; therefore, color television prices remained high.²⁶ As indicated in Figure 1.3, only 3.1% of households had a color television in 1964. But color sales began to increase in the late 1960s. By 1972, 52.6% of homes had color televisions. Today, over 95% of all American households have a color television.²⁷

Figure 1.3 goes here

Figure 1.3: Percent of TV Households with a Color Set 1964-1978

<u>Year</u>	<u>% of TV Households with Color TV</u>
1964	3.1
1966	9.6
1968	24.2
1970	39.3
1971	45.2
1972	52.6
1973	60.1
1974	67.3
1975	70.8
1976	74.0
1977	77.0
1978	78.0

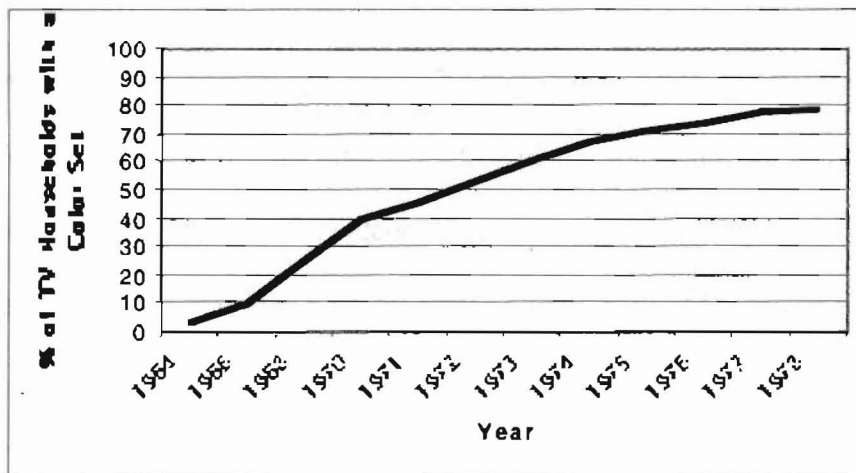
Source: Cobbett, Steinberg. *TV Facts*. New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1985. P.87

After analyzing the effects of television technology, the development of color receivers seemed to be the only new technology that did not have a detrimental effect

²⁶ *Encyclopedia of Television*, p. 396.

²⁷ *Encyclopedia of Television*, p. 396.

Figure 1.3: Percent of TV Households with a Color Set 1964-1978



Source: Cobbett, Steinberg. *TV Facts*. New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1985, p. 87.

upon the network domination. The invention of the video cassette recorder (VCR) was the first invention to pose as a threat to network domination. The enormous popularity of television created a demand among the public for a way to record favorite programs. Although Sony developed a machine to do this in 1975, the Betamax, a year later JVC introduced the VHS machine that was able to capture the home market.²⁸ In 1982, only 4% of homes contained a videocassette recorder; yet as Figure 1. 4 indicates, this percentage increased to 66% by 1990. Today, 85% of television households own a VCR.

In 1988, Nielsen Media Research, a company founded in 1923 by Arthur C. Nielsen Sr. in order to acquire information about television usage and audience preference, revealed that the average household made 14.1 VCR recordings and watched 16.9 recordings each month. In a typical week, households taped for 179 minutes and watched for 296 minutes. Furthermore, the average household rented 2.3 videos per month and 41% of households had purchased a video within the last twelve months.²⁹ Viewers could finally watch a program whenever they wished.

Despite these new opportunities for the television audience, many people in the television industry were not as enthusiastic. Instead of tuning into a prime time network program, viewers were now choosing to watch their favorite pre-recorded programs. Furthermore, cutting out commercials while recording a program, a behavior known as "zapping", created many problems for advertisers. In 1984, a Nielsen study discovered that 5% of the total commercial audience was lost due to zapping. General Foods claimed a loss of \$1 million in advertising due to the audience zapping commercials while recording. In 1985, VCRs existed in 14% of homes and 44% people admitted to

²⁸ *Encyclopedia of Television*, p. 1761.

²⁹ MacDonald, p. 223.

zapping out commercials.³⁰ It is clear that the advent of the VCR brought about dire consequences for NBC, ABC, and CBS.

Figure 1.4 goes here

Figure 1.4: Percent of Television Households Owning a VCR 1950-2000

<u>Year</u>	<u>% Owning VCR</u>
1950	-
1955	-
1960	-
1965	-
1970	-
1975	-
1980	-
1985	14
1990	66
1995	79
2000	85

Source: "Television Set Ownership." www.tvhistory.tv

The remote control was another technological advance that altered the use of television in America. Now Americans could use the remote to jump from channel to channel, an activity known as "zipping," "grazing," or "surfing," in order to watch more than one program at a time and in order to avoid commercials.³¹ It was not until the 1980s that the "clicker" became a household "necessity," and its popularity has grown ever since. Figure 1.5 indicates that in 1985 only 29% of television households had a remote; in ten years, that number grew to 91%. A survey conducted in 1996 revealed that remotes increased the amount of channel changing by 70%. Furthermore, 5-20% of commercials are not watched due to the changing of channels.³² With the remote in hand, the American

³⁰ Richard Butsch, *The Making of American Audiences* (Cambridge: Cambridge University Press, 2000), p.273.

³¹ MacDonald, p. 223.

³² Butsch, p. 275.

viewer was no longer a captive audience of the networks or of advertisers; viewers had acquired the power to surf from station to station.

Figure 1.5 goes here

Figure 1.5. Percentage of TV Households with a Remote Control Device 1950-2000

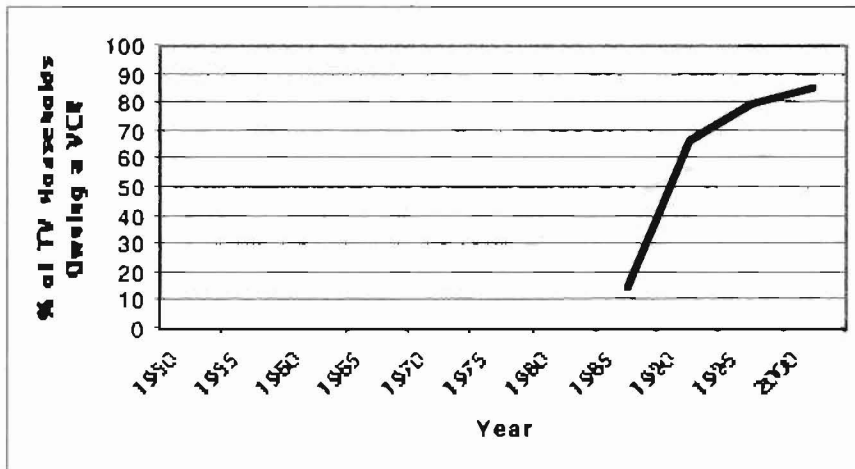
<u>Year</u>	<u>% of TV households with Remote</u>
1950	-
1955	-
1960	-
1965	-
1970	-
1975	-
1980	-
1985	29
1990	77
1995	91
2000	95

Source: "Television Set Ownership." www.tvhistory.tv

VCRs and remote controls many have had a negative impact, but cable television was the new technology that networks feared most and rightly so. The networks spent the first half of the 1960s fighting the legalization of the cable industry in an effort to maintain the network audience that they feared would be lost to new cable programming. In 1966, however, the Supreme Court upheld the emergence of cable in *Southwestern Cable Company v. FCC*. The fear of cable diluting the networks' audience was soon realized. In 1964, only 8% of homes could receive 9 or more channels, yet this percentage rose to 71% by 1987. As indicated in Figure 1.6, only 17% of households were cable subscribers in 1978, and 59% were subscribers by 1991.

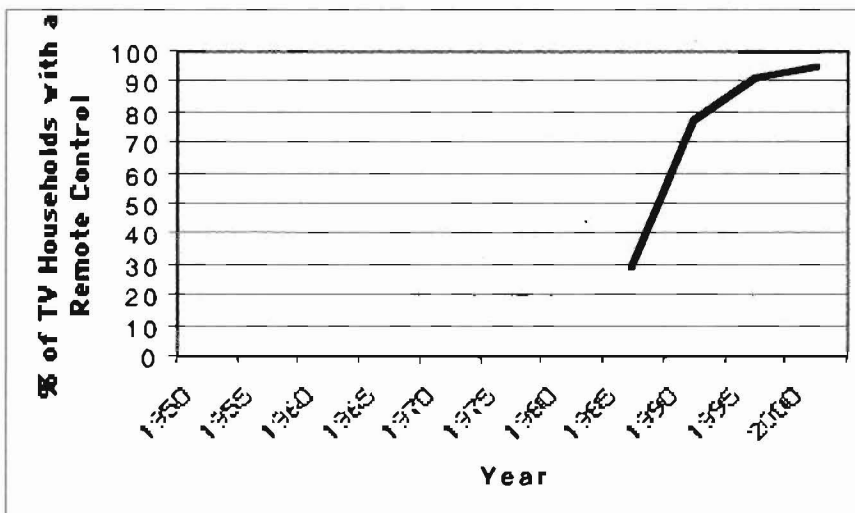
Figure 1.6 goes here

Figure 1.4: Percent of TV Households Owning a VCR 1950-2000



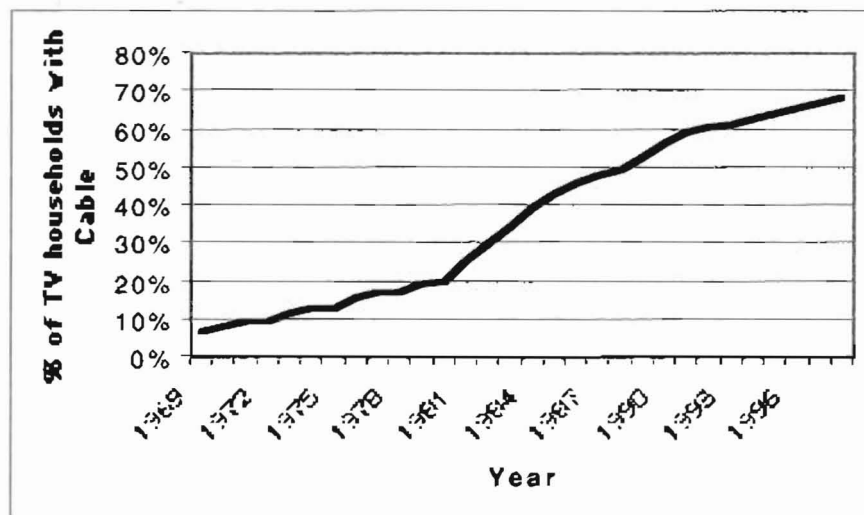
Source: "Television Set Ownership." www.tvhistory.tv

Figure 1.5: Percent of TV Households with a Remote Control Device 1950-2000



Source: "Television Set Ownership." www.tvhistory.tv

Figure 1.6: Percent of TV Households with Cable 1969-1998



Source: Nielsen Media Research.

Figure 1.6. Percentage of TV Households with Cable 1969-1998

<u>Year</u>	<u>% TV Households with Cable</u>
1969	6
1970	8
1971	9
1972	9
1973	11
1974	13
1975	13
1976	15
1977	17
1978	17
1979	19
1980	20
1981	25
1982	30
1983	34
1984	39
1985	43
1986	46
1987	48
1988	49
1989	53
1990	56
1991	59
1992	60
1993	61
1994	62
1995	64
1996	65
1997	67
1998	68

Source: Nielsen Media Research.

This increase in the access to cable television caused a downward spiral in network viewing. The increased program cancellation rates among the three networks during this time illustrates the networks' desperate efforts to find programs that would keep their audiences. During the years from 1982 to 1989, an average of 47 shows were

cancelled each year.³³ Figure 1.7 illustrates that in 1979, 57% of U.S. households were tuned into one of the three networks. But by 1989, this percentage had decreased to only 38%.³⁴

By 1988, the networks admitted to their losing battle against the cable industry. Thomas S. Murphy, the chairman of Capital Cities/ABC, stated, "All three networks are deeply affected by a significant and permanent erosion of audience...Network television, in short, is now a mature business, one which can no longer simply assume continued growth or expansion."³⁵

The introduction of digital cable diluted the network audience even further. This 1990s technology allowed today's many household viewers to receive over 500 different channels. And the introduction of satellite dishes allowed Americans living in more rural areas to still be able to access cable programming. The new technologies of VCR, remote control, and cable gave American viewers an increasing array of television choices. The emergence of these new technologies caused the American audience to become much more complex, differentiated, and difficult to reach.

Figure 1.7 goes here

Figure 1.7: Percentage of Three-Network Primetime Share 1969-1998

<u>Year</u>	<u>3 Network Primetime Share (%)</u>
1969	56
1970	56
1971	57
1972	56
1973	58
1974	57
1975	56

³³ MacDonald, p. 230.

³⁴ Nielsen Media Research.

³⁵ MacDonald, p. 243.

1976	59
1977	58
1978	58
1979	57
1980	55
1981	53
1982	51
1983	51
1984	49
1985	45
1986	48
1987	43
1988	42
1989	38
1990	38
1991	38
1992	37
1993	37
1994	35
1995	32
1996	29
1997	29
1998	29

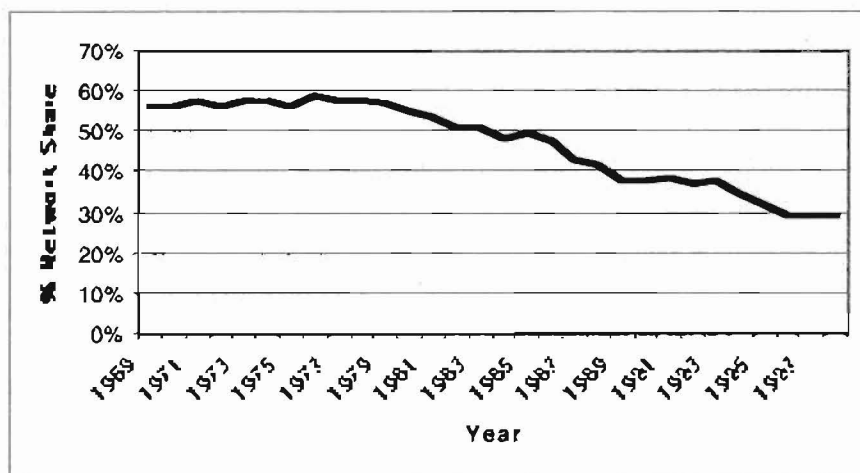
Source: Nielsen Media Research.

Evolution of the television audience

Not only has the television industry evolved since its inception in 1939, but the television audience has evolved as well. In the summer of 1945, before television use had exploded among the public, *Telesvisor* magazine conducted a survey and asked New Yorkers about their thoughts on the new industry. One man stated, "It will be a rather wonderful thing. A little theater in every home. It will be a new industry." This man's prediction proved to be absolutely true.³⁶

Those "pioneer families" who did purchase a television in 1939 started behavioral patterns that would repeat themselves for generations to come. Families rearranged their

Figure 1.7: Percent of TV Households Tuned into One of the Three Major Networks during Prime Time (Netshare) 1969-1998



Source: Nielsen Media Research.

eating and sleeping habits in order to be able to watch the few hours of programming that were available to them. The evening hours that were once designated for family time, were suddenly designated for television time.³⁷ Richard Butsch, professor of sociology at Rider College in New Jersey, states that the television "moved immediately into the living room, becoming the new hearth around which the family gathered."³⁸

Yet the early household audience did not simply consist of family members; pioneer families made many "new friends" with the purchase of their television. A 1947 survey conducted in Los Angeles found that the average size of a family who purchased a television was 3.6, but the average viewing audience in these same homes was 5 people.³⁹ This group viewing continued well into the 1950s. In 1951, comedian Paul Ritts revealed his experience as a television owner. He stated, "Having a television set, one automatically becomes the proprietor of a free theatre, free snack bar and public lounge. Nobody in the neighborhood is just a casual acquaintance. They are all *friends* - the 'just-thought-I'd-drop-in' variety. People who merely nodded to me on the street before now made a point to wave cheerily and shout, 'Hello *neighbor*!'"⁴⁰ Only as televisions became more reasonably priced and more households were able to afford one of their own, did this behavior of "communal viewing" diminish.⁴¹

³⁶ Marian Thomas, "What the 'Man-On-the-Street' Thinks of Television!" *Televiser*, Summer 1945, p. 17, 37.

³⁷ Kisseloff, p. 120.

³⁸ Butsch, p. 235.

³⁹ Butsch, p. 235.

⁴⁰ Paul Ritts. *The TV Jeebies* (Philadelphia: John C. Winston, 1951), p. 96.

⁴¹ Butsch, p. 242.

Television and the News

In its early decades, and even now, television was and is a medium dominated by light fare: comedy, game shows, variety entertainment, and sports. In April of 1952, 42.7% of all network television programs were comedies.⁴² The American audience has always looked to television as a way to be entertained. Figure 1.8 indicates the popularity of the different types of programming offered to viewers in 1970 when the networks were in their heyday. The percentages indicated the amount of time an audience member watched a certain type of program when he or she watched television. Movies ranked highest and were watched 76% of the time, whereas the news was ranked last and was watched 55.3% of the time. Yet the audience's relative non-reliance upon television as a source of information would change over the years.

Figure 1.8 goes here

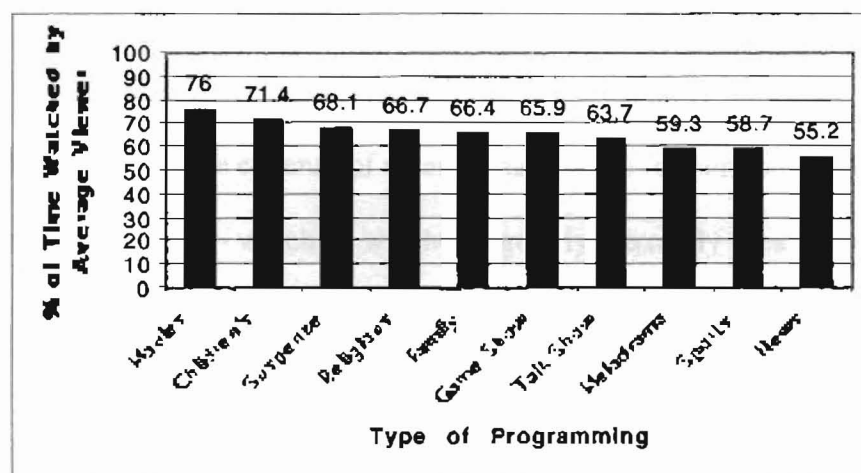
Figure 1.8. Favorite Types of Programming in 1970

<u>Type</u>	<u>% Time Watched when Television is On</u>
Movies	76
Children's	71.4
Suspense	68.1
Religious	66.7
Family	66.4
Game Show	65.9
Talk Show	63.7
Melodrama	59.3
Sports	58.7
News	55.2

Source: Cobbett, Steinberg. *TV Facts*. New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1985. P.85.

⁴² MacDonald, p. 72.

Figure 1.8: Favorite Types of Programming among American Viewers in 1970



Source: Cobbett, Steinberg. *TV Facts*. New York: Facts on File, Inc., 1985. P. 85.

According to an audience survey in 1960, viewers did not rely upon television as their primary news source. The administrator of the survey Gary A. Steiner stated that the typical audience member "would like TV to be more informative and educational but certainly not at the expense of entertainment." He further noted, "Aside from the day's news and weather- which he watches regularly- he rarely uses the set as a deliberate source of information, and he is extremely unlikely to turn on serious and informative public affairs presentations, even if he is watching while they are on the air."⁴³

By the late 1960s, however, Americans had come to rely upon television as their primary source of information. Although the ratings for news programs did not compare to the ratings for prime time programming, the networks responded to viewers' new reliance upon television as an information source. NBC and CBS hired increased numbers of news personnel to cover local and national events, and also began to create more documentaries. By 1967, all three networks had doubled the length of their nightly newscasts from 15 to 30 minutes.⁴⁴ A poll conducted in 1971 revealed that 60% of Americans preferred television to newspapers as the source of "most of their news."⁴⁵ Today, access to news information on television has expanded even more. Multiple newscasts are aired throughout the night, and entire networks, such as CNN and MSNBC, are dedicated to the delivery of news to the American people.

⁴³ Gary A. Steiner. *The People Look at Television: A Study of Audience Attitudes* (New York: Alfred A. Knopf, 1963), p. 228-229.

⁴⁴ MacDonald, p. 154.

⁴⁵ MacDonald, p. 154.

Conclusion

In today's contemporary television audience, 98.2% of U.S. households own at least one television. Of these homes, 99% own a second television, 35% have a third television, and 41% own four or more television sets. 85% of American homes with a television own a VCR, 68% receive basic cable, and 32% subscribe to premium cable. And, today's typical American watches an average of 28 hours and 13 minutes of television each week.⁴⁶ Americans rely upon television as their main source of news, but also as a source of entertainment. With today's television options, viewers are offered hundreds of different channels making today's audience is much more complex, differentiated, and difficult to reach than it was in the early days when television was simply dominated by three networks.

Television has been evolving since its inception in 1939. Its usefulness as a mass communication tool is extremely powerful; yet each new technological advancement has altered the way in which television is used and is viewed. For American presidents seeking to use television to their own political advantage, the powerful medium has been a constantly moving target.

⁴⁶ *World Book Almanac and Book of Facts 2001* (New Jersey: World Almanac Books, 2001), p. 314-315.

Chapter 2

Presidents and Television: The Early Days

Introduction

In his "Memo to President [George H. W.] Bush: How to Use TV- and Keep from Being Abused by It," former President Richard Nixon warned, "Of all the institutions arrayed with and against a President, none controls his fate more than television. Unless a President learns how to harness its power, his Administration is in trouble from the very beginning."¹ Nixon, like all the other presidents in the second half of the twentieth century had learned, sometimes painfully, the true power of television.

The President's ability to communicate with the American people has evolved over the years. Nearly a century and a half ago, Abraham Lincoln refused to speak about the approaching civil war, and the members of the audience applauded his decision.² But, at the beginning of the 20th century, President Theodore Roosevelt took a different view, recognizing the value of the presidency as a communicating tool. He called the office of the presidency a "bully pulpit," because the position allowed him to communicate his beliefs to the American people—and to be heard. This, of course, was before radio or television were even invented, and the emergence of these communication venues made the presidential pulpit even more "bully."³

In his book *Presidential Power*, Richard Neustadt emphasized that the president's prestige among the public has an integral impact on the president's ability to implement

¹ Richard Nixon, "Memo to President Bush: How to Use TV- and Keep from Being Abused by It," in *TV Guide* (14 January 1989), p. 27.

² Jeffery K. Tulis. *The Rhetorical Presidency* (New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 5.

³ Newton N. Minow, John Bartlow Martin, and Lee Mitchell. *Presidential Television* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1973), p. 26.

policy and to govern successfully. Although his book was written over 40 years ago, its message still resonates in today's contemporary political environment. If used efficiently, television can become the president's tool to build the popular support needed for an effective administration.⁴ Today, presidents communicate constantly with the people; Americans are inundated with the image of the president on television. Analysts Newton N. Minow, John Bartlow Martin, and Lee Mitchell state in their book *Presidential Television*, "No mighty king, no ambitious emperor, no pope, or prophet ever dreamt of such an awesome pulpit, so potent a magic wand."⁵ But to what end? And with what effect?

This chapter traces the evolution of the president's "bully pulpit" in the television era. What advantages and disadvantages does television provide compared to other means of presidential communication? What have presidents learned about using television effectively? The evolution of presidential use of television has been influenced by three important factors. Until President Franklin D. Roosevelt, presidential communication was dominated by newspapers. The administrations of Presidents Truman and Eisenhower mark the beginning of television as a communication tool. From Presidents Truman and Eisenhower to President Carter, presidential communication was profoundly impacted by network television domination. And, the Reagan administration marks the beginning of cable television domination. While other terminology might be equally appropriate, newspaper domination, network domination, and cable domination are useful categories for this analysis. This chapter will explore the presidential use of television in the first two of those periods, a time when television was

⁴ Richard Neustadt. *Presidential Power and the Politics of Leadership* (New York: John Wiley & Sons, Inc, 1960).

⁵ Ibid. p. vii.

dominated by the three networks and before the advent of cable and VCR. Chapter 3 will then trace the presidential use of television in the time of cable television domination.

Newspaper Domination

FDR sets a precedent

Presidential communication with the American people was dominated by the newspaper until President Eisenhower's Administration. Yet important developments during this time set the stage for effective presidential use of television during the period of network domination. President Franklin D. Roosevelt was the first president to move beyond simple experiments with technology in order to reach out to the public.

Roosevelt knew that he needed to establish communication with the public in order to calm their fears during the Great Depression. On March 12, 1933, only a few days after his inauguration, Roosevelt addressed the American people over the radio for the first time. He informed the nation of his plan to reopen the banks and sought to instill a sense of security among the American people. FDR's speech was broadcast over CBS and NBC stations and reached an audience of unequalled size.⁶ Sixty-four percent of all radio receivers were tuned to this first "fireside chat," one of the largest audiences in the history of radio.⁷

The success of the first fireside chat inspired FDR to give nineteen more, each running about a half an hour.⁸ By 1941, the average listening audience for the chats had grown to 60 million people. Popular entertainer Will Rogers wrote, "America hasn't

⁶ Edwin Diamond and Robert A. Silverman. *White House to Your House: Media and Politics in Virtual America* (Cambridge, Massachusetts: The MIT Press, 1995), p. 19.

⁷ Minow, Martin, and Mitchell, p. 30.

⁸ Diamond and Silverman, p.19.

been so happy in three years as they are today, no banks, no work, no nothing...They know they got a man in there who is wise to Congress, wise to our so-called big men. The whole country is with him, just so he does something."⁹ Franklin Roosevelt's example influenced presidents who followed; he proved that by using broadcast technology as a communication medium, the spirits of the American people could be lifted and their confidence in the president could be solidified.

FDR's second innovation continues to play an integral role in presidential communication. Although other presidents held press conferences, Roosevelt was the first to take a "modern" approach with his first press conference in 1933.¹⁰ He was the first to schedule frequent, regular press conferences. Under FDR's administration, the press conference transformed into an integral part of presidential communication. He referred to these sessions not as press conferences, but as "delightful family conferences," and established a set of rules that future presidents would implement and amend. Roosevelt stated that the reporters could only use direct presidential quotes if they had written consent from the White House. Furthermore, all background information included in articles could not be associated with the White House, and "off the record" remarks could not be repeated to other reporters who were not in attendance.¹¹ Roosevelt would even insist that reporters attribute all summaries of presidential remarks to "a White House spokesman."¹² Roosevelt took all necessary precautions to prevent himself from being falsely quoted; he was well aware of the danger of slanted reporting.

⁹ Quoted in Arthur M. Schlesinger, Jr., *The Age of Roosevelt* (Boston: Houghton, Mifflin Co., 1957), Vol. 2.

¹⁰ Pierre Salinger. *With Kennedy* (Garden City: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1966), p. 139.

¹¹ Samuel Kernell. *Going Public* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1997), p. 79.

¹² Salinger, p. 55.

The press's reaction to the birth of the press conference was one of overwhelming excitement. Samuel Kernell, professor of political science at the University of California at San Diego, states, "That first day, FDR gave them what they had sought for more than a decade: assurance of hard news, openly conveyed. The President had made a pact with the Washington press corps."¹³ Yet when television later took over the press conference, presidents transformed FDR's "delightful family conversations" into a primary way in which to reach a large number of Americans.

Truman and Eisenhower set the stage

The Administrations of Truman and Eisenhower mark the transition from a period of newspaper domination to network domination. Both Truman and Eisenhower learned from FDR's successful fireside chats and his "delightful family gatherings." President Truman's plea for the support of the American people for his Food Conservation Program on October 5, 1947 was the first televised broadcast from the White House. It was the first time a president had ever appeared on television, and it marked the very beginning of the powerful relationship between the president and the television.¹⁴ Presidents Truman and Eisenhower began to experiment with television, and their innovations laid the groundwork for future televised presidential communication. Each administration developed a unique strategy in order to manage this new relationship between the president and the television.

¹³ Kernell, p. 79

¹⁴ Joe S. Foote. *Television Access and Political Power* (New York: Praeger Series in Political Communication, 1990), p. 25.

Television: an integral part in presidential communication strategy

The birth of the television made it possible for presidents to use this new technology to communicate with the American people. Each president and his staff embraced the powerful medium in different ways. Although President Truman was the first president to appear on television, neither he nor his staff considered television to be an integral part of the communication strategy. It was not until the Eisenhower administration that the true power of television as a communication tool was harnessed. Beginning with Eisenhower's administration, television has become a primary way in which the American president reaches out to the electorate.

President Eisenhower and his staff realized that the president's popularity played a major role in the president's ability to exert influence. President Eisenhower stated, "One man can do a lot...he can especially do a lot at any particular given moment, if at that moment he happens to be ranking high in public estimation. By this I mean he is dwelling in the ivory tower and not in the doghouse."¹⁵ For this reason, Eisenhower and his staff wanted to use the medium of television to communicate an image of Eisenhower in which the people could trust and believe.

Back in 1948, more than 20,000 letters were sent to Eisenhower urging him to run for president. Eisenhower was interested to see what qualities he possessed that connected with the people and that provoked such an outpouring of letters. In the summer of 1949, Eisenhower asked Columbia's distinguished sociologist Robert Merton of the University's Bureau of Applied Social Research to analyze the content of the letters. Merton agreed, and the results showed that the letter writers picked up upon and

¹⁵ "Eisenhower to Emmet Hughes," December 10, 1953, DDE Diary Series, appeared in Fred I. Greenstein. *The Hidden-Hand Presidency* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1982), p. 98.

admired Eisenhower's qualities of sincerity and humanity and that the phrase "born leader" appeared again and again. Furthermore, the letter writers thought of Eisenhower as an intelligent general but also as a non-militaristic man who would excel in a position of civil leadership. Merton stated that he reviewed the analysis of the report "with the General almost line by line in two or three sessions" and that Eisenhower considered the results to be of great interest.¹⁶ Eisenhower took care to understand the public's perception of his character.

When Eisenhower took office in 1953, he wanted to develop a communication strategy that would convey these qualities that were noticed by so many Americans in order to build the popularity that he considered to be so vital to his success as a leader. Eisenhower and his staff recognized that fact that television could help them communicate these important qualities. Eisenhower took great care in expressing the characteristics of sincerity, humanity, and the others mentioned in the report during his public addresses, especially during his press conferences.¹⁷ For this reason, and for other reasons that will be discussed in the following section, President Eisenhower took the unprecedented step of allowing portions of his press conferences to be televised. As discussed above, many Americans prompted Eisenhower to run for the presidency based upon their perception of his upstanding character; television gave Eisenhower the chance to convey these qualities to all Americans.

¹⁶ Robert K. Merton, *An Inventory of Communications Addressed to General Eisenhower in Spring of 1948: Summary and Digest* (New York: Columbia University Bureau of Applied Social Research, September 1949, appeared in Fred I. Greenstein. *The Hidden-Hand Presidency* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1982), p. 96.

¹⁷ Fred I. Greenstein. *The Hidden-Hand Presidency, Eisenhower as a Leader* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1982, p. 97

John F. Kennedy and his administration recognized and utilized the power of television before Kennedy even took office. President Kennedy's press secretary Pierre Salinger remarks, "Without television, JFK could not have won the election" and the President himself later admitted, "We wouldn't have had a prayer without that gadget."¹⁸ Television's boost to Kennedy's campaign against Richard Nixon inspired Kennedy and his administration to take unprecedented steps in incorporating television as a main tool in their communication strategy. Kennedy took office hoping to maintain an open channel of communication with Americans, and television was the primary "gadget" to facilitate this goal.

In an address to the National Association of Broadcasters in May of 1961, President Kennedy expressed his desire for open communication and his realization of the power of television as a means to achieve this. He stated, "I feel, as a believer in freedom, as well as President of the United States, that we want a world in which the good and bad, successes or failures, the aspirations of our people, their desires, the disagreements, their dissent, their agreements, whether they serve the interest of that state or not, should be made public, should be made part of the general understanding of all people." He went on to comment, "For the flow of ideas, the capacity to make informed choices, the ability to criticize, all assumptions upon which political democracy rests, depend largely upon communication. And you are the guardians of the most powerful means of communication ever designed."

Furthermore, in a speech at a *Pulse* luncheon, press secretary Pierre Salinger spoke of the integral role that broadcasters play in disseminating information to

¹⁸ Pierre Salinger. *With Kennedy*, p. 54.

Americans. He stated that the broadcaster is "the most powerful and effective means of communication ever designed, and more people depend on him for news, for information, for interpretation than on any other means of communication."¹⁹ Television's power was certainly recognized and harnessed by the Kennedy administration. The president and his staff embarked upon a presidency based upon the goals of communication and education, and television lay at the foundation of these goals.²⁰

In the wake of the tragedy of President Kennedy's assassination, President Johnson initially used television as a way to reach out to Americans and reinstate their sense of security and confidence. Kennedy's press secretary Pierre Salinger, who continued on as press secretary for President Johnson for a short period of time, suggested the use of television "to establish the President's image solidly around the nation." Salinger recommended that President Johnson hold a televised meeting with leading network reporters, and after a considerable amount of persuasion, the President agreed. The hour-long program was aired on March 15, 1964. Salinger was content with the reception of the program and stated, "President Johnson's thoughtful responses to the questions did a great deal to underline the fact that he had the reins of government firmly in hand."²¹

Once Johnson's presidency was underway, his administration began to broaden the focus of their television strategy. Jack Valenti, an assistant to President Johnson, stated, "When I worked in the White House, one of my pet projects was how to construct some way for the President to leap over the barriers of difficult and hard to explain

¹⁹ "Speech Notes for the *Pulse* luncheon, New York, October 18, 1961," p. 2-3, Papers of Pierre Salinger, Subject Files, John F. Kennedy Library, Box 11, p. 2-3.

²⁰ "Memo to Ted Sorensen from Pierre Salinger, The Relations of the President with the Press, April 17, 1961," Papers of Pierre Salinger, Subject Files, John F. Kennedy Library, Box 11.

²¹ Salinger. *With Kennedy*, p. 338.

subjects (Vietnam, the economy, the Dominican Republic, white vs. black...), to interpose himself between the people and the press, so that he could tell his story, in his way, to the American people and tell it truthfully, simply, dramatically, and briefly.”²² Johnson and his administration saw “educator” and “communicator” as two important aspects of Johnson’s role as president. Valenti stated, “There is no higher priority than the president’s need to inform the American public, so they understand his motives, his actions, and the facts behind whatever it is the president has chosen to place before the people. For the modern truth exists, in particularly in this day of instant communication, that no leader can lead when those whom he abjures to follow him are confused about ‘why’ and fearful about ‘how’ and hesitant about ‘what’ .”²³

Valenti suggested numerous ideas to use television as a tool in becoming a great “educator” and “communicator” with Americans. He recommended a series of ten-minute telecasts in which the President addressed subjects of pressing concern to Americans, such as the economy and Vietnam. Valenti based this recommendation upon the belief that Johnson “use national television as a rostrum, editing out all needless words and ideas, keeping what he had to say simple and clear.”²⁴

Unfortunately, President Johnson did not embrace Valenti’s strategy; he was not as willing to use television as an educational tool as his predecessor was. Looking back, Valenti admits that he is uncertain as to why President Johnson did not agree with his strategy. Valenti hypothesized, “I would say he recoiled from being compared with JFK, as superb a television performer as ever inhabited the White House, somewhere deep in LBJ there lingered some messy doubts about his television image being measured against

²² Jack Valenti. *A Very Human President* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1975), p. 272.

²³ Valenti, p. 273.

²⁴ Valenti, p. 274.

JFK's. But I really don't know."²⁵ Johnson's internal battle with Kennedy's legacy certainly played a part in his hesitation, and will be discussed in greater detail in the following section. Although Johnson did use television to communicate with Americans through his televised press conferences and addresses, his strategy was never truly all that it could be due to his unwillingness to fully embrace the medium.

Like Kennedy, Nixon came to the White House with a strong understanding of the advantages (as well as the possible disadvantages thanks to the Kennedy-Nixon debate) of television. Herbert C. Klein, Director of Nixon's Office of Communications, stated, "His [Nixon's] first instructions to me on the morning after the 1968 election were, 'I want to do a lot more with television.'"²⁶ Nixon wanted his use of television to aid him in conducting an "open" presidency. During his Inaugural Address, Nixon stated, "Let all Americans know that during this administration, our lines of communication will be open." Klein stated that he focused upon Nixon's reference to "open" and to "communication" and understood the significance that these ideas had to Klein's own role as Director of Communications. Klein admitted, "In a statement I later came to regret, I had when I was appointed told the press, 'Truth will be the hallmark of the Nixon administration.' On that Inaugural day, I was confident it would be. Because of my news and political background, more than anyone else sitting on that long, cold platform bench, I knew that truth had to be the 'hallmark' if we were to succeed. I have not changed my mind on that point."²⁷

²⁵ Valenti, p. 275.

²⁶ Herbert C. Klein. *Making It Perfectly Clear* (Garden City, New York: Doubleday & Company, Inc., 1980), p. 76.

²⁷ Klein, p. 5.

Yet Nixon viewed the members of the press as adversaries in his quest for openness. Jack Keogh, chief of Nixon's research and writing team, stated, "The conviction that President Nixon could expect more twisted stories than straight reporting in the major media ran strong in his Administration."²⁸ Nixon felt that the press was out to get him from the very beginning of his administration, and it was this feeling that was the foundation of his use of television in his communication strategy.

Nixon's conviction proved to be a reality. Klein stated that an "unproductive, bully attitude toward the news media" began to emerge within the first few months of the administration.²⁹ And, it was not long until this "unproductive bully attitude" escalated out of control. David Gergen stated, "No modern president has surpassed Nixon in the fury stirred up in the press corps." Gergen was able to witness this fury first hand; he would occasionally observe interaction between reporters and Nixon's press secretary Ron Ziegler. Gergen describes these interactions as scenes "of animalistic intensity, as each side ripped away at the other. Reporters were sometimes screaming, eager to tear out Ziegler's throat. They thought the men working in the White House were akin to Nazi storm troopers working for a neo-Fuhrer....Those scenes are burned into the memory of all who witnessed them, reminders of what can come when a savage war breaks out between the government and the press."³⁰

On November 13, 1969, this hostility between Nixon and the press reached its height. With Nixon's insistence, Vice President Spiro Agnew attacked the television networks. He claimed that the networks' "endless pursuit of controversy" caused "a narrow and distorted picture of America." He encouraged the members of the media to

²⁸ Jack Keogh. *President Nixon and the Press* (New York: Funk & Wagnalls, 1972), p. 39

²⁹ Klein, p. 69.

³⁰ David Gergen. *Eyewitness to Power* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), p. 89.

“turn their critical powers on themselves” and to “direct their energy, talent, and conviction toward improving the quality and objectivity of news presentation.”³¹ Nixon’s speech writer Raymond Price admits, “Though in some respects Agnew overstated his case, I thought that basically what he said needed saying....The question, in our minds, was not whether news organizations should be ‘subservient’ to the administration...but whether we had a right to warn the public not to be misled by reporting that we considered heavily biased, sometimes propagandistic and often untrue. We thought we had that right.”³²

Nixon and his staff were ready to fight for their right to provide Americans with unbiased information, and they worked to develop a strategy to use television to get their message across to Americans without the slanted voice of the press. Herbert Klein states, “From the President on down, an amazingly excessive amount of time was spent worrying about plans to conjure up better and more favorable coverage.”³³ And, Raymond Price states that the conviction to circumvent the press “led the Nixon administration to devote so much effort to its communication – an effort which from time to time summoned the energies of a large percentage of the White House Staff.”³⁴

Utilizing live television was the way in which Nixon and his team sought to reach out to Americans without letting the press contaminate Nixon’s message with their own biased commentary. Keogh writes, “Nixon believed...that the best way to communicate with the people was to appear on live television and speak directly to them. This was in effect, going over the heads of the newsmen so that what was said would not be strained

³¹ Raymond Price. *With Nixon* (New York: The Viking Press, 1977), p. 188.

³² Price, p. 189.

³³ Klein, p. 107.

³⁴ Price, 39.

through their political bias.”³⁵ In a memo received by Klein, it is stated that “Richard Nixon, very consciously, has taken an entirely different tact [sic] from LBJ’s....Instead of trying to win the press, to cater to them, to have backgrounders with them, RN has ignored them and has talked directly to the country TV whenever possible.... He has particularly not allowed the press, whenever he could avoid it, to filter his ideas to the public. This is a remarkable achievement.”³⁶ It is true that Nixon was not the first president to recognize the need to “go over the heads of the press” in order to avoid biased information being disseminated to the public; yet, Nixon was certainly the first to go about circumventing the press with such anger and conviction.

Another piece of Nixon’s television strategy was the effort to “spin” the news in order to portray Nixon in a positive light at all times. David Gergen states, “The prevailing view at the top, as I and others elsewhere on the staff found out late in the game, was to see the press podium as a propaganda weapon. It was not a place for a free give-and-take between man and women seeking truth.” Although he proclaimed an “open” administration during his Inaugural Address, telling the truth at all times was certainly not an element of Nixon’s communication strategy. It was imperative to Nixon that the press be controlled, that he be portrayed in a positive manner. Gergen reveals, “Nixon said to advisers, tell them what you want them to hear, not what they want to know. Control the story. Put a rosy face on everything, no matter what you may think. ‘The press is the enemy,’ Nixon told his advisers over and over in private meetings.”³⁷ It appears that Nixon’s entire communication strategy with the American people was based upon those very words: “The press is the enemy.”

³⁵ Keogh, p. 39.

³⁶ Klein, p. 127. *Newsweek*, March 11, 1970.

³⁷ Gergen, p. 90.

Like President Johnson, President Ford also initially utilized television to restore American's confidence in their government in the aftermath of Nixon's Watergate scandal.³⁸ And, according to Ron Nessen, one of Ford's press secretaries, Ford also set out to restore the relationship with the press.³⁹ Yet, after those initial weeks, the focus of television began to widen. Unlike President Nixon, Ford and his staff did not seek to use television as a "propaganda weapon;" their intent was not to use television to "spin" the news but to convey a truthful message to Americans. Ford did not place a heavy emphasis upon controlling the message of the press. David Gergen, whose recollections of Nixon's desire to "spin" the news have already been mentioned, also served Presidents Ford, Reagan, and Carter. Gergen's appraisal of Nixon's desire to tell the truth lies in stark contrast to Gergen's appraisal of Ford's intentions to tell the truth. He states, "In my experience over the past thirty years, every White House save one – has on occasion willfully misled or lied to the press... The exception to the rule, of course, the Ford White House." Gergen goes on to admit, "More than one of our modern presidents has been a congenital liar; Jerry Ford was a congenital truth-teller." Gergen reveals that Ford's truthfulness was not just a unique personal quality, but a quality he expected his entire administration to embody.⁴⁰ Ford was the first, and most likely the only president, who never intentionally manipulated television as a way to convey a false message to Americans.

President Carter and his staff sought to utilize television as a way to make Americans feel more involved in their government. Barry Jagoda, Carter's television

³⁸ Jerald terHorst. *Gerald Ford and the Future of the Presidency* (New York: The Third Press, 1974) , p. 183.

³⁹ Interview with Ron Nessen, March 11, 2002.

⁴⁰ Gergen, p. 140.

adviser during the 1976 presidential campaign and during the first year and a half of Carter's administration, stated, "One of the things television does best is to let people feel they are part of a national moment."⁴¹ Yet, in their quest to involve Americans, Carter was careful not to over-expose himself. James Fallows, Carter's first speechwriter, stated that President Carter favored two to three minute public statements as opposed to the traditional televised addresses. Carter stated that all "most people hear [of those speeches] is about a minute or two on the news anyway. [That's] the same amount of coverage you get if you go out there and talk for one or two minutes."⁴² President Carter was realistic in the approach that he took toward the use of television as a communication tool. Each president seemed to learn from the successes and the failures of their predecessors as well as to incorporate new strategica aspects in their embrace of television. One of the most successful tools that presidents found in communicating with their constituents was the presidential press conference.

The evolution of the press conference

The press conference became one of the most effective communication tools in the period of network domination, as well as in today's period of cable domination, because it allows the president to demonstrate his knowledge and strength to the American public. David Gergen deems the press conference "one of the most important exercises of public accountability by a president."⁴³ Yet it is imperative to note that the necessary foundation for this form of presidential communication was created during the

⁴¹ Michael Baruch Grossman and Martha Joynt Kumar. *Portraying the President: The White House and the News Media* (Baltimore: The Johns Hopkins University Press, 1981), p. 29.

⁴² Ibid.

⁴³ Gergen, p. 84.

period of newspaper domination. President Franklin Roosevelt held the first modern press conference in 1933, and his press conference rules ultimately evolved into today's live press conference. Presidents Truman and Eisenhower took the first steps in modernizing FDR's creation.

Truman made minor changes to the rules and changed the location of the press conferences from the Oval Office to the old State Department Indian Treaty Room. Instead of conversing with reporters from his desk, the president now stood at the head of the room, looking out over the reporters. The major implication of this new setting was to create a more competitive, adversarial atmosphere among the president and the press. He also reduced the frequency of press conferences.⁴⁴ FDR met twice a week with the press; Truman only met weekly. Although television began to take hold of the nation during his presidency, television or newsreel cameras were not permitted at Truman's press conferences.⁴⁵ Yet, Truman did allow recorded excerpts of his press conferences to be broadcast over the radio.⁴⁶ This decision marks an important step in the relationship between technology and the press conference.

President Eisenhower adapted FDR's rules even more and allowed film crews to be present at press conferences starting in 1955 so that the networks could broadcast prerecorded excerpts to Americans. Although President Eisenhower was frustrated with the slanted stories, he was hesitant to take the unprecedented step and allow cameras during the press conferences. Eisenhower was not even comfortable with the idea of press conferences, let alone allowing cameras to be present. Eisenhower's adviser

⁴⁴ Carolyn Smith. *Presidential Press Conferences* (New York: Praeger Series in Political Communication, 1990), p. 33-34.

⁴⁵ Salinger. *With Kennedy*, p. 55.

⁴⁶ Smith, p. 33-34.

Emmet John Hughes recalls, "For weeks before and after his first Inauguration, he grumbled and argued against even the necessity of press conferences, deploring their establishment by Roosevelt as a fixed form of presidential communication; it required the persistent persuasion of Hagerty to have him hold his first such conference, almost a month after he took office." And, all of this convincing was just for Eisenhower to hold a traditional press conference. When confronted with the idea of televising the conferences, Eisenhower argued, "I keep telling you fellows I don't like to do this sort of thing. I can think of nothing more boring, for the American public, than to have to sit in their living rooms for a whole half hour looking at my face on their screens."⁴⁷

Yet an incident in March of 1954 gave Eisenhower the extra push he needed to televise his press conferences. Eisenhower's Press Secretary James Hagerty recalls walking into the office one day and finding the President very upset by the unfair articles he read by Ed Folliard of the *Washington Post* and James Reston of the *New York Times* regarding a statement he made the previous day. Hagerty was in accord with the President's sentiments and stated that "both stories, in my book, really hit below the belt and were deliberately needled up by Folliard and Reston, both of whom know better...." Hagerty then stated, "That's why I'm glad we released tapes of the statement to radio, TV and newsreels. To hell with slanted reporters. We'll go directly to the people who can hear exactly what the President said without reading warped and slanted stories."⁴⁸ This incident served as an important lesson to Eisenhower and his staff; they realized that the reporters' biased summaries of presidential statements and the importance of releasing

⁴⁷ Emmet John Hughes. *The Ordeal of Power: A Political Memoir of the Eisenhower Years* (New York: Antheneum, 1963), p. 131.

⁴⁸ Robert H. Ferrell. *The Diary of James C. Hagerty* (Bloomington, Indiana: Indiana University Press, 1983), p. 25.

the President's words directly to the people. The following year, on January 19, 1955, cameras were allowed at Eisenhower's press conference for the first time in history.⁴⁹

The televised press conferences brought about a favorable reaction, even among the reporters. In his diary, Hagerty stated that the majority of reporters "admitted that this way a very potent way of getting the President's personality and viewpoints across to the people of the country...."⁵⁰ Now, the people could make their own decisions and not be influenced by the bias of the press. Yet Eisenhower was criticized by some for holding somewhat vague press conferences and for mumbling through certain statements. Strengthening Eisenhower's image through his actual appearance on television was the main focus of Eisenhower's staff; what he was saying was not their primary concern.⁵¹ Eisenhower would later remark that this "intellectual thinness" and the "syntactical flaws" were a product of the great concern Eisenhower had of making an error. Eisenhower stated, "An inadvertent misstatement in public would be a calamity." He justified his "intellectual thinness" and "syntactical flaws" by stating, "It is far better to stumble or speak guardedly than to move ahead smoothly and risk imperiling the country by consistently focusing on ideas rather than on phrasing." Eisenhower was proud of the fact that he "was able to avoid causing the nation a serious setback through anything I said in many hours, over eight years of intensive questioning."⁵² Eisenhower did not take the risk of televised press conferences lightly.

⁴⁹ Ferrell, p. 168.

⁵⁰ Ferrell, p. 169.

⁵¹ Fred I. Greenstein. *The Hidden-Hand Presidency: Eisenhower as a Leader* (New York: Basic Books, Inc., 1982), p. 19.

⁵² Dwight D. Eisenhower. *The White House Years: Mandate for Change 1953-1956* (Garden City, New Jersey: Doubleday, 1963), p. 232-233.

Aside from taking the unprecedented step of allowing cameras at the press conferences, Figure 2.1 and Table 2.1 show that President Eisenhower also further reduced the frequency of press conferences. He only met with the press twice a month, and his steady reduction in the number of press conferences continued to change it from a friendly gathering into a more formal, structured meeting between the president and the press.⁵³ With Truman and Eisenhower, first steps were taken toward televised communication with the American people. Elmer E. Cornwall, professor of political science at Brown University, states that FDR's "private encounters" were evolving into "semi-private performance[s] whose transactions were increasingly part of the public record."⁵⁴

Figure 2.1 goes here

Table 2.1: Presidential News Conferences 1929-1981

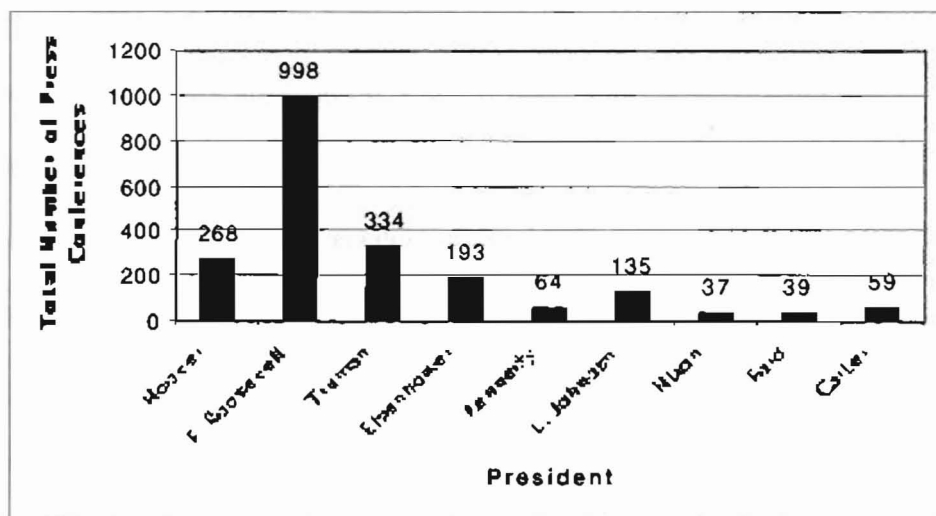
<u>President</u>		<u>Ave. Per Month</u>	<u>Total Number</u>
Hoover	(1929-1933)	5.6	286
F. Roosevelt	(1933-1954)	6.9	998
Truman	(1945-1953)	3.4	334
Eisenhower	(1953-1961)	2.0	193
Kennedy	(1961-1963)	1.9	64
L. Johnson	(1963-1969)	2.2	135
Nixon	(1969-1974)	0.5	37
Ford	(1974-1977)	1.3	39
Carter	(1977-1981)	1.2	59

Source: Kernell, Samuel. *Going Public: New Strategies of Presidential Leadership*. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1997, p. 84.

⁵³ Kernell, p. 83

⁵⁴ Smith, p. 34.

Figure 2.1: Presidential News Conferences 1929-1981



Source: Kernell, Samuel. *Going Public: New Strategies of Presidential Leadership*. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1997, p. 84.

An in-depth look at Kennedy's live press conferences

President John F. Kennedy's election to office signifies the beginning of the period of network domination, and it is under this administration that the press conference was shaped into the modernized format that is used today. When Kennedy and his staff took the unprecedented step in allowing presidential press conferences to be seen on live television, they transformed the press conference from an instrument mainly used to communicate with reporters to an instrument used to communicate directly with the American people.

President Kennedy's press secretary Pierre Salinger was the first to bring up the possibility of opening the press conference to live television. Salinger knew that Kennedy had the ability to perform well under pressure and to captivate an audience based upon his performance during the Kennedy-Nixon debate. Furthermore, Salinger realized that the majority of the press was against a Democratic president. He stated, "Although no Democratic candidate for President had ever been given fairer treatment by a predominantly Republican press, the honeymoon couldn't last."⁵⁵

In order to circumvent the press, Kennedy needed to find a "weapon by which we could go over the American press's head to the American people." When Kennedy took office, full transcripts of a presidential press conference were printed in only three or four of U.S. newspapers. Kennedy and Salinger wanted a way to get unedited message to the people.⁵⁶ Just two days after Kennedy was elected, Salinger presented his unprecedented idea to the President. Salinger stated, "What do you think of opening up your press

⁵⁵ Salinger. *With Kennedy*, p. 56.

⁵⁶ Pierre Salinger, recorded interview by Theodore H. White, July 19, 1965, page 109, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

conferences to live television? I don't think there's any doubt that you can handle it."⁵⁷

And, after much consideration, the President agreed.

Yet President Kennedy's decision to allow live broadcasting "was to provoke a storm of historic proportions." Looking back, Salinger states, "Today, no one blinks at the prospect of the most powerful head of state in the world exposing himself to free and often hostile questions before an audience of many millions and with no possibility of censorship. But, in 1960 my proposal was a radical departure from tradition, and the reaction was swift and violent."⁵⁸

New York Times columnist James Reston believed the decision to go live was "the goofiest idea since the hula hoop."⁵⁹ Another columnist stated that the whole idea was hazardous" and that it would instigate "off the cuff" government."⁶⁰ The strongest argument against live coverage was the fact that one mistake by the President could bring about detrimental consequences. The national and international atmospheres in 1960 were on edge, and one error could instigate disaster. No other world leader would even consider the risk of live coverage during these tense times. For example, in France, Charles DeGaulle's press conferences were held only twice a year upon DeGaulle's request and were carefully staged with planted questions. In Great Britain, press conferences do not even exist, and a forced question period serves as a means of accountability. And, the idea of a press conference in the Soviet Union was not even a possibility.⁶¹ Even in the United States, President Eisenhower had considered pre-

⁵⁷ Salinger. *With Kennedy*, p. 54.

⁵⁸ Salinger. *With Kennedy*, p. 52.

⁵⁹ Smith, 41.

⁶⁰ "Salinger's Speech Notes for Pulse, Inc. Luncheon, New York, October 18, 1961," Papers of Pierre Salinger, Subject Files, John F. Kennedy Library, Box 11.

⁶¹ Salinger. *With Kennedy*, p. 55.

recorded excerpts of his press conferences to be a risk; going live was not even a consideration.

Kennedy's advisers Dean Rusk, Ted Sorensen, and Bundy believed the stakes to be too high; one error could instigate an international fiasco.⁶² But, Kennedy assured them that he possessed the ability to meet the challenge. And, as Salinger pointed out, "...Even if he did blow a question -TV or no TV – it would be impossible to suppress it for very long."⁶³ President Kennedy had the confidence to take the risk.

The criticism surrounding Kennedy's decision was valid; it was certainly a risky move. Samuel Kernell states, "Compared with the alternate forms of communication...the press conference presents the president with ample opportunity to look uniformed, inarticulate, and incompetent."⁶⁴ But this built-in risk also helps make the live press conference such an effective way to communicate with the American people. If the president is able to respond articulately to the difficult questions posed by reporters, a sense of admiration and confidence is fostered among the people.

But, President Kennedy was not afraid to take the step that Truman, Eisenhower, and so many world leaders had feared to take. On December 27, 1960, after several weeks of discussion and evaluation, President Kennedy agreed to live coverage of his presidential press coverage. Kennedy told Salinger, "This is the right thing to do. We should be able to go around the newspapers if that becomes necessary. But, beyond that, I don't know how we can justify keeping TV out if it wants in."⁶⁵ Salinger announced the decision to reporters during a press conference that he claims he will never forget.

⁶² Salinger, *Oral History*, p. 108.

⁶³ Salinger, *With Kennedy*, p. 56.

⁶⁴ Smith, 41.

⁶⁵ Salinger, *With Kennedy*, p. 56.

Salinger retells the story and states that Bill Lawrence, then the White House correspondent of the *New York Times*, sarcastically began his question with, "Mr. Salinger, as you plunge deeper and deeper into matters about which you know absolutely nothing..." Salinger was outraged and yelled that "it was the President's press conference – not theirs- and he would run it his own way." Afterward, when Salinger went to recount the story to President Kennedy, Kennedy laughed and stated, "Don't tell me. I already know. I could hear it clear across town."⁶⁶

On January 25, 1961 at 6:00 p.m. EST, the first live press conference was broadcast to the nation. The location was changed to the larger State Department Auditorium, which many feared would take away from the "intimacy" of the White House press conference.⁶⁷ Yet, in reality, this was a much more ideal location. A permanent set-up could be arranged, it was only five minutes from the White House, there was enough room to accommodate the television cameras and equipment, and the President would not have to stand on a large stage as was the previous arrangement.⁶⁸ During the press conference, one reporter asked Kennedy about the consequences of an "inadvertent statement." The President confidently responded that the interests of the country "are as well protected under this system as they were under the system followed by President Eisenhower, and this system has the advantage of providing more direct communication."⁶⁹ The press conference reached an audience of over 60 million viewers,

⁶⁶ Salinger. *With Kennedy*, p. 58.

⁶⁷ Salinger, Oral History, p. 106.

⁶⁸ "Memo to Pierre Salinger from Bill Wilson." Papers of Pierre Salinger, Subject Files, John F. Kennedy Library, Box 11.

⁶⁹ "John F. Kennedy News Conference #1," Papers of the President, John F. Kennedy Library. Box 8.

and the President “thought it went very well.”⁷⁰ In a memo to Ted Sorensen, Salinger remarked, “The press conference in its present format is here to stay.”⁷¹

President Kennedy and his staff were not the only people satisfied with the new press conference format; the response from the American people overwhelmingly supported the change and commended the administration’s desire to communicate directly through television. The President received thousands of letters from Americans expressing their support of the live coverage.⁷² A telegram was even sent to the President from former press secretary Jim Hagerty, who was then working for ABC as vice president of news, special events, and public affairs. The telegram read, “Congratulations. It was a fine conference. It looked wonderful on TV. ABC will carry it anytime.”⁷³

Pulse conducted a public opinion survey on the new live coverage of presidential press conferences. The survey was conducted in New York City, the city with the most television stations and thus, the most programming options to viewers at any given time. Five hundred people were “asked if they knew that President Kennedy’s press conferences were shown on television while they were actually taking place,” and 90.2 percent replied that they did know. It was reported that of this number, “almost 85 percent had watched a least one of the press conferences and the vast majority of these—80 percent—had tuned in on purpose and had not just stumbled across the press conference while they were turning the dial.” These results proved that Salinger’s risky, “radical departure from tradition” had been a success. Salinger stated, “I think this shows

⁷⁰ Salinger. *With Kennedy*, p. 138.

⁷¹ “Memo to Ted Sorensen from Pierre Salinger, The relations of the President with the Press, April 17, 1961,” Papers of Pierre Salinger, Subject Files, Box 11, p. 3.

⁷² “Memo to Ted Sorensen from Pierre Salinger,” p. 10.

⁷³ “Telegram from Jim Hagerty,” Papers of Pierre Salinger, Subject Files, John F. Kennedy Library, Box 9.

that at the audience end citizens are following the press conferences – and not by accident.”⁷⁴

It is true that the press conferences had proven to be successful, but Kennedy understood the importance of the right level of exposure. FDR made sure not to inundate the American people with his fireside chats; Kennedy cut back on the number of television appearances as well. An excess of press conferences would cause the people to lose interest. As indicated in Figure 2.1, Kennedy held less number of press conferences than Eisenhower, and only one-third as many as FDR.⁷⁵ Although Kennedy and his team had hit upon a successful way to communicate with Americans through the live press conference, they were careful not to overuse their new strategy.

Looking back, Salinger is confident that his suggestion to Kennedy to open the press conferences to live television coverage was a perfect strategy. Of his time spent as Kennedy's press secretary in 1966, Salinger states, “Most of the pencil and paper reporters now concede that they were wrong – that live TV brought about none of the dire consequences they thought it would. Ironically, many of the reporters who were most opposed to the format in 1960, are now the most adamant in insisting that LBJ should use it more often.”

And, Salinger was also accurate in his prediction that Kennedy would be rise to the occasion and perform well under the pressure of live television. Salinger writes, “The ideas and philosophy of the man were best displayed during those moments of truth when he stood alone before millions of his countrymen to answer to questions of greatest moment to their lives and their very survival.” Sadly, John F. Kennedy did not have the

⁷⁴ Salinger's Speech Notes for Pulse, Inc. Luncheon, New York, October 18, 1961," Papers of Pierre Salinger, Subject Files, John F. Kennedy Library, Box 11, p. 5-6.

⁷⁵ Kernell, 85.

opportunity to write his own memoirs, but the transcripts of his live press conferences serve as a remarkable alternative. Salinger writes, "They [the transcripts] reveal as much about the man as they do about his ideas. His grasp of the infinite detail of government; his studied refusal to look at problems in over-simple terms; his quickness of mind; his capacity for righteous anger; and his quick humor are all clearly evident."⁷⁶ The decision to go live was a calculated judgment that proved to be successful and ultimately changed the relationship between the president and the television forever.

The press conference continues to evolve

As an attentive student of Franklin D. Roosevelt and John F. Kennedy, President Lyndon Johnson learned the importance of circumventing the press and communicating directly to the people. Yet Pierre Salinger, who stayed on as Johnson's press secretary for a short time, suggested that Johnson experiment with the press conference in order to determine which format worked best for him. Salinger stated, "JFK had chosen the mass press conference, open to live TV and radio, because he was convinced that he must go directly to the people to sell the innovations of the New Frontier. Also, he had great success against Richard Nixon in the debates." This same situation, however, did not exist for Johnson. Salinger believed that Johnson "could expect greater support from the Congress than JFK, not only because partisanship would not be as virulent during the presidential transition, but because of his own great skill in working with Congress."⁷⁷

President Johnson and Salinger agreed to experiment with a variety of press conference formats. They began with an entirely impromptu, informal format on

⁷⁶ Salinger. *With Kennedy*, p. 142

⁷⁷ Salinger. *With Kennedy*, p. 337.

December 7, 1963. After Salinger's press briefing, he told reporters that Johnson wished to meet with them in his office over coffee. Only twenty or thirty reporters were in attendance, and Salinger remarked that an "atmosphere reminiscent of Franklin D. Roosevelt's meetings with the press" presided. Johnson was satisfied with this first conference and decided to go ahead and try a live, televised press conference on February 29, 1964.

Salinger and Johnson agreed to change the setting from Kennedy's press conferences and moved the location to the International Conference Room at State. Furthermore, Johnson decided to sit at a desk, whereas Kennedy chose to speak from a rostrum.⁷⁸ Press relations excelled during the first few weeks of the Johnson administration. Salinger stated, "The correspondents, of course, were not unaware of the nation's interest and tried to play a constructive role in restoring stability in Washington after the nightmare of Dallas." Yet relations began to deteriorate as the weeks went on. Johnson had grown accustomed to the press's sympathetic treatment and was highly sensitive to the adversarial relationship that began to form after his presidential honeymoon. Salinger comments, "If the press had voluntarily become a partner of government in restoring national unity after Dallas, it was now clearly returning to its normal role."⁷⁹

Johnson did not react well to the press's return to its "normal role." He wanted their partnership to remain intact and reacted by reaching out even more to the press. Johnson also recognized that Kennedy was a truly gifted orator who possessed an unmatched talent and felt that he could make up for his shortcomings by increasing

⁷⁸ Salinger. *With Kennedy*, 337.

⁷⁹ Salinger. *With Kennedy*, 339.

contact with the press. Jack Valenti, Johnson's assistant, stated, "LBJ's obsession to talk to the press, to have them near, was a narcotic for him. He wanted their approbation. He wanted them to notice his strength, not his inadequacies."⁸⁰

Johnson intended to make up for his relative lack of rhetorical talent and to prolong the honeymoon treatment of the press by holding more press conferences than any other president. As indicated in Figures 2.1 and 2.2, Johnson not only held more press conferences than Kennedy held during his administration but increased all other forms of broadcast communication as well. In just his first year in office, LBJ appeared on television more times than JFK did in three years and more times than Eisenhower did in eight years.

In their book *Presidential Television*, Minow, Martin, and Mitchell refer to Johnson as the "compulsive communicator."⁸¹ Johnson may have learned a great deal from the previous presidents, but he seemed to overlook FDR and Kennedy's warning of overexposure. LBJ also failed to master the adversarial relationship between the president and the press with the success of his predecessors. His plan to make up for his lack of rhetorical skill and to maintain friendly press relations by an abundance of communication backfired. Valenti stated that there "seemed to be an avalanche of barbaric (as the president saw them) attacks, and as the criticism grew more and more virulent, LBJ saw an odious conspiracy stalking him." Yet Valenti looks back and states, "The fact remains that had the president stood aloof from the press, he would have fended off most of their probings."⁸² Unfortunately, this advice came too late, and by the end of

⁸⁰ Jack Valenti. *A Very Human President* (New York: W.W. Norton & Company, Inc., 1975), p. 271.

⁸¹ Foote, p. 35.

⁸² Valenti, p. 271.

his presidency, Johnson's relationship with the press had completely deteriorated, and it was agreed that his communication skills paled in comparison to those of Kennedy.

Figure 2.2 goes here

As described earlier, Richard Nixon had no intention of allowing himself to be victimized by the press, even though his relationship with Washington reporters had rarely been very good. He saw the press as an adversary, as an alien and aggressive force against him, and Nixon intended to change this from the onset of his presidency. He wrote, that the "basic need is not PR - it's PO [a presidential offensive]." He continued with the press conference model developed by President Kennedy, but his hostility toward the press compelled him to make significant alterations.

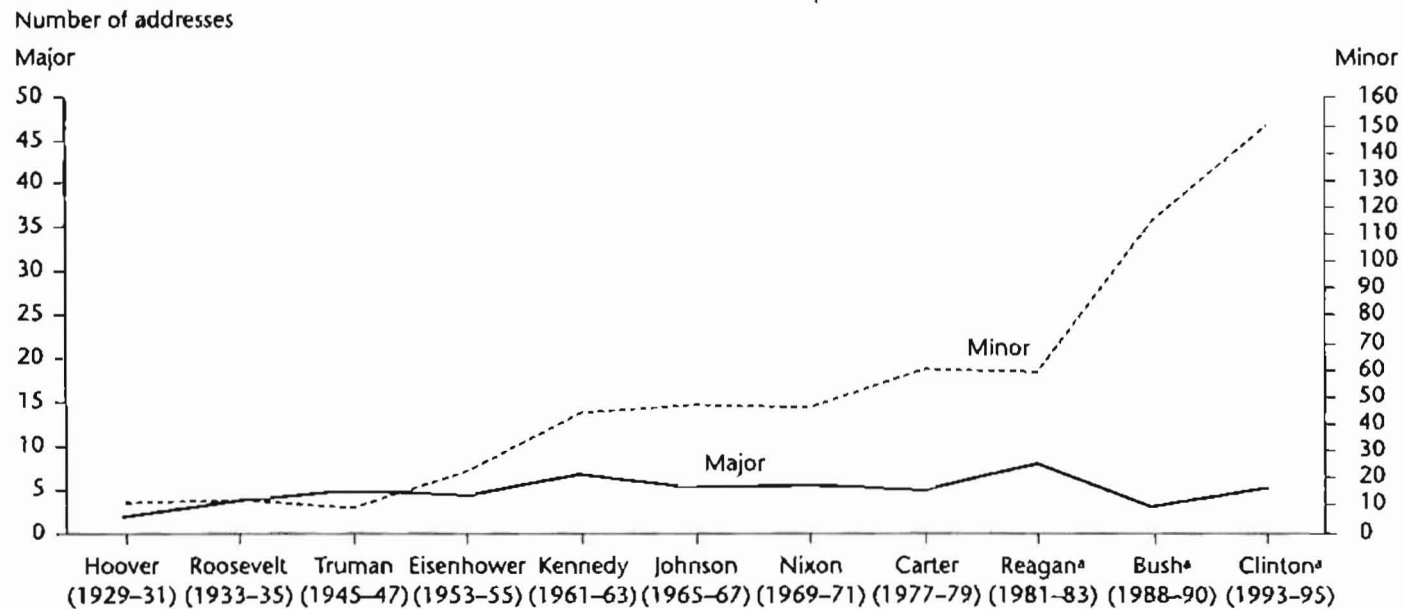
Nixon changed the name of "press conference" to "news conference" in order to demonstrate that it was the president who made the news, and the news was what the conference was all about, not the press.⁸³ Nixon made his first outright attack on the press during his first press conference held on January 27, 1969, just seven days after his inauguration. He told the press, that he refused to respond to questions dealing with domestic or foreign affairs. He stated, "I do not believe that policy should be made by off-the-cuff responses in press conferences or in any other kind of conference. I think it should be made in an orderly way."⁸⁴

Despite this tension that existed between Nixon and reporters during his press conferences, Nixon was nonetheless extremely successful in conveying a positive

⁸³ Smith, p. 48.

⁸⁴ Keogh, p. 45.

Figure 2.2: Number of Presidential Addresses 1929-1995 (Yearly Averages for First Three Years of First Term)



Sources: Data for Hoover, Roosevelt, Truman, Eisenhower, Nixon, and Carter are from William W. Lammers, "Presidential Attention-Focusing Activities," in *The President and the American Public*, ed. Doris A. Graber (Philadelphia: Institute for the Study of Human Issues, 1982), Table 6-1, 152. Data for Kennedy, Johnson, Reagan, Bush, and Clinton are from *Public Papers of the Presidents* series. See also Samuel Kernell, "The Presidency and the People: The Modern Paradox," in *The Presidency and the Political System*, ed. Michael Nelson (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1984), 242.

Note: To eliminate public activities inspired by concerns of reelection rather than governing, only the first three years have been tabulated. For this reason, Gerald Ford's record of public activities during his two and one-half years of office have been ignored.

* Major addresses include television addresses only. With radio included, Reagan averaged twenty-four major addresses per year.

Source: Kernell, Samuel. *Going Public: New Strategies in Presidential Leadership*. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press. 1997, p. 113.

message to American viewers. Jack Keogh, Nixon's chief of writing and research, stated that there was "widespread agreement among friend and foe alike, including often frustrated Washington news corps, that he [Nixon] was a master." Nixon dazzled American and reporters after his second news conference in 1969. Even commentator Frank Reynolds, a staunch anti-Nixon reporter, agreed, stating, "There was no band to play 'Hail to the Chief' as he came in, but they should have played it as he walked out."⁸⁵

This success is partly due to the great care Nixon took in preparing for the news conferences. Keogh states that President Nixon was "personally and thoroughly involved" in the brainstorming and researching of possible subjects that took place before each conference.⁸⁶ Herbert Klein also reveals Nixon's preparedness, stating, "Richard Nixon's effectiveness in using the television medium is remarkable. This is due, of course to the tremendous amount of preparation that he takes before making a television appearance. With the exception of TR, Wilson and Hoover, RN is probably the only president in this country who still sits down from time to time and completely writes a major speech himself."⁸⁷

Although Nixon experienced success with his news conferences, he did not hold them with great frequency. This is due to Nixon's belief that a press conference should only be one form of communication with Americans and also due to his belief that press conferences promote "off-the cuff- responses."⁸⁸ In fact, Nixon held fewer press conferences than all of his predecessors held. David Gergen writes, "The frequency of presidential press conferences had been declining since FDR, but under Nixon they fell to

⁸⁵ Keogh, p. 44.

⁸⁶ Keogh, p. 49.

⁸⁷ Klein, p. 126.

⁸⁸ Keogh, p. 44.

a new low." During his first term, Nixon held eight press conferences per year, and this number fell to just five per year during his second term.⁸⁹ Historian Melvin Small reveals that Nixon held "the fewest number of press conferences of any president from Hoover through Carter."⁹⁰

Reporters did not react well to the diminished number of press conferences, thus adding to the intense hostility that existed between reporters and President Nixon. It is true that an adversarial nature did exist during press conferences under Truman, Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson; yet, the tension between Nixon and the press reached an unprecedented level, especially after the onset of the Watergate scandal. During a press conference in August of 1973, CBS's Dan Rather began his question, "I want to state this question with due respect for your office," and Nixon cut him off and stated, "That would be unusual."⁹¹ Unfortunately, the heated tension caused the press conference to deteriorate into a bickering contest and undermined the people's confidence in President Nixon.

Hoping to decrease the level of hostility that existed during Nixon's press conferences, President Ford made a number of changes. These changes became apparent nineteen days after his Inauguration when he held his first press conference.⁹² President Ford allowed reporters to ask follow-up questions if they were not satisfied with the president's response to their questions and moved the reporters' chairs closer to the podium. Ford wanted to rearrange Nixon's press conference setting completely in order

⁸⁹ Gergen, p. 84.

⁹⁰ Melvin Small. *The Presidency of Richard Nixon* (Lawrence, Kansas: University Press of Kansas, 1999), p. 228.

⁹¹ William L. Rivers. *The Other Government: Power & the Washington Media* (New York: Universe Books, 1982), p. 206.

⁹² Jerald F. terHorst. *Gerald Ford and the Future of the Presidency* (New York: Joseph Okpaku Publishing Company, Inc., 1974), p. 189.

to symbolize a fresh start. Unlike President Nixon who spoke with a blue velvet curtain in the background, Ford decided to stand on the other side of the room, in front of a doorway leading to the Great Hall of the White House. Ford's first Press Secretary Jerald terHorst states that this backdrop of the open door was a "symbolic reference to Ford's 'open' administration." In an aside, terHorst also comments that "unlike Nixon, Ford wore no makeup" during the press conferences.⁹³ Ford was not looking to hide anything; he wanted to use the press conference to get a truthful message out to Americans. Ford and his team were able to use the press conference as a way in which to reinforce Americans confidence in the office of the presidency.

Carter's first press conference was held on February 8, 1977, and was the first of many more to come. Barry Jagoda, Carter's television adviser during his campaign and during the first year and a half of Carter's administration, suggested that Carter refrain from holding his press conferences during prime time viewing. Jagoda understood that an interruption of regular prime time programming annoyed and frustrated many Americans, and Jagoda did not want to irritate the electorate.⁹⁴ These feelings of annoyance are a telling sign that the American viewer had changed since the days of Presidents Eisenhower and Kennedy, when a presidential televised address was a television event that viewers did not want to miss. This idea of decreased presidential audience size will be analyzed in Chapter 3, but it is important to note that the Carter picked up on the early signs of disinterest among the American viewers.

President Carter and his staff also decided to make a commitment to hold two press conferences each month based upon a number of different theories. Powell did not

⁹³ terHorst, 189.

⁹⁴ Grossman and Kumar, p. 111.

want Carter to “lose his feel for the medium.” He stated that a president’s “sense of the issue, which makes the difference between an adequate response and a good one fades quickly.”⁹⁵ There was also a factual aspect to their theory. By subjecting Carter to reporters’ questioning twice each month, Carter was sure to stay on top of the most pressing issues. Powell states, “...Even the best briefing book cannot possibly remind or inform a President of everything of importance that has happened during a two or three month period. The danger here is that an adequate answer turns into a terrible one.”⁹⁶

Powell also believed that the president had an obligation to reach out to Americans on a regular, frequent basis. Powell states, “The American people have a right to see how their Chief Executive and Commander in Chief handles himself under tough cross-examination, without benefit of a text that has been carefully polished and endlessly rehearsed. The ability to perform adequately in such a situation is not the most important qualification a president should have, but it is well up on the list.”⁹⁷

Looking back on Carter’s administration, however, Powell admits that this “two press conference per month” policy was not the most effective way to communicate with the American people. Powell states, “Our commitment to hold two a month was foolish. A president simply has more important things to do with his time than prepare for two full-blown press conferences each month.” Carter had experimented with town hall meetings, where he would travel to different towns around the country and hold an open meeting in which citizens could voice their concerns. Powell believes that televising these town hall meetings may have been a more effective way to address the real

⁹⁵ Jody Powell. *The Other Side of the Story* (New York: William Morrow and Company, Inc., 1984), p. 305.

⁹⁶ Powell, p. 306.

⁹⁷ *Ibid.*

concerns of the people. He believes this “not because the citizenry asks more intelligent questions than the press, but because they ask questions about the things they want to know about.”⁹⁸ President Carter may not have been able to effectively communicate through his press conferences, but the theory behind the frequency of his press conferences is important for every president to consider.

The growth of public relations components of presidential staffs

As presidents became more comfortable with and more reliant on television, the importance of the White House press office began to grow. During the newspaper era, the president's press office consisted of a few aides whose role was to provide sustenance to the fifty or so newspaper reporters. These reporters spent their time in a pressroom the size of a regular hotel room.⁹⁹ President Franklin D. Roosevelt hired the White House's first press secretary, Stephen Early, in order to authorize the use of direct quotes from the president in news articles.¹⁰⁰ President Truman was the first president ever to hire a media advisor to help him with the delivery of his speeches.¹⁰¹

It was during President Eisenhower's administration that the press office began to take on a much broader role. Before his administration, the press secretary did not play a very important function. For example, press secretary Stephen Early's role was minimal compared to what the job entailed during Eisenhower's administration and the administrations to follow. In an excerpt from Early's diary, he explains a typical day in which he held a press conference, arranged for photographers to come to the White

⁹⁸ Powell, p. 305.

⁹⁹ Hess, p. 2.

¹⁰⁰ Kernell, p. 79.

¹⁰¹ Minow, Martin, Mitchell, 34.

House, wrote a memorandum, and then "left the office about noon and took Helen and the kids to the circus."¹⁰² Starting with Eisenhower's administration, this type of schedule for the press secretary would be unheard of.

President Eisenhower's press secretary, James Hagerty, came into the administration with great enthusiasm and high expectations for the future of presidential communication. He knew that there would be no half days in his future. The day President Eisenhower took office, Hagerty stated, "We are in a day of a new medium - television. I would like to work out with television representatives...a system whereby the president could give talks to the people of the country - possibly a press conference - on television...about once a month."¹⁰³ Hagerty was able to influence the networks so that they would broadcast all that he asked of them. Political scientist Elmer Cornwall stated, "It was Jim and not the networks that decided the newsworthiness of a given presidential statement."¹⁰⁴ Hagerty's determination and innovative thinking was the style of press secretary leadership that would be necessary in the period of network domination.

The president began to rely upon his communication staff even more heavily during the period of network domination. An effective communication staff became an absolute necessity. Instead of a hotel room sized pressroom, a briefing room was constructed above the swimming pool.¹⁰⁵ The public relations component of presidential staffs exploded under the Nixon administration. Nixon recruited a diversified staff from the broadcasting, advertising, and public relations fields in order to help him reach out to

¹⁰² Stephen T. Early Diary, May 8, 1934, Early Papers, FDR Library.

¹⁰³ Ibid.

¹⁰⁴ Foote, p. 29.

¹⁰⁵ Hess, p. 3.

the public. Nixon's adviser Herbert Klein stated, "When one looks at the memos written, the hours in meetings, the long informal discussions, one might think that the White House staff was made up basically of top PR men from New York, with the help of a few other PR experts from perhaps Washington, Chicago, and LA."¹⁰⁶ And, Klein's assessment of the staff was true. Nixon hired aides who had worked as broadcast program managers, broadcast news reporters, newspaper editors, television news producers, advertising accountants, and television production experts. Klein described this extreme focus on the media as an "obsession." Klein stated, "It seemed to me that half of the President's staff considered themselves experts on the press and public relations."¹⁰⁷ Nixon set a precedent, and this "obsession" would continue into future administrations as presidents became increasingly concerned with controlling the message conveyed to Americans.

One of Nixon's first acts as president was the inauguration of the White House's Office of Communication for the Executive Branch. The commencement of this office marked a significant change in the mentality of the president during the time of network domination; the president must be actively strengthening and using his relationship with television effectively.¹⁰⁸ This office's primary role was to ensure that a favorable portrayal of the Administration was appearing on the television screens of Americans. FCC Commissioner Nicholas Johnson claimed that Nixon's new staff created "the overwhelming impression of an Administration whose fixed focus is on the little glass

¹⁰⁶ Klein, p. 108.

¹⁰⁷ Klein, p. 69.

¹⁰⁸ "U.S. Presidency and Television." In *The Encyclopedia of Television* Vol. 3, p. 1744.

screen.¹⁰⁹ Nixon's diversified staff brought the ability to communicate with Americans to a new, professional level and served as an example for presidents to come.

The presidents after Nixon continued to follow his precedent, and President Ford added an even greater component to his staff. Ford needed assistance with the delivery of his 1975 Address to the Nation, and he hired former CBS news producer Robert Mead to help him. Mead was the first television expert hired since Robert Montgomery during the Eisenhower administration; yet, Mead's role was much more crucial to the president than Montgomery's had been. Mead believed that enough practice would make Ford's address perfect. Mead hired a CBS production unit consisting of a twelve-person crew and rented a state of the art VPS 100 Teleprompting system from Q-TV in New York so that President Ford could practice before his big event.¹¹⁰ Mead thought of everything; he decided the Address should take place in the more intimate setting of the White House library and even thought to have a log burning in the fireplace. After witnessing President Ford's execution of the Address, the *Washington Post*'s David Broder wrote, "No president probably ever rehearsed more carefully for an address."¹¹¹ This was yet another step in the evolving presidential embrace of television, but more importantly, in the institutionalizing of the present's new role as communicator-in-chief.

Presidential innovations

Each president enhanced presidential communication in his own way, either by building upon the ideas of predecessors or by innovating. President Truman and

¹⁰⁹ Minow, Martin, and Mitchell, p. 55.

¹¹⁰ Foote, p. 61.

¹¹¹ David Broder, "Ford Carefully Rehearsed 'Make-or-Break' Speech," *Washington Post* (January 14, 1975), p. A3.

President Eisenhower's press conference innovations have already been discussed, but other important communication tools were developed during the period of network domination.

President Kennedy was the first to truly diversify his use of television to communicate with the American people. President Eisenhower allowed staged, stuffy cabinet meetings to be filmed, but President Kennedy wanted to reach to the public on a more intimate level. Kennedy's live press conferences proved to be a successful communication outlet, but Kennedy and his staff recognized the need for other communication strategies as well. Salinger stated that the press conference was not "the be-all and end-all as far as educating or communicating to the American people. It is one vehicle."¹¹² Kennedy experimented with other televised "vehicles" in order to make the important connection with his constituents.

Television cameras were permitted to follow Kennedy and his brother, Attorney General Robert Kennedy, on a tour through the White House as the two brothers discussed the resistance to school desegregation in Alabama.¹¹³ The program, entitled *Crisis*, aired on ABC and also contained footage of Alabama's governor George C. Wallace decision-making meetings. Pierre Salinger deems ABC's airing of *Crisis* "resulted in as important a view of the American presidency in action as television has ever been able to present."¹¹⁴

President Kennedy and his staff also granted all "worthy" requests for special televised interviews. Salinger points to Kennedy's interview with David Schoenbrun of

¹¹² "Remarks of Salinger at the Luncheon Meeting of Public Information Officers, June 8, 1961," White House Central Files, John F. Kennedy Library, Box 118, p. 8.

¹¹³ Minow, Martin, and Mitchell, p. 41.

¹¹⁴ Salinger, p. 113.

CBS as an "outstanding example." Schoenbrun was one of the most knowledgeable reporters on the field of the European Common Market. In 1962, President Kennedy sent a complicated bill to Congress, facilitating trade relations between the U.S. and members of the European Common Market.¹¹⁵ Salinger stated that most Americans were uninformed about the European Market and did not comprehend the significance of this bill; he saw the interview as "a great way to sell our program."¹¹⁶ President Kennedy took advantage of Schoenbrun's request and used the interview as a way to educate Americans on the subject of the U.S. trade pattern and on the importance of establishing trade relations with the Common Market. Salinger remarked that this interview "was just one phase of a vast educational campaign by the government on this important point."¹¹⁷

Walter Cronkite of CBS wished to commemorate the network's first thirty minute evening news show with an exclusive interview with president Kennedy, and his request was granted. Although CBS recorded a half and hour of questions and answers, only twelve minutes were broadcast. The cut footage resulted in a distortion of what the President said about President Ngo Dinh Diem. During the interview, President Kennedy spoke of his "respect and sympathy" for President Diem; unfortunately, the televised version only included Kennedy's negative remarks.¹¹⁸ Salinger stated that the interview made it seem as if Kennedy "was advocating the overthrow of Diem; in fact, it was quoted, after Diem's assassination, as proof that President Kennedy really wanted Diem killed."¹¹⁹

¹¹⁵ Salinger, p. 114.

¹¹⁶ Pierre Salinger, recorded interview by Theodore H. White, July 19, 1965, page 116, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program.

¹¹⁷ Salinger, p. 114.

¹¹⁸ Salinger, p. 114.

¹¹⁹ Pierre Salinger, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program, p. 121.

As can be imagined, President Kennedy was deeply troubled by these false accusations after Diem's death. President Kennedy and his staff believed that exclusive interviews were another effective way to reach out to the public; yet, Walter Cronkite's interview powerfully illustrated the danger of cut footage and misrepresentation. Salinger admits that the repercussions of the Cronkite interview "frightened me terrifically because I think it did the President, and the country, a great disservice because it misrepresented the President's position...."¹²⁰ When President Kennedy was asked to give an exclusive interview on NBC's Huntley-Brinkley show, Kennedy agreed under the condition that the White House approve the segments that would be cut from the final version. Cronkite's interview had served as a lesson to the Kennedy administration and would serve as a lesson to administrations to follow.

A Conversation with the President, which aired on the evening of December 17, 1962, was another way in which the Kennedy administration reached out to the public through television. This program was set in the President's office and consisted of an hour-long conversation between Kennedy and reporters from all three networks. Kennedy's sincere assessment of his first two years in office was heard in the homes of millions of Americans. Salinger stated, "Never before had the American public had such an intimate glimpse of a President: his personality, his mind at work, his sense of history – and his sense of humor."¹²¹

The first lady was also involved in Kennedy's commitment to communication with the American people. On February 14, 1962, millions of viewers followed Mrs. Kennedy on an hour-long tour of the executive Mansion. Salinger deems this television

¹²⁰ Pierre Salinger, John F. Kennedy Library Oral History Program, p. 123.

¹²¹ Salinger, p. 114.

event as "one of the most memorable television events of the Thousand Days."¹²² Mrs. Kennedy had worked hard to restore the White House and she happily agreed to CBS's proposal.¹²³ Yet when the other networks discovered the plan, they were outraged. Salinger stated, "They were insistent that I require CBS to furnish them with tapes of the tour for simultaneous telecast on all three networks." Salinger refused based upon his position that who ever comes up with a good idea, be it a magazine, a newspaper, or a television network, they get the rights. The ABC and NBC continued to pressure Salinger, and he was forced to go to President Kennedy in order to resolve the situation. Due to the belief that the Executive Mansion was public domain, Kennedy decided that all three networks be allowed to telecast the tour, with the condition that CBS be given full credit on the air.¹²⁴

Presidents Truman and Eisenhower made use of the domestic ceremony as an occasion for public statements, but Kennedy modernized that approach and used it four times as often as Truman and Eisenhower.¹²⁵ As seen in Figure 2.3 and Table 2.3, Johnson learned from the success of Kennedy's domestic ceremony and held a domestic ceremony on an average of three per week. Kennedy and Johnson realized that domestic ceremonies are appealing television presentations and have the ability to lift the spirits of the people and saw them as an excellent form of publicity.¹²⁶

Figure 2.3 goes here

¹²² Salinger, p. 116.

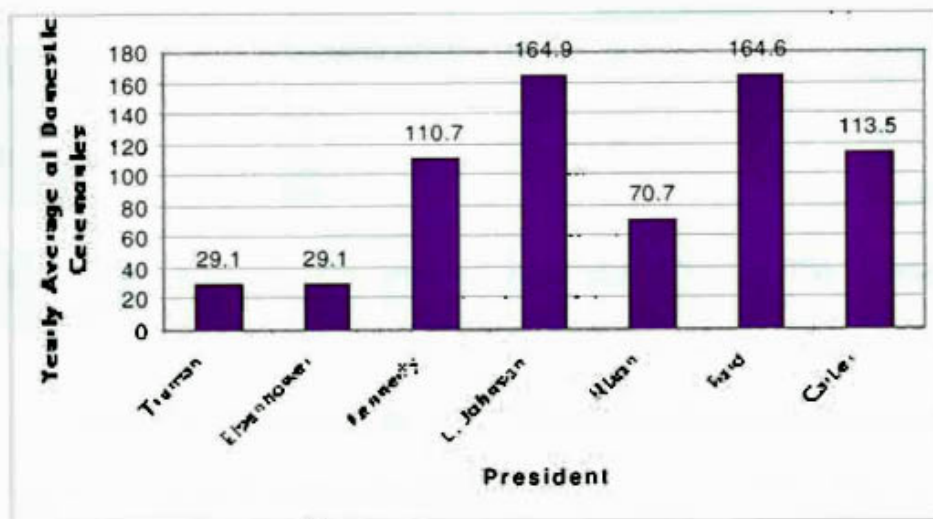
¹²³ "Jacqueline Kennedy: the White House Years – Selections from the John F. Kennedy Library and Museum." Exhibition, John F. Kennedy Library and Museum, from September 15, 2001 to February 28, 2002.

¹²⁴ Salinger, p. 116.

¹²⁵ Hart, 26.

¹²⁶ Ibid.

Figure 2.3: Comparative Use of Presidential Ceremonies



Source: Hart, Roderick. *The Sound of Leadership*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 24.

Table 2.3: Comparative Use of Presidential Ceremonies

<u>President</u>	<u>Number of Domestic Ceremonies</u>	<u>Yearly Average</u>
Truman	226	29.1
Eisenhower	233	29.1
Kennedy	321	110.7
Johnson	841	164.9

Source: Hart, Roderick. *The Sound of Leadership*. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 1987, p. 24.

Apart from his institution of the White House Office of Communication for the Executive Branch, Nixon is also known for other contributions to presidential communication. Presidents Kennedy and Johnson had engaged in conversations with news reporters and permitted these conversations to be broadcast at a later date. Nixon took the innovative step of making these conversations live. By doing so, he created another way to present his views to an average audience of more than 55 million people. *Time* magazine described these "live conversations" as a "public relations triumph for Richard Nixon."¹²⁷

Nixon was also an innovator in terms of his use of prime time television. During the first 18 months of his presidency, Nixon appeared in prime time as frequently as Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy and Johnson combined during their first 18 months in office. Nixon appeared on primetime 31 times during the first 39 months in office. Johnson only appeared 24 times in 5 years, Kennedy appeared 10 times in 3 years, and Eisenhower only 23 times in 8 years. In 1970, Nixon's State of the Union Address was broadcast at 12:30 p.m. EST and reached an audience of 22.5 million Americans. The following year the address was moved to prime time, reaching an audience of 54.4

¹²⁷ Minow, Martin, and Mitchell, p. 57.

million people. The audience size doubled just by changing the time to prime time, and this made a huge impact upon Nixon and presidents to come. A prime time precedent was set for future presidents to follow.¹²⁸ It is clear that each president since President Truman has made meaningful contributions to the quality of presidential communication.

Conclusion

The relationship between the president and television has been evolving since the birth of television. Presidents have learned from the successes and the failures of their predecessors. Theodore Roosevelt's "bully pulpit," has never been so bully as in the first three decades after television became a commercial medium in America. But the salad days of three-network television were coming to an end in the 1980s, and this would spur—indeed require— a more complex evolution for the presidential use for television.

¹²⁸ Minow, Martin, and Mitchell, p. 56.

Chapter 3

The Strategies of Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush

Introduction

Presidential communication began to take on a whole new meaning with the onset of cable television. Prior to this new development, the three main networks dominated television, and it was easy for presidents to target and to reach their intended audience. But the numerous program options available with cable television now made the audience much more differentiated, complex, and difficult to contact; cable television transformed the American audience into an elusive, moving target. For this reason, it was necessary for presidents to sharpen and to modernize their communication skills in order to keep up with the changing television technology. This chapter will compare the strategies of presidents in the era dominated by three television networks to the strategies of Presidents Ronald Reagan and George Bush in this era of cable television.

The new challenges of cable television

By 1985, 43% of households were cable subscribers; viewers were no longer limited to network broadcasts but had access to a wide variety of television programming.¹ As mentioned in Chapter 1, the increase in the popularity of cable television caused a downward spiral of network viewing.² Viewers had so many options that they were finding more attractive programming on the over 500 cable stations that became available to many households. Thus presidents no longer had the captive audience they once had when television was dominated by the three networks.

¹ Nielsen Media Research.

² J. Fred MacDonald, *One Nation Under Television* (New York: Pantheon Books, 1990), p. 230.

It is true that the public's reliance upon television as an information source has increased over the years; yet the public's desire to tune into presidential speeches and addresses has diminished with the advent of more programming options. Since the rise in cable television, a sharp decline in presidential television audience size has become strikingly apparent. On January 23, 1980, 58% of American households owning a television were tuned into President Carter's State of the Union messages.³ Carter's televised policy addresses reached an average audience of 69 million Americans.⁴ But soon thereafter, cable television began to take hold of the nation, and presidential television appearances no longer attracted as many viewers.

It is clear that presidential viewing audiences have changed drastically over time. It can be hypothesized that this decline varies in severity according to the type of televised address (state of the union message, policy address, news conference), the time of the address, and the president's approval ratings. It is possible that certain types of addresses and certain time slots attract a larger viewing audience. It is also possible that the level public support for the president can influence the size of the audience.

After analyzing the Nielsen data from 139 televised presidential, primetime addresses from 1969 to 1998, an extremely sharp decline in presidential viewing audiences is evident. A decrease in audience size can be found in all presidential televised addresses, regardless of the type of address or of the time slot. Yet it is interesting to note that in keeping with the hypothesis, the severity of the decline does differ according the type of the address and according to the time slot. Furthermore,

³ Nielsen Media Research.

⁴ Joe S. Foote, *Television Access and Political Power* (New York: Praeger, 1990) p. 153.

contrary to the hypothesis, a decline in audience size is also evident regardless of the president's approval ratings at the time of the address.

Figure 3.1 illustrates the decline in the presidential audience size from 1969 to 1998. As seen in the graph, a high of 54% was hit in 1970 during the Nixon administration. After a low of 39% in 1972, audience size continued to steadily increase until 1980. From 1980 on, the audience size has steadily fallen. Furthermore, Figure 3.2 illustrates the decline in presidential audience by administration. The average viewing audience actually increased slightly from President Nixon to President Carter. Yet there is a significant difference between President Carter's average audience of 49% and President Reagan's average viewing audience of 37%. The Reagan administration marks the beginning of the decline in presidential audience size. After his administration, the audience size was never the same.

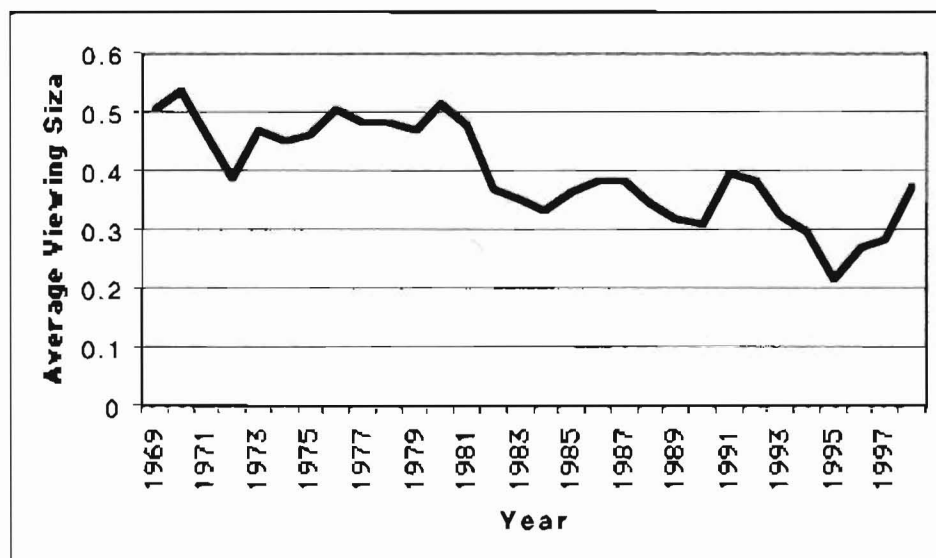
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This decline directly correlates with the rise in cable television among American households. Americans no longer wanted to tune into the three major networks to watch a presidential address when they had hundreds of cable television options. As seen in Figure 3.3, the average percentage of television households tuned into one of the three major broadcast networks ("netshare") during primetime has declined, while the percentage of American households subscribing to cable has increased. It is clear that cable television has greatly affected the president's ability to reach Americans; as cable subscribers have increased, presidential audience size has decreased.

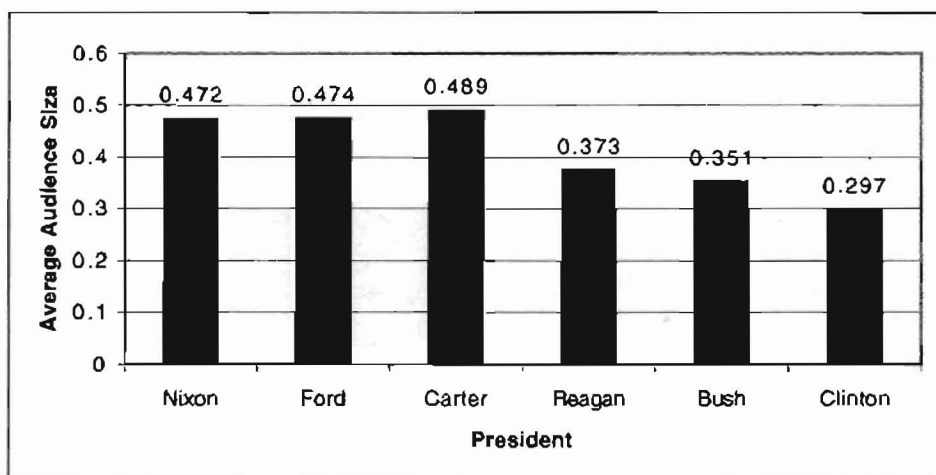
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Figure 3.1: Average Size of Presidential Viewing Audience 1969-1998



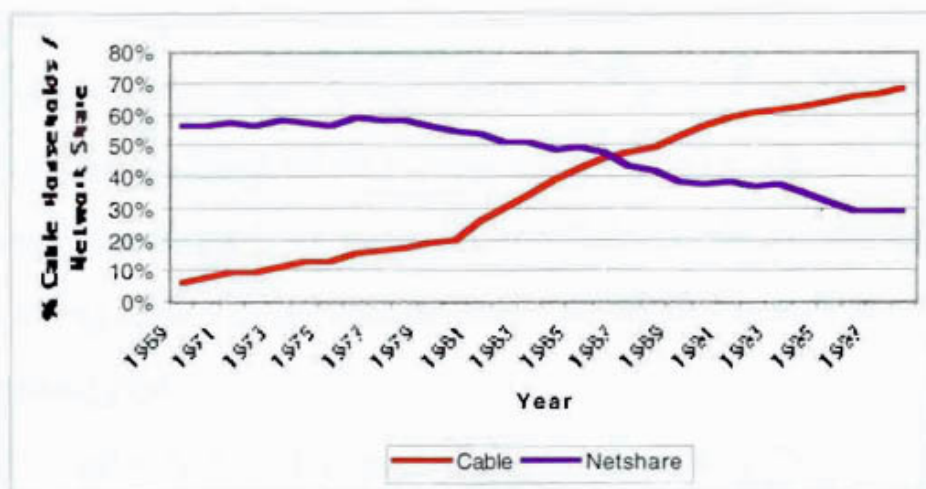
Source: Nielsen Media Research.

Figure 3.2: Average Audience Size for Presidential Addresses by Administration



Source: Nielsen Media Research.

Figure 3.3: Percent of Households with Cable versus Network Share



Source: Nielsen Media Research.

This decrease in audience size is true of all televised presidential appearances. Figure 3.4, Figure 3.5, and Figure 3.6 reveal the average audience size for primetime policy addresses, news conferences, and state of the union messages from 1969 to 1998. As displayed in Figure 3.4, the audience size for primetime policy addresses increased from 47% under the Nixon administration to 52% under the Ford administration; but, beginning with the Reagan administration, audience size has declined with each new administration.

Although Nielsen did not collect data for President Bush's news conferences, Figure 3.5 nonetheless demonstrates a decline in audience size for televised news conferences as well. Nixon's average news conference audience was 49% and this rate declined beginning with Reagan and ultimately dropped to 20% in the Clinton administration.

Finally, audience size for state of the union messages has also declined. As seen in Figure 3.6, there was a slight decline in audience size under the Ford administration, but audience size increased to 53% during the Carter administration. Yet, once again, beginning with the Reagan administration, audience size dropped with every succeeding administration.

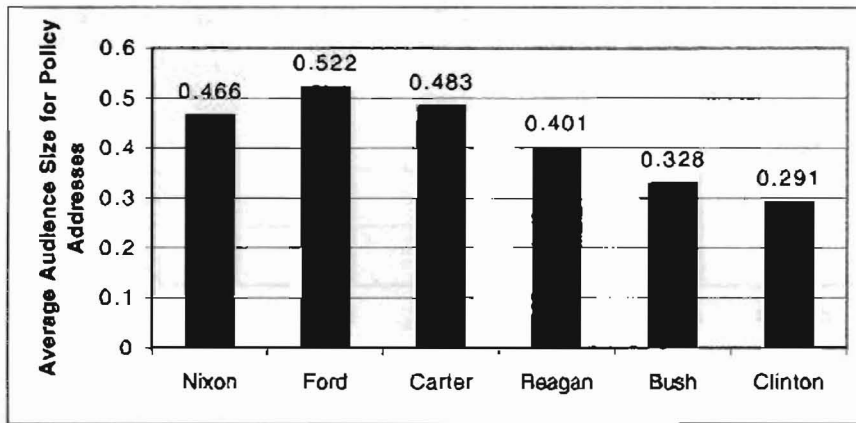
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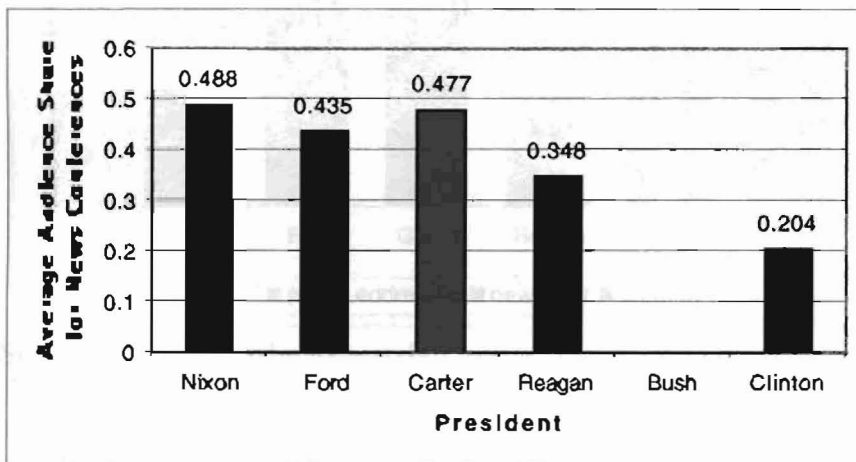
There was a decline in all three types of televised addresses, yet Figures 3.7 and 3.8 illustrate that this rate of decline varies according to the type of presidential appearance. During the Nixon, Ford, and Carter administrations, state of the union

Figure 3.4: Average Audience Share for Presidential Policy Addresses



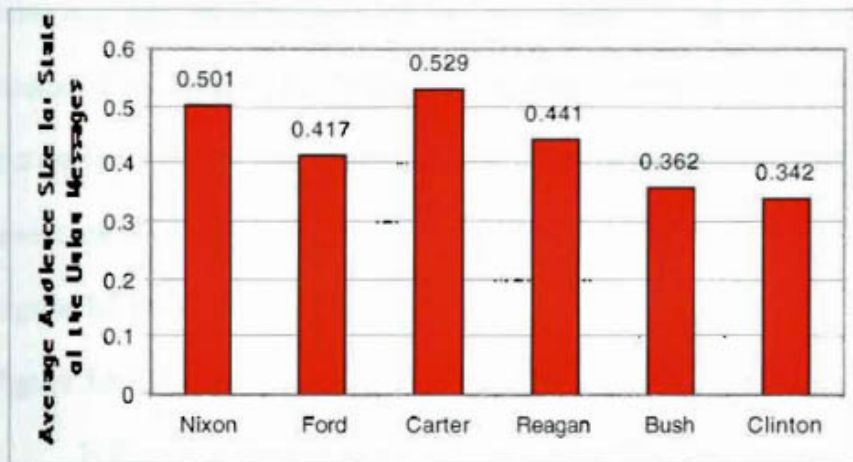
Source: Nielsen Media Research.

Figure 3.5: Average Audience Size for News Conferences



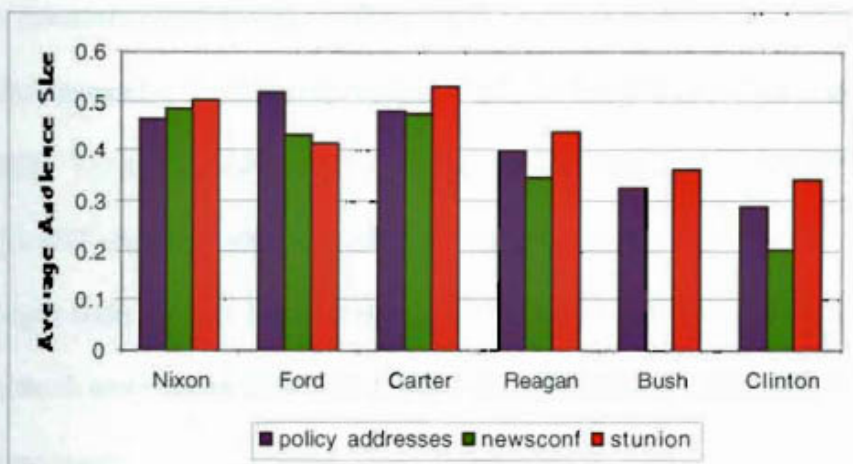
Source: Nielsen Media Research.

Figure 3.6: Average Audience Size for State of the Union Messages



Source: Nielsen Media Research.

Figure 3.7: Average Audience Size for 3 Types of Addresses



Source: Nielsen Media Research.

messages had the smallest audience size. Yet, after the Carter administration, state of the union messages have received the highest audience ratings of the three types of addresses studied. This could be due to the fact that state of the union messages occur infrequently and are highly publicized events. Furthermore, news conferences have received the lowest audience size ever since the Carter administration.

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Figure 3.8 goes here

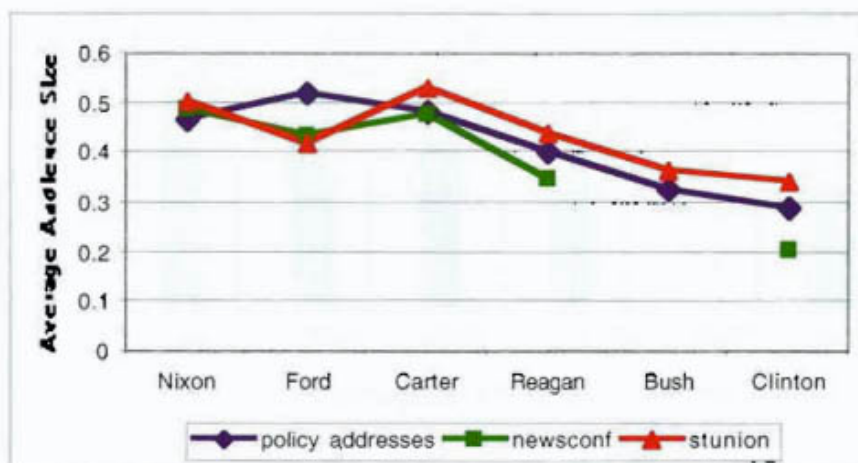
Is there a difference in audience size according to the time at which the presidential appearance is aired? Figures 3.9 and 3.10 reveal that audience size for presidential appearances has declined regardless of the times at which they occur. Yet it is interesting to note that a difference in audience size can be found at different times. Unfortunately, Nielsen only included data for Bush's speeches that took place at 9 pm EST. Yet it is nonetheless evident that presidential appearances on television before 9 pm EST reached a smaller audience than presidential appearances after 9 pm EST. The larger audience size for addresses after 9pm EST could be attributed to the fact that this is a much more convenient time for working Americans, especially those in the western time zones.

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Figure 3.10 goes here

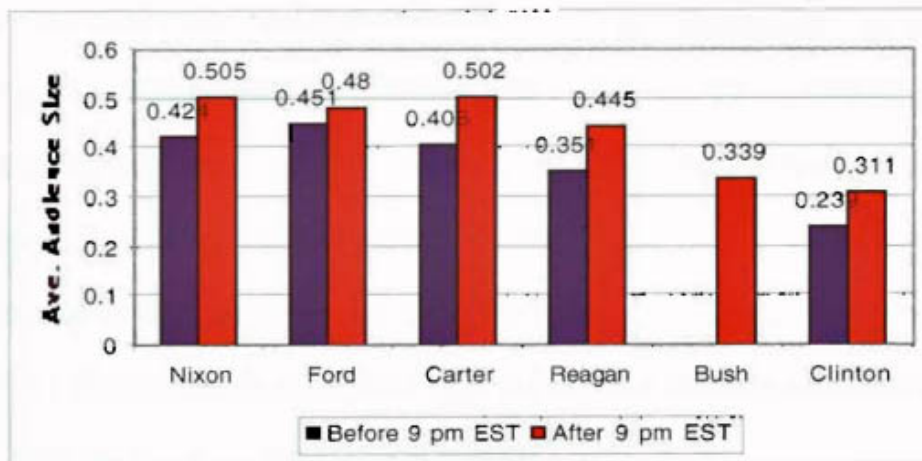
Finally, is there a correlation between audience size and the president's public approval? Figure 3.11 shows that for Presidents Nixon, Ford, and Carter, the average audience size is strikingly similar to the president's average approval rate. In fact, President Carter's average audience size and his average rate of public approval differed

Figure 3.8: Average Audience Size for 3 Types of Addresses



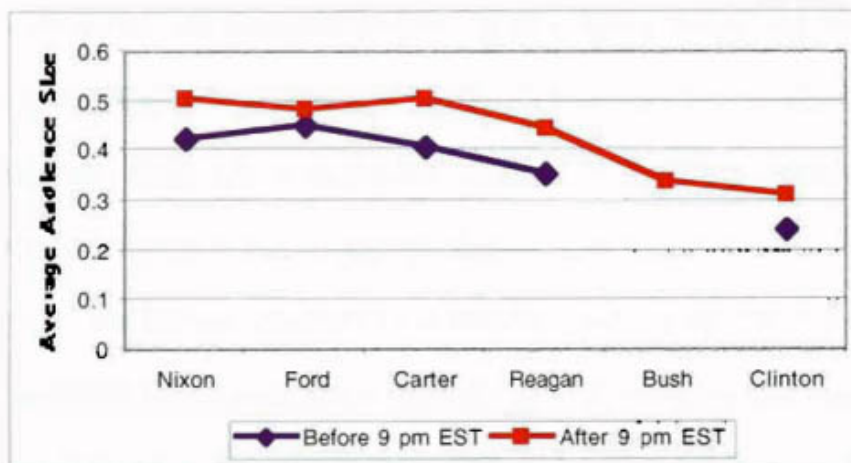
Source: Nielsen Media Research.

Figure 3.9: Average Audience Size According to Time of Broadcast



Source: Nielsen Media Research.

Figure 3.10: Average Audience Size According to Time of Broadcast



Source: Nielsen Media Research.

by only one one-hundredth of a percentage point. Yet, beginning with President Reagan, average audience sizes began to decline regardless of the president's approval ratings.

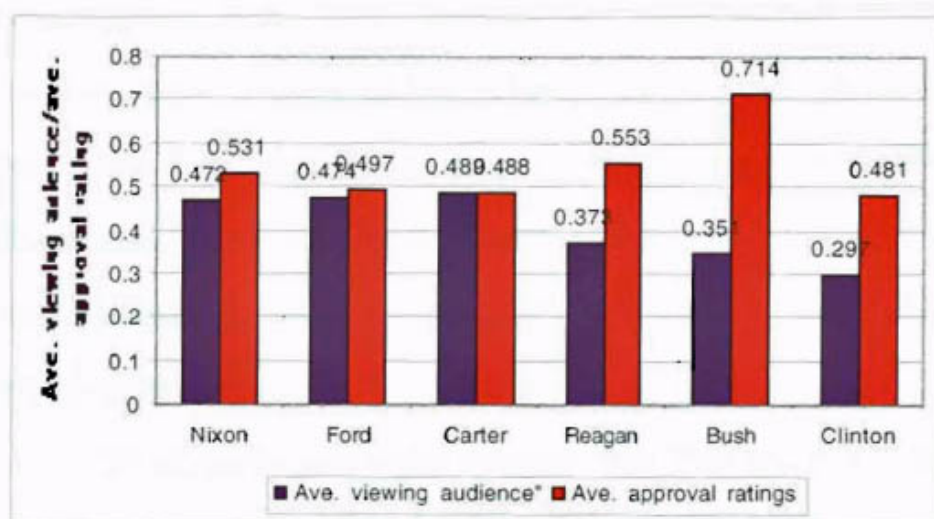
Figure 3.11 shows that while 71% of Americans approved of President Bush, only 35% of Americans tuned into his television appearances. This is a telling discovery; the majority of Americans supported Bush, but they still did not feel inclined to watch his attempt to communicate with them. Public opinion may have played a role in audience size before cable television, but Figure 3.11 reveals that no matter what the public felt about the president, they were not likely to tune in.

Figure 3.11 goes here

This analysis of 139 primetime addresses from 1969 to 1998 powerfully illustrates the profound impact made by cable television on the president's ability to reach Americans through television. In each figure, the decline in audience size begins with the Reagan administration, the onset of the era of cable television, and never recovers. Cable television offered Americans other viewing alternatives, and the public was no longer the captive audience they once were with network domination.

Joe S. Foote conducted a significant study during the 1986-1987 season, illustrating the audience's new tendency to switch to cable programming when the president appeared on all three networks. His study sought to determine the average number of audience households who watched television during 9 prime-time presidential appearances in that season. It found that while the presidential speeches deterred viewers from watching network programming, there was no difference between the number of households watching television on presidential speech evenings and on non-presidential speech evenings.

Figure 3.11: Average Presidential Viewing Audience versus Average Presidential Approval Rating



Source: Nielsen Media Research.

The study revealed that, on average, 11.1 million fewer households watched a presidential appearance than the regular program it replaced. One of the highest rates of defection in this study occurred when President Reagan addressed the nation in March of 1986 with regard to Contra aid funding to rebels in Nicaragua. This address caused 16 million households to change to a channel that was not carrying the President's speech. Foote states, "A substantial number of Americans made a conscious decision to avoid just the President's message, watch an alternative program, then quickly return to network programming."⁵

The ratings for independent stations in New York rose by as much as 75% for some stations during President Reagan's State of the Union Address in 1987. Furthermore, when President George H. W. Bush's first prime time televised news conference delayed the beginning of "The Cosby Show," so many viewers defected from Bush's appearance that the hit show received its worst ratings of the year. Foote states, "Millions of viewers obviously went elsewhere when they saw the President appear on the screen rather than Bill Cosby."⁶

The advent of cable television made reaching the American public increasingly harder for the modern president. Ronald Reagan's presidency marks the transition from a television era dominated by the three networks to a new, more complex and challenging television era dominated by numerous programming options. In order to overcome this new challenge, it was necessary for President Reagan and those presidents who followed to go beyond the communication methods developed by previous presidents and to invent new ways to reach this much more differentiated audience.

⁵ Foote, p. 154.

⁶ Foote, p. 155.

Reagan's working relationship with the press

In 1965, Ronald Reagan admitted, "The shape of television-except for its mammoth size- is not yet clear to me...The single stunning success of such things as TV dinners bears witness to the strength of television's grasp on the public - and upon me as well."⁷ Yet, by the time he became president, Reagan seemed to have fully grasped the true "shape" of television and understood how to utilize "the strength of television's grasp on the public" to his political advantage. He capitalized upon his skills as an actor, his ability to communicate with others, and his knowledge of the importance of establishing a relationship with the press. This allowed Reagan, unlike presidents before him, to establish a working, peaceful relationship with the Washington press corps; Reagan and his team were able to win over the press and completely use and manipulate it to their political advantage.

The hostility and the feeling of contempt for the press did not exist during the Reagan administration. David Gergen, who worked as Reagan's director of communications as well as for Presidents Nixon, Ford, and Clinton, states, "Of the six presidents I have known, all but one have felt battered, even brutalized, by the press....Reagan stands out as the exception."⁸ And an exasperated David Burke, ABC's vice president, wondered, "I don't know how to explain why he hasn't been as vulnerable to the onslaught as some American presidents. It's a hard subject for me...It isn't

⁷ Ronald Reagan, *Where's the Rest of Me?* (New York: Karz Publishers, 1981), p. 294.

⁸ David Gergen. *Eyewitness to Power: The Essence of Leadership* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2000), p. 184-185.

because he intimidates us. It isn't that he blows us away with logic. So what the hell is it?"⁹

This peaceful relationship allowed Reagan and his team to truly take advantage of all that television had to offer. In late 1981, House Speaker Tip O'Neill even admitted, "He handles the media better than any one since Franklin Roosevelt, even Jack Kennedy."¹⁰ How did Reagan create this working relationship with the press and experience such success through television during this time of audience fragmentation? The answer to this question lies in the powerful combination of two key elements: Reagan's own personal ability to connect with the American people and the "communication apparatus" that worked to manipulate the television to Reagan's advantage. The product of this powerful formula won him a reputation as the "Great Communicator."¹¹

The personal attributes of the "Great Communicator"

Although Reagan had a strong support system behind him, many people credit Reagan alone for the success he was able to stir up through television. David Gergen states, "I was one of Reagan's first 'directors of communication' at the White House. The title was a misnomer. He was director, producer, and star all rolled into one – the 'Communicator in Chief' from the beginning to the end of his presidency.... When the curtain went up, he stood center stage alone."¹² Reagan's unique personality and

⁹ Mark Hertsgaard. *On Bended Knee: The Press and the Reagan Presidency* (New York: Farrar Straus Giroux, 1988), p. 4.

¹⁰ Gergen, p. 185.

¹¹ Robert E. Denton, Jr., *The Primetime Presidency of Ronald Reagan* (New York: Praeger, 1988), p.1.

¹² Gergen, p. 211.

Hollywood background allowed him to reach out easily and connect to the American people.

One of Reagan's strengths was the "good guy" image that he seemed to embody, what Gergen described as an "aw shucks" manner.¹³ His speeches conveyed images of personal courage and self-sacrifice.¹⁴ Even during his acting days, directors were incapable of assigning him a villainous role; Reagan seemed to embody the wholesome American stereotype. Tom Shales of the *Washington Post* jokingly wrote, "...Put him in a room, just him and a camera and 80 million folks out there in television land, and he's Johnny Carson, Grandpa Walton and Big Bird all rolled into one."¹⁵ Reagan projected himself as a man of values and understanding, and this image appealed to the American people.

This wholesome image allowed Reagan to connect with an audience. Audience members felt as though Reagan was talking to them, not over them. Gergen states, "Reagan could reach people with his speeches because he felt an emotional bond with them. They were not "children" to him, as they were for Nixon; they were fellow Americans."¹⁶ Reagan seemed to capture the sentiments of the people in his speeches. After the Challenger tragedy, Reagan's speech verbalized the internal feelings of many Americans. During his speech in honor on the fortieth anniversary of D-Day, Reagan "put himself in the shoes of the men who had climbed up Pointe de Hoc and described what they felt inside."¹⁷

¹³ Gergen, p. 185.

¹⁴ Robert E. Denton and Gary C. Woodward, *Political Communication in America* (New York: Praeger, 1990), p. 178.

¹⁵ Tom Shales. "Reagavision: The Battle Continues," in *Los Angeles Times*, Friday, March 26, 1982, p. 17.

¹⁶ Gergen, p. 200.

¹⁷ Ibid.

In his autobiography *An American Life*, Reagan explains the origin of this ability to truly connect with his audience. "When I was a sports announcer," he writes, "I learned something about communicating with people I never forgot."¹⁸ Reagan's friends used to gather at the local barbershop in order to listen to his sports broadcasts. During his broadcasts, he would picture his friends together and pretend that he was talking directly to them. He would imagine their reactions to his choice of words or to his intonation and make adjustments according to his friends' imagined responses. Reagan states, "Over the years, I've always remembered that, and when I'm speaking to a crowd - or on television - I try to remember that audiences are made up of individuals and I try to speak as if I am talking to a group of friends...not to millions, but to a handful of people in a living room...or in a barbershop."¹⁹ Reagan knew all the right things to say and just the right way to say them.

Reagan also possessed an amazing ability to improvise and to remain calm during awkward public moments. Gergen remembers one of these moments occurred in April of 1982 when Reagan was delivering a prime time speech in order to build support for his economic program. Gergen suggested that the President use an easel and charts and that he draw a red line to show the economic consequences of not enacting his budget. The speech was rehearsed a few hours before the 9:00 PM Eastern slot, and everything ran smoothly.

Yet disaster struck during the speech as Reagan attempted to draw in the red line. Reagan stated, "Our original cuts totaled \$101 billion. They (pause) I can't make a big enough mark to show you." Gergen recalled, " 'Screeecch!' That was all that could be

¹⁸ Ronald Reagan, *An American Life* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1990), p. 246.

¹⁹ Reagan, p. 247.

heard or seen. No line. An awful silence.” The cover had not been replaced on the red pen after the rehearsal and it had dried out. Fortunately, television producer Mark Goode had a backup on hand, and he immediately started crawling across the Oval Office to make the important handoff. Gergen recalls, “A twinkle came into Reagan’s eye. Reaching off camera and without missing a beat, he told the audience, ‘Now my pen is working.’ Magically, the line appeared. The night was saved.” Gergen includes this story in his memoirs because it reveals Reagan’s presence and level-headedness. He states, “I have long imagined that if Nixon had been giving that speech, he would have thrown us out the garden window....”²⁰

Reagan also projected appealing themes to Americans during his speeches. In his farewell address on January 11, 1989, Reagan stated, “I won a nickname, ‘the Great Communicator.’ But I never thought it was my style or the words I used that made a difference: It was the content. I wasn’t a great communicator, but I communicated great things.” Despite Reagan’s assessment, his style was important, but his content equaled it in importance. Reagan focused on inspiring themes such as freedom, honor, and patriotism. Gergen stated, “In the politics of the late 1970s, when millions were disillusioned and worried that the country was on a slide, Reagan communicated a vital message: American could regain its glory if it found its core values, and he was the man who would lead the way.” This message touched and comforted the majority of Americans. There were certainly those Americans who did not see the importance of his message, but “to Main Street, he was a ‘Communicator of great things.’”²¹

²⁰ Gergen, p. 214.

²¹ Gergen, p. 216-217.

Reagan's understanding of the importance of humor also helped him communicate to Americans. He stated, "I've always found humor is a good way to get an audience's attention, and for years I've been mentally collecting quotes and jokes to use in speeches."²² This communication tool is vital to the success of being able to connect with an audience. Robert E. Denton, Jr. and Gary C. Woodward, co-authors of *Political Communication in America*, characterize humor as "the modern emblem of power in a savvy, subtle, sensual television era."²³ Although many Americans could easily forget the details of Reagan's speeches, the memory of the laughter that he was able to provoke is something that will stay with audience members. Gergen declares, "Everyone still associates Reagan with laughter."²⁴

Reagan's delivery of his speeches was nearly flawless. His experience as an actor and the thousands of speeches he made during his political career allowed him to perfect his ability to reach an audience through timing and cadence. He wrote, "Here's my formula: I usually start with a joke or something to catch the audience's attention; then I tell them what I am going to tell them; I tell them, and then I tell them what I just told them."²⁵ Reagan had internalized certain "tricks of the trade." Gergen summarizes Reagan's tricks as: prepare carefully, keep it short, keep it brisk, use the language of the living room, look for catchy phrases, use occasional props, be positive, anticipate critics, and have a good closer.²⁶ Reagan had his communication down to a science, and his technique seemed to work. His personal attributes and communication skills enabled him to overcome the decrease in potential television viewing audience and truly impact those

²² Reagan, p. 247.

²³ Denton and Woodward, p.48.

²⁴ Gergen, p. 234.

²⁵ Reagan, p. 247.

Americans he did have the chance to reach. But Reagan's individual qualities are only one piece of the puzzle; the communication apparatus that lay behind him must also be credited for the success of Reagan's relationship with the press.

The "terribly cunning aides"

Reagan's communication staff worked like no presidential staff before it to generate a positive image of the President through television. Television critic Tom Shales states, "It is potentially a very sinister combination –this enormously charismatic President, this figure-head that everyone loves, and this [collection] of aides who are terribly cunning about how to put their boy across...These guys understand television so much better, and they understand that television is what you have to understand."²⁷ The anchor and managing editor of NBC Nightly News, Tom Brokaw, stated, "Reagan's got that kind of broad-based philosophy about how he wants the government to run and he's got all these killers who are willing and able to do that for him."²⁸

Reagan's communication team, particularly Michael Deaver and David Gergen, had a sophisticated knowledge of the workings of the media based upon their own individual knowledge and upon an analysis of what strategies had been successful in previous administrations. Their knowledge and skill enabled them to completely reinvent the idea of using television to promote the president. Mark Hertsgaard, a member of Reagan's team, stated, "They introduced a new model for packaging the nation's top

²⁶ Gergen, p. 235-244.

²⁷ Hertsgaard, author's interview, p. 50.

²⁸ Hertsgaard, p. 5.

politician and using the press to sell him.” Referring to Deaver and Gergen, Hertsgaard admitted, “If they did not exactly get away with murder, they came pretty close.”²⁹

The “killers’ ” strategy was based on the necessity of using the press and the television to Reagan’s advantage. Americans may not tune into presidential speeches, but the still watched the news. If Reagan’s team could control the messages that appeared on the news, they could effectively communicate with Americans. As ABC reporter Dan Harris points out, soundbites become increasingly important in the era of audience fragmentation.³⁰ Hertsgaard reveals that the “objective was not simply to tone the press but to transform it into an unwitting mouthpiece of the government; it was one of Gergen’s guiding assumptions that the administration simply could not govern effectively unless it could ‘get the right story out’ through the ‘filter of the press.’”³¹

The press is what influences the minds of Americans when making a judgment of the president, and therefore the press must be controlled. Instead of trying to circumvent the press to communicate with the American people, an attempt made by previous presidents, Reagan and his team sought to use the press by manipulating television to their political advantage. Without control, the press was a danger to the administration. Pollster Richard Wirthlin states, “The more influence they could exert over how Reagan’s policies were portrayed in the press, the greater were the White House’s chances of triggering widespread disaffection or endangering Mr. Reagan’s re-election chances.”³²

²⁹ Hertsgaard, p. 5.

³⁰ Dan Harris, interview conducted by the author, March 8, 2002.

³¹ Ibid.

³² Hertsgaard, p. 6.

Gergen reveals, "I was convinced that Reagan had to be on the offensive on his communication." Gergen believes that the control of the "bully pulpit" had left the hands of the president and was being dominated by the television networks. He states, "Executive producers in New York had become the arbiters of what Americans heard and saw of their president, and what was coming through diminished both the voice and stature of the only person elected by voters to lead the nation." He goes on to declare, "A more aggressive, cynical press corps was making it too difficult to govern. It was time to take the pulpit back."³³

Reagan's team created an elaborate communication apparatus to reclaim the "bully pulpit." It seemed as though the entire administration was focused on the goal of controlling the media and using it to their own advantage. Hertsgaard states, "To be sure, Reagan's was hardly the first administration to establish a public relations apparatus within the White House. But few, if any, administrations had exalted news management to as central a role in the theory and practice of governance as Reagan's did." Peggy Noonan, one of Reagan's speechwriters recalls, "When I was in the White House, TV was no longer the prime means of receiving the presidency, TV in a way was the presidency... and decisions were made with TV so much in mind, from the photo op to the impromptu remark on the way to the helicopter, that the President's aides who planned the day were no longer just part of the story – it was as if they were the producers of the story. They were the line producers of a show called *White House*, with Ronald Reagan as President."³⁴ Leslie Janka, a deputy press secretary for the Reagan administration who later resigned, stated, "The whole thing was PR. This was a PR outfit

³³ Gergen, p. 185.

that became President and took over the country. And to the degree then to which the Constitution forced them to do things like make a budget, run foreign policy and all that, they sort of did. But their first, last and overarching activity was public relations.”³⁵

It is clear that an obsession with public relations and the packaging of the president developed and grew during the Reagan administration. Yet the actual players are not so willing to admit to this obsession. Hertsgaard reveals that Gergen and Deaver worked closely together and “flourished on the basis on their common appreciation of the supreme importance of good propaganda to a modern presidency. Neither man would put it quite that way, of course.”³⁶ And, when retelling the beginning stage of Reagan’s presidency, Gergen recalls, “With the help of our 100 Day Plan, we were off and running in those opening months. Or was it off and spinning, controlling, elbowing, and manipulating? It may depend on one’s perspective.”³⁷ During their time working for the Reagan administration, Deaver, Gergen, and the other members of the communication team created a powerful strategy to use the news to their own advantage. And it was this strategy that helped to compensate for the declining size of the audience able to be reached through prime time addresses or news conferences. Their powerful plan was implemented in several different lines of attack.

³⁴ Peggy Noonan. *What I Saw at the White House: A Political Life in the Reagan Era* (New York: Random House, 1990), p. 143.

³⁵ Hertsgaard, p. 6.

³⁶ Hertsgaard, p. 17.

Implementation of the strategy:

"Spin Patrol"

Reagan's communication team set out to control all the messages that were received by Americans through the press, and they soon became known as the "spin patrol."³⁸ Deputy White House press secretary under the Reagan administration Marlin Fitzwater defines spin as "the weaving of basic truth into the fabric of a lie, the production of a cover garment that protects, or obscures, or deflects public examination." He states that spinning is especially easy in the White House because "the process requires fortress-like credibility and incredible gall. No matter how great the siege of the White House, people still want to believe the president and those who speak for him."³⁹ The Reagan administration was not afraid to take advantage of the public's vulnerability, and David Gergen was the leader of the crusade to spin the news.

Fitzwater states that Gergen was dubbed the "spin master," because he possessed "a special knack for engaging a reporter in discussion, ascertaining the reporter's attitude on an issue, and, in mid-conversation, turning his explanation to fit the reporter's bias."⁴⁰ Gergen would call up reporters and major networks in order to influence their portrayal of the president in a particular story. An article in *The National Journal* quoted one of Reagan's officials as stating that Gergen regularly "called all three major networks about an hour and a half before their final deadline to find out what they were going with. And then, for the next hour, to hour and a half, there was a flurry around here trying to

³⁷ Gergen, p. 185.

³⁸ Gergen, p. 187.

³⁹ Marlin Fitzwater. *Call the Briefing! Reagan and Bush, Sam and Helen: A Decade with Presidents and the Press* (New York: Random House, 1995), p. 220.

⁴⁰ Fitzwater, p. 221.

influence what they were doing.” The article also included a statement by Deaver upholding Gergen’s routine and explaining that it was “absolutely necessary.”⁴¹

Joanna Bistany, one of Gergen’s deputies, stated, “Gergen made a very conscious effort at the start to concentrate on the networks,” and that “on deadline” calls to the networks were made “five, maybe ten times, maybe fifteen.”⁴² CBS was Gergen’s most frequent target. CBS anchor Dan Rather states that the routine calls were “designed to make us think twice. I don’t care how good you are, in some ways, on some days, it is bound to work on your subconscious. We are better at resisting it, but we are not perfect at resisting it.”⁴³ Senior producer of the *CBS Evening News* Tom Bettag also stated, “A call even from a Gergen is no small thing. It’s a sort of subtle reminder usually over relatively small details. There was no ‘Don’t run that story!’ They understand how much we brace at anything smacking of overt control. Usually it was more like, ‘We wonder if you realize that....’”⁴⁴

Gergen himself upheld his actions during an interview with Mark Hertsgaard. He did claim that some accusations, such as the comment made by Dan Rather, were slightly exaggerated. Gergen stated that “Dan’s views were taken a little out of context” and that their conversations were usually initiated by Rather. Yet Gergen believed in his right to call and persuade the networks. He stated, “If a story comes out that puts a bad spin on things or really distorts the news from our point of view, if it is really egregious,

⁴¹ Dick Kirschten. “Communications Reshuffling Intended to Help Reagan Do What He Does Best,” in *The National Journal*, January 28, 1984, p. 154.

⁴² Hertsgaard, p. 30.

⁴³ *The New York Times*, November 14, 1983.

⁴⁴ Hertsgaard, p. 30.

particularly on facts, I had no hesitation about calling them up and saying, 'We've got a real problem with this story.'"⁴⁵

Yet in Gergen's own book *Eyewitness to Power*, he is more regretful of his actions taken to spin the news. This may be attributed to the fact that his book was just recently published in 2000, whereas Hertsgaard's book was published in 1988. When writing his own book, Gergen had more time to see how his actions have influenced other administrations. Gergen also saw first hand how his precedent of spinning the news played out when he served on President Clinton's communication team, which will be discussed in the succeeding chapter. Gergen notes the successes of the Reagan communication team, but also points out that he made his share of mistakes. He writes, "In particular, I find it painful how some of the initiatives I helped to launch, have become exaggerated and misshapen in current politics. I worked hard under Reagan to persuade the press corps that he was on the right track...Reporters began calling it 'the spin patrol.'" He goes on to claim, "Those efforts were fair, in my judgment, but in the years since, spin has become a twisted form of propaganda."⁴⁶ It is true that Gergen may have set into motion a practice that now inhibits reporting the full truth with regard to the president, but this practice was only duplicated because future administrations recognized the success it brought to the Reagan administration.

⁴⁵ Hertsgaard, p. 31.

⁴⁶ Gergen, p. 187.

Visuals

It was clear to Reagan and to his staff that Reagan's popularity needed to be managed by controlling the images that Americans saw on television.⁴⁷ They knew that visual imagery would help during this time of highly differentiated television viewing patterns. A viewer may not be likely to sit and watch a presidential speech or a long news segment on the President, but flashes of image-building pictures of the President would be sure to capture the audience's attention. Reporter Sam Donaldson stated that Deaver and Gergen understood "a simple truism about television: the eye always predominates over the ear when there is a fundamental clash between the two."⁴⁸

Furthermore, the images helped Reagan's team to control what reporters would say about the President. Gerald Pomper, professor of political science at the Eagleton Institute of Politics at Rutgers University, states, "Reporters can comment only in the context of a picture; the medium is impotent without photo-opportunities and cannot easily resist a story with good visual possibilities."⁴⁹ For these reasons, Reagan's staff focused on projecting positive images of the president to the media; they gave reporters the "photo-opportunities" that they could not resist. Larry Speakes, Reagan's deputy White House press secretary, states, "We learned very quickly that when we were presenting a story or trying to get our view point across, we had to think like a television producer. And that is a minute and thirty seconds of pictures to tell a story...."⁵⁰

⁴⁷ Ibid.

⁴⁸ Hertsgaard, p. 25.

⁴⁹ Gerald Pomper, *The Election of 1984* (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House Publishers, 1985), p. 162.

⁵⁰ Larry Speakes. *Speaking Out: The Reagan Presidency from Inside the White House* (New York: Charles Scribner's Sons, 1988), p. 220.

A clear example of the Reagan team utilizing televised images took place in January of 1983, during the depth of a recession. Deaver arranged for Reagan to visit a working class bar in Boston, because he believed that a visual image of Reagan conversing with workers over a few beers would help promote a “regular guy” image of Reagan. Deaver states, “It may sound cynical, but you can do a lot of things cutting programs, but a picture of an Irish President in an Irish pub with a bunch of blue-collar workers and an Irish priest – that will last you for a long, long time.”⁵¹ And, when Reagan was pushing his education reform, Speakes states that “the visual of him was sitting at a little desk and talking to a group of students, or with the football team and some cheerleaders, or in a science lab.” Speakes admits, “We learned very quickly that the rule was no pictures, no television piece, no matter how important our news was.”⁵²

Reagan’s communication apparatus had the visual aspect of their strategy down to a science, and the press complied. According to Speakes, a tacit agreement became established among Reagan’s communication team and the press. He states, “Once in frustration, I gave a memorable retort to the press that became known as ‘Speakes’s Law.’” He goes on to state, “ABC television’s art department even had it made into a sign that I put on my desk: ‘You don’t tell us how to stage the news and we don’t tell you how to cover it.’”⁵³ Reagan’s communication team believed that they had the right to stage the news in a way to use it to their political advantage. Yet, as described in the section above, it also seems that the Reagan team believed they had the right to tell the press “how to cover it” as well. But the press did not seem to mind, and the Reagan team’s visual strategy was successful. “Night after night,” long-time Washington

⁵¹ Hertsgaard, p. 26.

⁵² Speakes, p. 220.

journalist Martin Schram argued, "Reagan had his way with the TV news. He succeeded in setting their agenda and framing their stories by posing for the cameras in one beautiful and compelling setting after another."⁵⁴

Line of the day

Another part of the strategy was the re-implementation of the "story line of the day," which was first developed under the Nixon administration.⁵⁵ Each morning Reagan's communication team they would decide upon a message to project to the evening news networks and newspapers. Hertsgaard reveals that James Baker, Reagan's chief of staff, as well as Gergen, Richard Darman, Reagan's assistant, and Speakes usually led these meetings. An unnamed participant at these meetings who was interviewed by Hertsgaard stated that the meetings would convene by someone asking, "What are we going to do today to enhance the image of the President?... What do we want the press to cover today and how?"

The projection of a "line of the day" exemplifies the Reagan team's effort to manipulate the news to Reagan's advantage. Hertsgaard states, "the very devising of a line of the day was a tacit admission that what the White House told the press was not so much the truth as a carefully calculated and sanitized version of it." ABC's Sam Donaldson told Hertsgaard in an interview that the Reagan communication team "seems to believe it has a divine right to do whatever it wants in the way of manipulation... The people around Reagan, and perhaps Reagan himself, really have contempt for the press as

⁵³ Speakes, p. 218.

⁵⁴ Martin Schram, *The Great American Video Game* (New York: William Morrow, 1987), p. 23.

⁵⁵ Hertsgaard, p. 38.

an institution. They believe they were born to rule, their ideology was born to prevail, that they somehow are the upper class.”⁵⁶

Use of the television ratings

Because the onset of cable television had fragmented the audience, the Reagan communication team put a heavy consideration upon the television ratings when making a decision. Speakes states, “Throughout the Reagan years, we not only played to television, we used all of our television judgments strictly on audience size.” Speakes reveals that during Reagan’s presidency *Good Morning America* was the number one morning show, Dan Rather anchored the number one evening news show, and ABC’s *David Brinkley Show* was the leading Sunday show. When the communication team wanted to get an important message out, they looked to presidential and staff appearances on these popular shows to reach out to Americans. They understood the new trend for viewers to change the channel when they saw the President; but, if messages were communicated through popular shows, people would be less likely to change the channel and more likely to absorb the ideas. Ratings reached a new importance in the new age of a much more differentiated viewing audience.

A genuine communications strategy

Reagan’s communication strategy, implemented through the use of “spin patrol” techniques, the visual imagery, and the line-of-the-day, manipulated television to generate a positive image of Reagan, and thus to generate support for him and for his

⁵⁶ Hertsgaard, p. 35.

policies among the American people. Past presidential administrations, most notably Nixon's, considered the press to be the ultimate enemy in the quest to communicate with Americans; the Reagan administration, however, saw the press as an accomplice. Hertsgaard states, "Like a double-threat running back in football, blessed with the strength to power his way up the middle as well as the speed to sweep the end, the Reagan apparatus projected its messages to the American public not only by going over the top of the press but also going right through it."⁵⁷ But, what made the press such an easy target? Why did the press allow itself to be controlled and elbowed?

The answer lies in the press's hunger for presidential news, which grew to an unprecedented level during the Reagan administration. The media accepted the controlling aspects of the Reagan apparatus in exchange for good stories about the President. Hertsgaard states, "During the Reagan years, it was the rare network evening newscast that did not include at least one White House story."

This was not a trend based in tradition. In the past, coverage of Washington has been more dispersed among the different branches of government. During the Nixon administration, coverage began to focus more upon the president, "but it was greatly stimulated by the arrival of the Reagan administration, with its prowess as a supplier of attractive visual images." Christopher Matthews, former press secretary to House speaker Thomas "Tip" O'Neill, states that the Reagan era was "the only time in history when a major medium had a section regularly fenced off just for the President to speak... They know the presidency is ideally suited for the television age, because it is one person, there

⁵⁷ Hertsgaard, p. 53.

is all the *People* magazine aspect – what is he like, what is Nancy like? It is amazing how the monarchy translates so well into the television age and legislatures do not.”

When trying to explain the press fixation with the President, *The Washington Post*'s Robert Kaiser states, “[The President] is the political figure that the whole country has in common. If you start with that assumption, which is understandable sociologically but bizarre journalistically, you're giving it away to this guy to begin with. You're saying, ‘Anything you do or say in public, Mr. President, is going to be news.’”⁵⁸ Therefore, the success of the Reagan team's communication operation was because the press, although somewhat resistant, *let* themselves be taken advantage of in order to satisfy their desire for presidential news.

The Bush communication strategy

As soon as he took office in January of 1989, Bush made an effort to distance himself from the kind of manipulative media strategy that Reagan and his communication apparatus depended upon. It was just not George Bush's style, and he rejected it from the outset. The White House Office of Communications may have been Reagan's lifeline, but it was much less significant in shaping and setting the tone for Bush's administration. Bush wanted to make it clear that he was promoting a more open, natural image of the presidency and not the controlled, contrived “onscreen” image projected during the Reagan administration.⁵⁹

Bush did not deem television as important a tool in communicating with the American people as the Reagan team did; he did not want television to be the center of

⁵⁸ Hertsgaard, p. 51.

his new administration. Reporter Lesley Stahl states, "This White House had a plan to shift the emphasis from network coverage, away from the Reagan obsession with camera angles." Bush's team would not allow their communication strategy to revolve around deadlines set by the networks. Stahl reveals that the Bush team regarded television with feelings of indifference. She states, "They acted as if television didn't matter."

Stahl recounts a time when Bush went on a three-day trip to eight different cities, and none of his travels were televised. According to Stahl, this lack of public relations would have upset the Reagan team greatly, but it did not seem to bother Bush and his staff.⁶⁰ Stahl also remembers an impromptu gathering between reporters that Bush held on the patio outside of the Oval Office. Stahl states that Bush "was so reluctant about television, I had to beg him to wear a lavalier microphone." She asked, "Sir, couldn't we please clip a mike onto your tie? We're outside, and the sound won't be good." The President responded, "Maybe I want it that way."⁶¹ Clearly, television was not Bush's main concern.

Gerald Seib wrote in the *Wall Street Journal* that the television reporters had once grumbled about the "the cynical, manipulative Reagan presidency" were now upset about the "unpackaged Bush presidency." Stahl admits that she is included in this group of reporters. She states, "I was astonished at how sloppily Bush's events were thrown together and how many opportunities the president lost to promote his antidrug or his literacy messages just because cameras weren't in good positions or one couldn't hear

⁵⁹ John Anthony Maltese, *Spin Control: the White House Office of Communication and the Management of Presidential News* (Chapel Hill, NC: The University of North Carolina Press, 1992), p. 215.

⁶⁰ Lesley Stahl. *Reporting Live* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), p. 336.

⁶¹ Stahl, p. 336.

what he said.”⁶² Bush did not develop a strategy to embrace television in order to use it to his political advantage. His indifferent feelings toward television certainly contrast with Reagan’s obsession with the medium.

Bush and his team wished to distance themselves from elements of Reagan’s communication apparatus; however, Reagan’s “spin patrol” legacy implemented itself in the Bush administration whether Bush and his staff were willing to admit it or not. Bush’s press secretary Marlin Fitzwater recalls the press conference held preceding the fall of the Berlin Wall in 1989. Bush’s performance during this press conference was a public relations disaster. Fitzwater states that Bush appeared to be “uninspired” from the onset and that during the middle of the conference “the President did the one thing that made every Bush staffer start to sweat. He started sliding down in his chair.” According to Fitzwater, Bush slumping in his chair was the “absolute ironclad signal that he didn’t like what he was doing, didn’t want to be there, and was probably going to show it.”

Bush began to answer question after question in a monotone voice, with his hands folded on his chest and his head bent. At last, Lesley Stahl of CBS stated, “In what you just said...you don’t seem elated.” Bush explained that he was just “not an emotional guy” and that the fall of the Berlin Wall “pleased” him. Fitzwater reveals that after that press conference he ran to call Stahl and stated that Bush did not want to come across as gloating during the press conference so as not to insult Gorbachev or other Eastern European leaders. Isn’t Fitzwater’s excuse for Bush’s behavior just another form of the “spin control” from which Bush and his team wanted to distance themselves? Reagan’s communication team hit upon a strategy that future administrations could not resist.

⁶² Stahl, p. 337.

The consequences of Bush's communication strategy

Bush's reaction to the manipulation of television under the Reagan administration may have been too extreme. In his effort to distance himself from the stagecraft of Reagan, Bush also inadvertently distanced himself from the American people. It is true that Americans were disillusioned with the "onscreen," manipulated image of the presidency, but they nonetheless expected their president to attempt to communicate with them. Political scientists Craig Allen Smith and Kathy B. Smith support this view in their book *The White House Speaks*. In his effort to distance himself from Reagan, Bush overlooked potentially effective opportunities to communicate with the American people. Smith and Smith argue that, "Political situations rich with rhetorical potential were repeatedly ignored by Bush."⁶³ His unwillingness to truly seek out the American people weakened the relationship between the President and the public. "By avoiding public discourse," Smith and Smith note, "Bush enabled others to charge, credibly, that he was not in charge, that his policies were not coherent, that he did not care about domestic policy, and that he was out of touch with America."⁶⁴

Not only were potential television opportunities overlooked, but instances when television could have been used to help Bush out of a difficult situation were also overlooked. Lesley Stahl points out that Bush's fateful "Read my lips, no new taxes" statement could have been cleared up with skillful use of television. She writes that "it all comes back to performance on television" and that Reagan would have said, " 'I was forced into it. I had to do it.' But Bush said, 'I should not have done it.' " Stahl believes

⁶³ Craig Allen Smith and Kathy B. Smith, *The White House Speaks: Presidential Leadership as Persuasion* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1994), p. 236.

⁶⁴ Smith and Smith, p. 238.

that Bush shied away from television at a time when he could have used it most.⁶⁵ It is clear that Bush learned from Reagan's mistakes; yet Bush seemed to have overcorrected for the "symbolic presidency" created by Reagan.

Evolution of the press conference continues

In keeping with their strategic efforts to control Reagan's image on television, Reagan's staff opted to reduce the number of press conferences he held. As described above, Reagan's staff was intently focused upon projecting a controlled, "right" image of Reagan, and the nature of the press conference did not permit this control. Therefore, the number of speeches and public television appearances was decreased in an effort to diminish the opportunity for television reporters to ask questions of Reagan and to put him on the spot. As seen in Figure 3.12, the total number of press conferences dropped significantly during the Reagan presidency. President Carter held 59 total press conferences in 4 years, while President Reagan held only 42 press conferences in 8 years. Reagan was averaging less than one press conference every three months just before he left office.⁶⁶ As indicated in the previous chapter, routine exchange of information between the press and the president had characterized every president's administration since Roosevelt's. The press conference was viewed by some as the most effective tool in communicating with the American people. Yet in an effort to preserve his well constructed image, Reagan's staff heavily restricted the number of press conferences.

⁶⁵ Stahl, p. 401.

⁶⁶ Samuel Kernell, *Going Public: New Strategies of Presidential Leadership* (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1997), p. 84.

Reagan's press secretary Larry Speakes states that the lack of press conferences was the source of some of Reagan's strongest criticism.⁶⁷ But Reagan's team felt that a cut in the number of press conferences was the only way to protect the President from embarrassment and from ruining his precisely controlled image. Reagan's team would heavily prepare Reagan for press conferences, but Speakes reveals that "in spite of all our groundwork, we never could tell how Reagan would do... Sometimes that rehearsal would be bad and you would be living in fear that the President was going to make a series of major mistakes... and he'd be brilliant, or you might feel entirely comfortable after the briefing session and the final act would be riddled in mistakes."⁶⁸

Reagan just could not be counted upon to respond spontaneously to questions with educated answers. He was known for exaggerating stories and for making blatantly untrue statements, one of his most famous being his claim that "eighty percent of the nation's air pollution was caused by trees." These types of ridiculous statements made the public question Reagan's competency as a leader. And, Gergen states that "the gaffe stories were the worst when we were doing afternoon press conferences."⁶⁹

Reagan was also known for a lack of knowledge on contemporary events. Gergen states, "Working for him, I saw he was no dullard, as his critics claimed... Yet, Reagan could be remarkably unaware (and indifferent to) developments around him... it's hard for anyone to argue that he knew as much as a president should know about the state of the world." If a subject did not interest Reagan, he would unthinkingly skim over it, thus causing major gaps in his knowledge.⁷⁰ Gergen claims, "The only story you got out of

⁶⁷ Speakes, p. 234.

⁶⁸ Speakes, p. 236.

⁶⁹ Hertsgaard, p. 140.

⁷⁰ Gergen, p. 197.

the conference was how many mistakes he made.”⁷¹ Reagan simply could not be trusted to answer questions on live television; therefore, the frequency of the press conference was reduced. This reduction is certainly in accord with the strategy of the communication apparatus. How could Reagan’s team risk destroying the positive image they worked so diligently at generating?

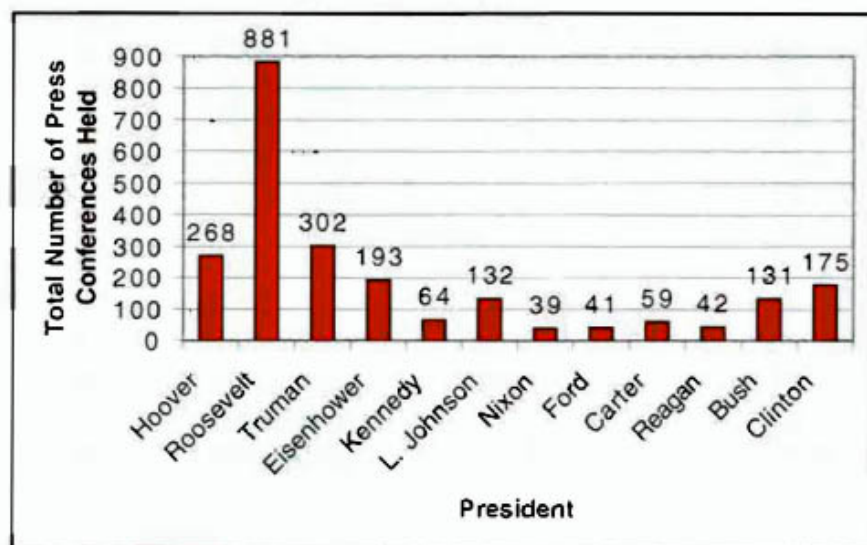
By the last few years of his administration, the number of live, televised speeches made by Reagan decreased even more. He would only give welcoming addresses or pre-set speeches to be held in front of a non-critical audience. These types of non-controversial speeches ensured that the President would not be caught in a difficult situation that would adversely affect his image. His staff considered him to be more of a “highly prized piece of political furniture” that could be used to “decorate” events.⁷² In this way, positive public images were being projected of the President by his mere attendance at events, but the press was not given the opportunity to ask questions of Reagan that might compromise his popular image.

Figure 3.12 goes here

⁷¹ Hertsgaard, p. 140.

⁷² Denton and Heywood, p. 160.

Figure 3.12: Presidential Press Conferences 1929-2001



Source: Ragsdale, Lyn. *Vital Statistics on the Presidency: Washington to Clinton*. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1996, p. 167-168 and *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, online version, www.access.gpo.gov.

Table 3.12: Presidential News Conferences 1929-2001

<u>President</u>		<u>Ave. Per Month</u>	<u>Ave. Per Year</u>	<u>Total</u>
Hoover	(1929-1933)	5.6	67	268
F. Roosevelt	(1933-1944)	5.3	72.3	881
Truman	(1945-1953)	3.15	38	302
Eisenhower	(1953-1961)	2.1	24.5	193
Kennedy	(1961-1963)	1.9	22	64
L. Johnson	(1963-1969)	2.1	26	132
Nixon	(1969-1974)	0.6	6.5	39
Ford	(1974-1977)	1.4	19	41
Carter	(1977-1981)	1.2	15	59
Reagan	(1981-1988)	0.5	5.5	42
Bush	(1989-1992)	2.7	33	131
Clinton	(1993-2001)	1.95	21.9	175

Source: Ragsdale, Lyn. *Vital Statistics on the Presidency: Washington to Clinton*. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1996, p. 167-168 and *Public Papers of the Presidents of the United States*, online version, www.access.gpo.gov.

The use of the press conference was restored under the Bush administration; Bush held more press conferences in his first year than Reagan held over his eight years in office.⁷³ His staff was not so focused upon controlling the image of Bush projected to the American people and was not afraid to allow televised interaction between reporters and the president.

Bush too was known for occasional slip-ups, although not as numerous or damaging as Reagan's, but this did not deter Bush's staff from holding frequent press conferences. These slip-ups and syntactical errors became known as "Bushspeak." Mary Matalin, a member of Bush's re-election team, remembers that the President used a line from a song by the "Nitty Gritty Dirt Band" in one of his speeches, but referred to the band as the "Nitty Ditty Nitty Gritty Great Bird." A reporter commented the next day

that "President George Bush couldn't even get out his name yesterday."⁷⁴ Bush also struggled with grammar, and Stahl states that "bad syntax was Bush's middle name."⁷⁵ Nevertheless, Bush, unlike Reagan, was confident in his ability to answer reporters' questions with intelligent, impressive responses. By shying away from press conferences, as Reagan did, Bush would not be able to take advantage of an important personal asset.

Unlike other presidents, Bush did not view press conferences as a way to speak directly to the American people. Instead, he viewed them as a way to interact with the press and to make a favorable impression upon them. Political scientist George C. Edwards III states that President Bush talked "to the press, not over it," and this generated a sense of approval and respect for President Bush among the press corps.⁷⁶ Bush's view marks a very dramatic change in presidential use of press conferences. Since President Kennedy, presidents had been using press conferences as a tool to communicate directly with the American people. The press conferences would be scheduled during prime time, when the biggest viewing audience could be reached. Yet Bush did not see press conferences as a way to communicate with the people but as a way to communicate with reporters.

Bush's new mind-set is exemplified in the informal, impromptu "press conferences" that he would hold with reporters. These press conferences were located in informal settings and were usually held in the afternoons, not during prime time. The

⁷³ George C. Edwards III, "George Bush and the Public Presidency: The Politics of Inclusion," in *The Bush Presidency First Appraisals*, eds. Colin Campbell and Bert A. Rockman (Chatham, NJ: Chatham House Publishers, 1991), p. 148.

⁷⁴ Mary Matalin and James Carville. *All's Fair: Love, War, and Running for President* (New York: Random House, 1994), p.12.

⁷⁵ Stahl, p. 343.

press conferences continued to be broadcast by the three networks, but the afternoon timing reveals that they were not intended to reach a large viewing audience. Bush did not want to be constricted by the restrictions of the prime time network schedule; he wanted to use his press conferences as a way to ingratiate himself with the press. Helen Thomas was the first female reporter to close the press conference with the traditional "Thank you, Mr. President" and has covered every president since John F. Kennedy. Yet she states that the formal "Thank you, Mr. President" came to an end during the Bush administration. Thomas explains, "He liked to hold his news conferences in the afternoon, and to his credit, they would go as long as we asked questions, since the prime time network rule of a designated half hour didn't apply."⁷⁷

Furthermore, the significant increase in the number of press conferences held by Bush is another clue that he had changed the idea of the press conference. As demonstrated in Figure 3.12, Bush held the most press conferences since the Johnson administration. Since Bush was holding informal, afternoon meetings, it was much easier to call a press conference. It is clear that Bush used the press conference as a way to court the press and not as a way to win over the American public. This strategy is very different from the direction President Kennedy's press conferences seemed to be going with the first live press conference back in 1961.

Bush's numerous press conferences displayed his desire to make himself available to the press. This is a direct contradiction to President Reagan, who was criticized for his inaccessibility to the Washington press corps. Reporter James Reston notes that Bush "held almost as many press conferences in his first eight months in the White House as

⁷⁶ George C. Edwards III, in *The Bush Presidency First Appraisals*, p. 148.

Ronald Reagan had in the previous eight years.”⁷⁸ And Fitzwater states that Bush’s numerous press conferences made him “generally more accessible than any president in modern history.”⁷⁹ Bush made an immense effort to reach out to the press.

Lesley Stahl describes a cartoon drawn by Tom Meyer of the *San Francisco Chronicle* as an example of Bush’s availability to the press. She writes that the cartoon showed Bush “in my bedroom pointing at me as if at a news conference: ‘Miss Stahl?’ In my bed with curlers, I say, ‘I know it’s crazy, but I miss the days when he was less accessible.’”⁸⁰ Bush’s openness to the press was somewhat overdone and not received as well by the press as Bush had hoped. Despite all of his efforts, Bush did not develop a friendly relationship with the press. Fitzwater states, “President Bush, to the very last day of his administration, could not understand how that press could be so bad to him when he had been so good to them.”⁸¹ Therefore, Bush’s strategy seems to have backfired. Bush sacrificed an effective way to communicate with the American people by converting the press conference into a way to court reporters but nevertheless was unable to establish the relationship he desired with the press.

Conclusion

The onset of the cable era forced Reagan and Bush to make new decisions about the way and which they were going to communicate with the American people. Some of these decisions simply entailed continuing with the communication strategies established under previous administrations, but changes were necessary in order to cope with the new

⁷⁷ Helen Thomas. *Front Row at the White House: My Life and Times* (New York: Scribner, 1999), p. 121.

⁷⁸ James Reston. *Deadline* (New York: Random House, 1991), p. 447.

⁷⁹ Fitzwater, p. 12.

⁸⁰ Stahl, p. 336.

differentiated television viewing audience. Reagan's communication apparatus changed the way in which presidents use television. Instead of attempting to circumvent the press, Reagan's team found a strategy that would "go right through" the press and use it to their advantage. Some of the new strategies in which Reagan and Bush developed to cope with the fragmenting audience worked well, while others did not. Yet, despite the success and failures, the scope of presidential communication was forever changed during the new period of cable television domination. This next chapter will evaluate the communication strategies of presidents in the contemporary period and will seek to determine the new opportunities and the new constraints placed upon presidential efforts to make full use of the television medium.

⁸¹ Fitzwater, p. 12.

Chapter 4

Opportunities, Constraints, and Strategies:
A focus on the contemporary period

Today's highly diversified, fragmented audience has posed great communication challenges to Presidents William Jefferson Clinton and George W. Bush. This chapter focuses on the contemporary period and seeks to determine the character of television as a communication medium for presidents today. What opportunities and advantages does television provide in reaching the American people and building support? What are the constraints on presidential efforts to make full use of the medium? This chapter will also strive to identify the strategies that Clinton and Bush have deployed in an effort to maximize the advantages and minimize the disadvantages of television in this modern era.

The contemporary environment

The appearance of the all-news networks is one of the most significant changes in today's world of modern political communication. These news networks have changed the way in which people use television. Today, one can simply go to an all-news network in order to get the news he or she desires instead of waiting until an evening news broadcast by one of the three networks.

Cable News Network (CNN) is one of the major all-news networks that has revolutionized the idea of televised news. Ted Turner launched CNN in 1980, making it

the first 24-hour all news network.¹ Turner introduced this new network based upon the belief that 24-hour news channels would become the main source of news for Americans in the future. Not many people agreed with Turner's predictions when CNN was first established. Amateurish news correspondents, inadequate video technology, and financial difficulties flawed the network. Yet eventually CNN was able to win over viewers by its ability to be the first to cover breaking news and also by its ability to offer extended, all-day coverage on major stories.²

CNN viewers were informed instantaneously of major breaking news such as the PanAm 103 crash in December of 1988, the San Francisco earthquake in October of 1989, the American invasion of Panama in December of 1989, and the release of Nelson Mandela in February of 1990. In their book *The Century*, Peter Jennings, anchor and editor of ABC News' *World News Tonight*, and Todd Brewster, former editor and writer for *Life* magazine, state, "While the three big broadcast networks were forced to make judgments on whether to interrupt other programming to present such news (and if so, for how long), the producers at CNN faced no such decision – news was their network's *raison d'être*."³ The success of the all-news channel networks forced the three broadcast networks to make difficult choices.

By the 1990s, viewers relied upon CNN for breaking news, and it was clear that Ted Turner's hypothesis proved to be true. It was reported in 1989 that CNN and its affiliate "Headline News" attracted 24% of the overall news-watching audience during a 24-hour period. In comparison, CBS attracted 30%, ABC 28%, and NBC 18% of the

¹ Thomas L. Yancy, in *History of the Mass Media in the United States*, ed. Margaret A. Blanchard (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1995), p. 114.

² Yancy, p. 115.

³ Peter Jennings and Todd Brewster. *The Century* (New York: Doubleday, 1998), p. 534.

news-watching audience. It became strikingly clear to the networks that CNN was fast becoming a strong competitor. Furthermore, it has been calculated that over 500,000 households tune into CNN's primetime newscasts held at 8:00 and 10:00 pm EST, and between 700 and 900 thousand American homes watch CNN's "Larry King Live" each night.⁴ Even the White House has become hooked to CNN. The televisions in the Situation Room in the White House were once tuned into a special CIA station; today the televisions are tuned into CNN because of the station's ability to report on news first.⁵ And, in 1996, CNN International was launched as the first and only 24-hour global news network. This expansion meant that CNN was broadcast to over 200 nations and territories and to an estimated 80 million people.⁶

CNN was not the only domestic all-news network that arose in the contemporary period. Fox News Network and MSNBC were also created, giving viewers choices for 24-hour news sources. And the creation of C-SPAN (Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network) by Brian Lamb has enabled viewers to have 24-hour access to House and Senate proceedings and as well as other political information. When asked what the effect of C-SPAN has been on the nation over the past twenty years, Lamb is hesitant to reply, but he states, "I could say that it is the most important thing to happen to American politics this century, but I would prefer to say that, at the very least, it has extended the gallery."⁷

⁴ Joe S. Foote. *Television Access and Political Power: The Networks, the Presidency, and the "Loyal Opposition"* (New York: Praeger, 1990), p. 157.

⁵ Interview with Ron Nessen, March 11, 2002.

⁶ Margaret A. Blanchard, in *History of the Mass Media in the United States*, ed. Margaret A. Blanchard (Chicago: Fitzroy Dearborn Publishers, 1995), p. 116.

⁷ Travis Paddock, "C-SPAN Chief Says Network has 'Extended the Gallery,'" in *The University Record* (April 8, 1998).

These new news options completely changed the face of journalism. The effects of the all-news networks on the three networks can be comparable to the effects of television on the newspaper industry. When television first came to the scene, newspapers could no longer be the first to report a story, and the reporters had to change their strategy to more in-depth analysis of what the television news broadcasts had already reported. Jennings and Brewster state that this same switch in strategy occurred in the 1990s with the success of the all news channels. They state, "The older broadcast networks were themselves suffering much the same fate (and turning to the same solutions), for with the exception of the biggest stories, it was virtually assured that CNN, with its 24-hour window to the world, would get the news on the air first." Therefore, network news broadcasts continue to cover breaking news, but may have to turn to a more in-depth analysis of the news just as newspaper reporters had to do back in the 1960s.⁸

One would think that the introduction and popularity of all-news networks would give reporters more access to the president, but reporter Helen Thomas states just the opposite. Thomas compares an experience she had with President Johnson to the climate of the Clinton administration. She remembers a day when she was at the White House covering a story on Johnson, and afterwards he invited her to have lunch with him and the First Lady. Thomas then recounts a story of a day spent at the White House in December of 1997. Clinton met "with House Speaker Newt Gingrich, Chinese dissident Wei Jing Sheng, other members of Congress and a businessmen's group." But, "the word from the White House press office to the press corps: 'No questions.'" Thomas believes that modern presidents are hesitant to talk in "today's media circus." She reveals, "The

⁸ Jennings and Brewster, p. 534.

sad equation is that there are more media outlets devoted to covering the president and more demand for coverage that have left us with less access than ever.”⁹

Other changes in the modern realm of communications can also be identified. With today’s technology, it is possible to broadcast the president live from any location. We now see the President talking to groups of school children or making a speech at a university; we see him interacting with common people and not simply speaking from the White House. But a negative aspect to this constant coverage is that presidents and their staffs have less and less control of the message that is getting out to the public. ABC reporter Dan Harris states that message management is much harder today because the 24-hour news cycle moves so quickly.¹⁰ Furthermore, Ron Nessen, one of President Ford’s press secretaries, states that his main focus was the three nightly news programs and that press secretaries before the advent of all news coverage had considerably more time to prepare.¹¹

Another, not so positive change in today’s world of modern political communication is the growing fragmentation of the American viewing audience. As discussed in Chapter 3, this challenge to presidential communication first arose in the late 1970s and early 1980s when cable television grew in popularity. With today’s digital cable and satellite options, people have access to hundreds of channels and are less likely to watch a presidential address. Except in times of crisis, Americans have grown less and less interested in what the president has to say.

Other aspects of the modern age of political communication have carried over from previous times. Since the Nixon administration, presidents have struggled with the

⁹ Helen Thomas. *Front Row at the White House* (New York: Scribner, 1999), p. 79.

¹⁰ Interview with Dan Harris, March 8, 2002.

tendency for modern network news bureaus to take control away from the president by accentuating presidents' failures and by offering editorial comment on presidential statements. Dan Harris states that the Watergate scandal "opened the flood gates" of negative news coverage. He reveals that a mentality grew among reporters that it was more "glamorous" to uncover scandal during this time.¹²

Negative presidential coverage continues to have a detrimental effect upon the ability of the president to communicate with the American people; the president's message to the public is being intercepted and twisted by the media. The presidential effort to make full use of the television medium continues to be constrained in today's environment. During a press conference on May 7, 1993, President Clinton was asked how he explained the 15-percentage point drop in his popularity ratings in only two months. Clinton abruptly responded, "I bet not 5% of the American people know that we passed a budget...and it passed at the most rapid point of any budget in 17 years. I bet not one in 20 American voters know that because...successes and the lack of discord are not as noteworthy as failure."¹³ Clinton's statement illustrates the negative impact the media can play on the public's judgment of the president.

Over the years, the press has focused upon presidential failure as opposed to presidential success. The Center for Media and Public Affairs has been analyzing network news coverage of the president since 1989. Every presidential news story broadcast by one of the three major networks has been given a positive or negative score, depending upon the slant of the news story. Their results show that Clinton's words are correct; there is a disproportional focus on presidential failure in today's media. The first

¹¹ Interview with Ron Nessen, March 11, 2002.

¹² Interview with Dan Harris, March 8, 2002.

three years of the administrations of Presidents George H. W. Bush and Clinton were evaluated. The three years were divided into 24 quarters in order to evaluate the negative and positive news story coverage. The results showed that of the 24 quarters, the average negative and favorable coverage was equal in only 4 quarters. In the remaining 20 quarters, there was more negative coverage than positive coverage of the president.¹⁴ Figure 4.1 displays the findings of the Center for Media and Public Affairs as quarterly averages.

Figure 4.1 goes here

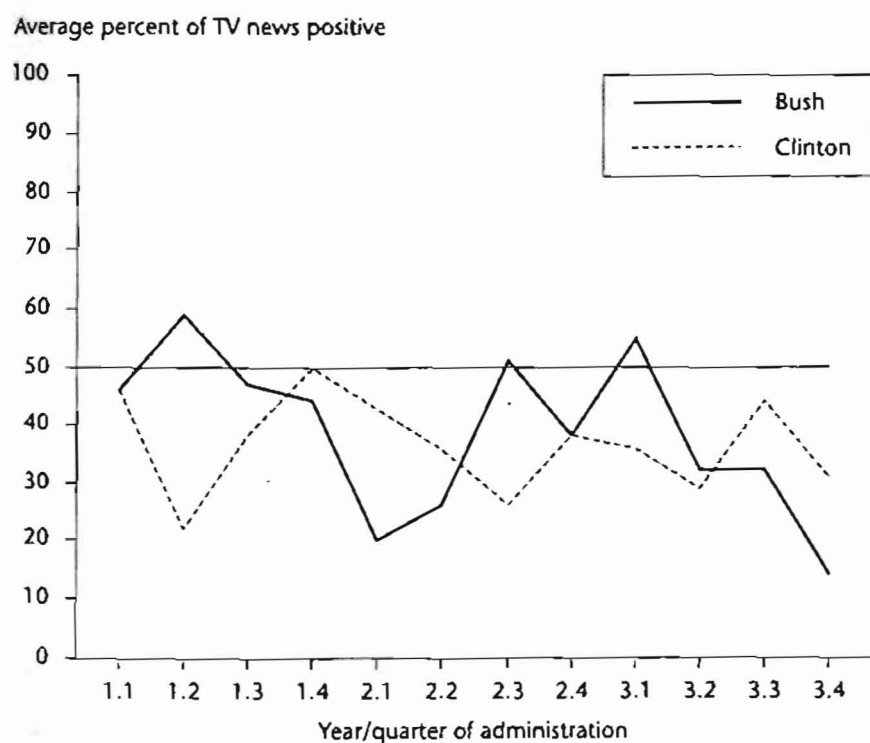
Tim Groeling and Samuel Kernell also conducted an analysis of the coverage of the president and found an interesting connection to approval ratings. Groeling and Kernell evaluated the three major networks' evening news programs from 1990 to 1995 and concluded, "We find qualified support for the bias hypothesis but even more compelling evidence that changes in presidential approval, whether favorable or unfavorable, drive news coverage of the president's public support." They went on to note, "As the president's popularity declines, it becomes more newsworthy; as it rises it does not."¹⁵

The network news habit of focusing on negative presidential stories continues to be a further barrier to presidential communication with the American people through television. Presidential statements will be edited and news reporters have the tendency to

¹³ President Clinton press conference, May 7, 1993, Washington, D.C.

¹⁴ Samuel Kernell. *Going Public: New Strategies of Presidential Leadership* (Washington, D.C., CQ Press, 1997), p. 94.

Figure 4.1: Television News Evaluations of Bush and Clinton



Source: Ratings based on content analysis of sound bites on ABC, NBC, and CBS evening news programs provided by the Center for Media and Public Affairs, Washington, D.C.

Note: Clinton data are from his first term.

Source: Kernell, Samuel. *Going Public: New Strategies of Presidential Leadership*. Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 1997, p. 95.

reflect their own opinions about the president in their editing. It is more difficult for the president to attract a prime-time viewing audience; and now, whenever stories about the president are getting across to the American people, there is the chance that the stories will cast him in a negative light. It seems that in the contemporary period, presidents have become more and more fed up with the frequent negative, editorialized stories. They have seen what strategies worked well and what strategies did not work well for past presidents confronting this persistent problem. The contemporary presidents thus seek new, alternative means of televised communication in an effort to circumvent the distortion and the manipulation by the press that they so often perceive.

Clinton's media strategy

According to one of President Clinton's early media advisers, Mandy Grunwald, Clinton's media strategy consisted of two parts: relying upon more informal program formats and a general effort to avoid the Washington press corps. She believed that this strategy would allow Clinton to reach an audience that did not necessarily read the newspaper or watch nightly news programs. Large, informal program formats would hit this targeted audience and give Americans a more "personal look at the president." Most importantly, Grunwald believed that these formats would allow the President to circumvent the press. With this strategy, the President could go directly to the people and address their concerns and ultimately gain more control over the messages being received by the American viewer through television.¹⁶

¹⁵ Tim Groeling and Samuel Kernell. "Is Network Coverage of the President Biased?" *Journal of Politics* (November 1998, Volume 60, Issue 4), p. 1063.

¹⁶ Robert E. Denton Jr. and Rachel L. Holloway, "Clinton and the Town Hall Meetings: Mediated Conversation and the Risk of Being 'In Touch,'" in Robert E. Denton Jr. and Rachel L. Holloway, eds., *The*

It was clear to reporters from the very beginning of Clinton's administration that part of his communication strategy involved avoiding the press at all costs. This strategy was very different from that of Presidents Reagan and Bush, who attempted to reach out to the Washington press corps. Yet Helen Thomas states, "Bill Clinton and his team had arrived at the White House with a notable, but different goal: make whatever end runs necessary to avoid the White House press corps." Thomas reveals that Clinton held a private strategic meeting with top staff on his official first day in office. During this meeting he told the staff about his plans to continue holding televised town hall meetings, to appear on "Larry King Live," and most importantly to avoid regular contact with reporters. Thomas reveals that Clinton did not realize that a television technician was setting up cameras in the back of the room for a later question and answer session, and he relayed Clinton's plans to the reporters in the pressroom. Thomas states, "Well, we knew we were off to a good start."¹⁷

Clinton held true to his plan to distance himself and his staff from reporters. He immediately designated the corridor connecting the pressroom to the press secretary's office as "off-limits" to reporters. Furthermore, the door that separated the briefing room from the press secretary's office was closed. But Thomas reveals that communication director's George Stephanopoulos's decision to hold live daily briefings put an end to these changes. Thomas states, "As far as I was concerned, it was news when reporters were being denied access to the press secretary's office, and I made a point of it loud and clear at the start of the several briefings – on television." Clinton had no choice but to

Clinton Presidency: Images, Issues, and Communication Strategies(Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1996), p. 30.

¹⁷ Thomas, p. 94.

allow reporters access to the corridor and to re-open the door to the press secretary's office.¹⁸

Yet, despite these concessions, Clinton held true to his overall plan to circumvent the press. In an effort to employ this strategy, Clinton committed to at least two appearances per year on the "Larry King Live Show" and also developed the idea of holding weekly, televised town hall meetings across the nation. The idea of a town hall meeting was first explored in the Carter administration. They were never televised and were ultimately considered to be a failure.¹⁹ Yet Clinton's town hall meetings created an opportunity for Clinton to reach out to the American people without the interference of the media.

The town meeting demonstrated Clinton's effort to "host the presidency." Journalist Joe Klein of *Newsweek* had written during the campaign about Clinton's skill in this kind of forum, allowing him to be "equal parts master of ceremonies, televangelist and group-therapy facilitator. You tell him your problem; he tells you his 12-step program with appropriate body language, concerned lip-biting, caring nods and clucks...Tell Bill, and feel better."²⁰ During the town hall meetings, Clinton made a great effort to create a one-on-one situation by moving away from his seat and moving closer to the questioner. Clinton was also known to establish direct eye contact with the questioner. The cameraman would then place the camera in a position near the questioner, giving the members of the television audience the feeling that Clinton was talking directly to them as well.

¹⁸ Thomas, p. 94.

¹⁹ Steven Stark, "The First Postmodern Presidency," *The Atlantic Monthly* (Volume 271, number 4, 1993) p. 26-28, 37-38.

²⁰ Joe Klein, "The Bill Clinton Show," in *Newsweek*, 10/26/92, Vol. 120 issue 17, p.35, 1p.

The town hall meetings were Clinton's favorite forms of communication because he was in complete control of the message he was sending to the American people.²¹ During a special town hall edition of *Nightline* on September 23, 1993, host Ted Koppel stated, "There is something wonderful about being able to bring an American president and an audience of 1,000 of his constituents together for this kind of exchange."²² Yet, as more and more town hall meetings took place, not everyone, including Clinton and his staff, voiced this kind of praise for the new town hall strategy.

It soon became apparent that the town hall format did not afford as much control as Clinton's staff had hoped. Due to the wide range of audience questions, the White House could not control which topic reporters would chose to focus upon in their next story. Elizabeth Drew, a journalist with close ties to the White House, revealed that a key Democrat admitted, "I don't believe the town meeting was a useful device. When you have those town meetings, a hundred subjects come up and there is no message."²³ Drew too wondered if the town meeting was the best format. She asks, "Did the American people want a Phil Donahue in the presidency?"²⁴

It is true that the town hall meetings evolved into a kind of talk show forum and that Clinton did not create an image of "adept policy leadership but rather of boundless empathy."²⁵ One must evaluate the consequences of this empathetic image. Clinton was so busy empathizing with citizens that Americans were not getting a sense that real work was being accomplished in the White House. The town hall meetings defined Clinton as

²¹ Denton and Holloway, p.30.

²² *Nightline*, September 23, 1993.

²³ Elizabeth Drew. *On the Edge: the Clinton Presidency* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 1994), p. 169.

²⁴ Drew, p. 95.

²⁵ Keith E. Whittington, "The Rhetorical Presidency, Presidential Authority, and President Clinton," in *Perspectives on Political Science* (Fall 1997, Vol. 26 Issue 4), p. 199.

a shoulder to cry on, not as a strong leader. And, after two years of the town hall meetings and disappointing midterm election votes, it became clear that the public was not looking for a "Phil Donahue" to lead the nation. This disappointment provoked Clinton's advisors to change their strategy. According to Drew, Clinton's Chief of Staff Leon Panetta believed that the president was becoming "over-exposed" and that the dignity of the office was deteriorating due to an abundance of informal televised appearances. After the two-year experiment with town hall meetings, Panetta worked to decrease the number of informal formats and to increase the number of formal press conferences in an effort to restore dignity to the Office.²⁶

The constant campaign

Another aspect of Clinton's strategy was to continue campaigning once he was elected; the campaign mentality of Clinton and his staff dominated even after the inauguration. This "continuous campaign" mind-set could be attributed to the fact that Clinton was the first president since Richard Nixon in 1968 to win the presidency without winning the majority of popular votes. For this reason, he felt that he needed to continue campaigning into the presidency.²⁷

President Clinton composed his presidential team almost entirely of his campaign staff, the first sign of a permanent campaign. Clinton's counselor David Gergen believes that this was a poor decision. Gergen states, "If anyone had paid attention to Reagan's success, they would have noted how much he gained from integrating campaign loyalists with Washington veterans." Gergen believes that Clinton did not use the eleven weeks in

²⁶ Drew, p. 424.

²⁷ Kernell, p. 121

between the election and the inauguration to his best benefit. Gergen states, "As we saw with Carter and Reagan, a newly elected president must seize upon those intervening weeks to appoint his new team, map out policy and communication plans, build bridges to key constituencies, and - whenever he can - get some rest. It is the moment to put the campaign behind a focus on governing."²⁸ Because Clinton's team was made up mostly of his campaign team, many communications strategies were carried over from the campaign and did not reflect a rational communication plan for governing.

The town hall meeting is an example of a campaign strategy that was carried over into the presidency. During the first three years of his presidency, the President was traveling just about every fourth day. And, even on the days when Clinton remained in Washington, he used video conferencing to visit with constituents. The effort to conduct town halls across the nation put a great strain on Clinton's schedule. Clinton also made it a priority to visit California often because of its important 54 electoral votes. By the 1996 election, Clinton had taken trips to California on an average of at least every six weeks. Clinton continued to pursue his campaign strategy and to reach out to as many people as possible in order to win them over.²⁹

Another communication strategy that remained in use after the election and into the presidency was the tendency of Clinton's staff to "spin" the news of the president. Gergen admits that during a campaign, members of the team will tell reporters "damn near anything to grab a good headline." The only focus of a campaign is winning "each day's battle" and ultimately winning the election. Twisting the news to portray the president in a positive light, or "spinning," can not really get one into trouble during a

²⁸ David Gergen. *Eye Witness to Power: the Essence of Leadership, Nixon to Clinton* (New York: Simon and Schuster, 2000) p. 257-258.

campaign. Gergen states that after the election, "people can fold up their tents and go home, not worrying about the debris in their wake."

Yet the president and his staff must have a completely different mentality while in office. The president and his team must maintain their focus not only upon the importance of grabbing headlines, but also upon the future. Gergen acknowledges that "the mind set for governing is entirely different" than the mind-set of the campaign.³⁰ Gergen's statement is certainly ironic considering that he was involved in the Nixon administration, an administration adept at spinning the news, and also considering that he was known as the leader of the "spin patrol" during the Reagan administration. It is obvious that Gergen did not adhere to his own philosophy on governing; but, this statement was made in hindsight, and Gergen's regrets about his role in spinning the news are discussed below.

Due to the "continuous campaign" mind-set of Clinton and his staff once in office, spinning each day's story continued to play a major role in communication with the American public. Clinton's press secretary Joe Lockhart publicly admitted that many of Clinton's staff "fell into a pattern of spinning stories beyond their legitimate bounds." This spinning did not take the form of blatant public exaggeration, but "half-truths" and even "bald-faced lies" were known to be told during phone calls and conversations in an effort to bolster the image of the President and the First Lady.³¹ President Clinton's first

²⁹ Kernell, p. 121.

³⁰ Gergen, p. 336.

³¹ Gergen, p. 336.

director of communications, George Stephanopoulos, even referred to himself as the President's own "spin doctor" in his memoir.³²

David Gergen, Clinton's advisor, admits that he felt partially responsible for the spinning of each day's story that was taking place during the Clinton administration. As described in Chapter 3, Gergen worked for President Reagan as director of communications, and he basically created the idea of "spin control" during this time. Yet, while working for Clinton, Gergen admits that he was "aghast at how it had been corrupted." Gergen asks, "How could we have taught a younger generation of public officials the wrong lessons about governance?" He confides, "While officials since the beginning of the republic have been cajoling the press, one of my deepest regrets in public life is a feeling that I have contributed to this deterioration."³³

The spinning of the news about the President and the First Lady was certainly another strategy that did not work well for the Clinton administration. Reporters became well aware of the higher-than-usual tendency for Clinton's staff to exaggerate the truth and this was reflected in media's portrayal of the President. Reporters could not delineate between truth and exaggeration, and the public picked up on this as well. Gergen stated that during the Clinton administration, "reporters became unclear where the truth stopped and the spin started. After a while, they wondered whether the Clinton team knew themselves."³⁴

George Stephanopoulos also states that the White House press corps was much more aware of the tendency for the President's staff to spin the news after their

³² George Stephanopoulos. *All Too Human: A Political Education* (Boston: Little, Brown and Company, 1999), p. 310.

³³ Gergen, p. 336.

³⁴ Ibid.

experience with the Reagan communication apparatus. Therefore, spinning was not working to the Clinton team's advantage. He states, "Elaborate staging only increased the tendency of skeptical reporters to focus on the process rather than the substance of what we were trying to say." He went on to reveal, "The benefits of spin were being canceled out by the press's resistance to it. Often we reacted by spinning even harder, but I was beginning to see the virtue in just letting stories go – Zen spin."³⁵ But, unfortunately, the Clinton team did not embrace a policy of "Zen spin," and the "half-truths" and lies had a negative impact upon the public's perception of the President during his first few years in office.

A change is necessary in the strategy

Helen Thomas reveals, "By May 1993, polls showed that Clinton's approval ratings had plummeted to 36 percent, lower than for any American president at this point in his term, with 50 percent disapproving of his performance in office."³⁶ Clinton realized that it was time to make changes in his communication strategy. He decided that Stephanopoulos was not executing his job as director of communications effectively and decided to replace him with Gergen. Stephanopoulos states that he believed that the President should make himself more accessible to the press and that this belief made the Clintons think that he "was going soft." Stephanopoulos admits, "In the end, I wasn't strong enough to convince the Clintons that we were making a mistake, or skillful enough to give the press what they needed even if it wasn't what the Clintons wanted. There was plenty of blame to go around: the Clintons were intransigent and the reporters were self-

³⁵ Stephanopoulos, p. 309.

³⁶ Thomas, p. 156.

absorbed. But they could all agree on at least one point – that George was doing a poor job. And they were right.”³⁷

Gergen stepped in as director of communications and helped reduce the tension between the president and the reporters, although the spinning of the news continued under his direction. Thomas states, “Gergen set out repairing some breeches with the press corps. His office may have been down in the basement – it was the old barbershop – but his finger prints were everywhere.” Gergen also prepared Clinton’s first prime time press conference, and it was held on June 17, 1993. Clinton was hesitant to have this contact with reporters and Thomas states that he generally “tried to evade follow-up questions unless the reporter insisted and stood his or her ground.”³⁸ Nevertheless, an important communication tool with the American people was reinstated with Gergen.

Mike McCurry was also hired as press secretary, and his actions also helped to diminish the hostility between Clinton and reporters. Thomas states that he “brought a new spirit to the White House when he came aboard.”³⁹ When Thomas told him that she and other reporters “were tired of being treated with contempt by the press office,” McCurry responded by saying, “Anyone who does that will not be around here long.” McCurry did not see reporters as the enemy, and a working relationship began to develop. Thomas states, “He put together a staff that did not view reporters as the enemy or as intruders – a refreshing change from the recent past.” McCurry did have his conflicts with the press, but he was able to foster a much more accommodating attitude toward the press than Clinton’s previous staff.⁴⁰

³⁷ Stephanopoulos, p. 145.

³⁸ Thomas, p. 142.

³⁹ Thomas, p. 159.

⁴⁰ Thomas, p. 160.

The Internet as a tool of presidential communication

President Franklin Roosevelt incorporated the radio into his communication strategy with the "fireside chats," President Kennedy was the first to televise his press conferences, and President Clinton was the first to experiment with the Internet. This experimentation with the Internet was part of the effort to adhere to the strategy of avoiding the Washington press corps. The Internet began to gain tremendous popularity during the Clinton administration; more and more homes were becoming connected. Clinton and his staff soon realized that the Internet was an untapped venue that had the potential to reach a large number of Americans.

In September of 1993, the Clinton Administration announced the National Information Infrastructure (NII) initiative. On May 27, 1993, a meeting of the political communication division of this initiative was held. It was during this meeting that Clinton's director of electronic publishing and of public access e-mail to the White House, Jonathan "Jock" P. Gill, announced the idea of connecting with the American public through e-mail. Gill stated that this idea was developed during the campaign in an effort to disseminate information to the public without going through the media. Just like the town hall meetings, access to Americans through e-mail was thought to provide more control over the messages Americans were receiving from their president. Gill believed that communication via the Internet would be a way to communicate with the American people without "interpretation or filtration or manipulation" by the press.⁴¹

Jonathan Gill was a volunteer member of Clinton's election team in 1992 and was in charge of answering e-mail. When Clinton was elected to office, Gill was asked to

join the White House Office of Media Affairs and continue with constituency communication via e-mail. Gill hoped to make e-mail communication a permanent feature of the administration, not just an extended aspect of the campaign.⁴² Gill based this new communication strategy upon two models of management theory. The first model is known as the "top-down" or "one directional model," and it described the existing state of communication between the President and the American people. In this model, Americans only have the option of tuning into and paying attention to the president or not. The "top-down" model does not invite Americans to actively engage in communication, does not allow them to select what information they would like to receive, and does not promote political conversation among constituents.

The second model of management theory promotes all of these things. The second model is thought of as a "two-way, upward-downward, and lateral interaction" model.⁴³ Gill explained that this second model became the focus of the Clinton administration's communication strategy. According to Gill, the "top-down" model worked against community and interactivity; he hoped that the "2-way" model would enable the Clinton team to communicate with Americans and "involve them as interactively as possible."⁴⁴ Although this objective was never fully achieved under the Clinton administration, the new White House homepage, the new e-mail system, and the creation of Americans Communicating Electronically (ACE) were considered significant first steps toward achieving communication according to the "two-way" model.

⁴¹ Kenneth L. Hacker, "Virtual Democracy: A Critique of the Clinton Administration Citizen-White House Electronic Mail System," in *The Clinton Presidency: Images, Issues and Communication Strategies* (Westport, Connecticut: Praeger, 1996), p. 50.

⁴² Hacker, p. 52.

⁴³ Hacker, p. 51.

⁴⁴ Ibid.

The first White House Web site, www.whitehouse.gov, was launched in 1994, but was not finalized until 2000 after \$600,000 had been poured into the project.⁴⁵ The site offered and continues to offer biographical information about the President, the First Lady, and the Vice President, history and tours of the White House, current news and policies, full texts of speeches, and the day's news at the White House.⁴⁶ The Clinton administration also developed a "White House Kids" section in which children could take virtual tours of the White House with Socks the cat and Buddy the dog in order to gain a simplified understanding of the workings of the White House. Finally, the web page invited constituents to send e-mail to the President or to the Vice President.⁴⁷

The constituent-White House e-mail system was introduced in August of 1993 and not included on the web page until 1994. President Clinton's e-mail address was PRESIDENT@WHITEHOUSE.GOV and Vice President Al Gore's address was VICE.PRESIDENT@WHITEHOUSE.GOV. A letter from the White House Office of Presidential Correspondence in 1993 stated that the Clinton administration hoped that the new e-mail system would make the President and the administration more accessible to the American people. The letter also stated that in this early stage, an e-mail sent to the White House would be read and the subject would be recorded. Unfortunately, the sender would not receive a response from the White House, but White House staff members were working on creating a number of "response based programs." The letter emphasized that the new system was experimental but that it had great potential.⁴⁸ In an

⁴⁵ Jack Lule, "Click and Learn on the White House Web Site," in *Chronicle of Higher Education* (May 18, 2001, Volume 47, Issue 36) p.1.

⁴⁶ www.whitehouse.gov.

⁴⁷ Lule, p. 1.

⁴⁸ "White House Reachable through Internet E-Mail" in *Database Magazine* (August, Vol. 16 issue 4) p. 14.

interview, Gill stated that not only was it a hope to create a response program, but also to create responses that would direct constituent questions to pertinent documents on the web.⁴⁹

During the Clinton administration, MIT's Artificial Intelligence lab investigated the public's use of the new web page. The report indicated that between 30,000 to 40,000 people accessed documents provided by the web page every day and that an additional 100,000 people received governmental information via e-mail (once the system was created) on a daily basis. The MIT study concluded that document receivers were "younger, more educated, and more male than the average American population" and that 75% graduated from college, 50% graduated from graduate school, and 20% of the document receivers were women.⁵⁰

Furthermore, Gill told an interviewer from *Educom Review* that the White House was still receiving more written mail than electronic mail despite the new emphasis on communication via the Internet. The White House received an average of 40,000 to 60,000 pieces of paper mail per day and received an average of 800 e-mails per day. Gill attributed this to the fact that a piece of paper and a pen were accessible to almost all Americans, yet Internet access was still not widely available. For this reason, Gill set out to make e-mail access more accessible to all Americans.⁵¹

Gill was one of the original creators of Americans Communicating Electronically (ACE). This organization sought to remedy the fact that Internet access and e-mail was not available to all Americans, only to those wealthy enough to buy their own computer and Internet connection. Gill identified more than 3,000 extension offices of the

⁴⁹ Hacker, p. 53.

⁵⁰ "Survey Briefing Points for Busy Officials," MIT AI Lab in Hacker.

Department of Agriculture located throughout the nation that could serve as public Internet centers. Gill made it possible for citizens to access these extension offices and use them to send and receive e-mail from the White House.⁵² The Clinton administration took pioneering action to modernize with technology in order to access Americans without going through the press. The true power of the Internet was just being realized during the Clinton administration, and Clinton's exploration and experimentation with web sites and e-mail access has set a great precedent. As the Internet expands and communication becomes even more rapid and varied, it will be an invaluable communication resource for future presidents.

President George W. Bush continues with a "2-way" strategy

When President George W. Bush took office, he and his staff also realized the importance of creating a "2-way," interactive relationship with the American people. It was unclear whether the Bush administration would continue on with the "technological" precedent set by Clinton and his staff. Would the Bush team continue making the President and the Vice President accessible to the American people through e-mail? Would they continue providing the public with government documents on line? Jack Lule, a journalist for the *Chronicle of Higher Education* wondered this as well and writes, "I logged on at 11:30 a.m. on January 20 to get a good seat for the peaceful transfer of power from one Web team to the other." Yet Lule found that the White House server was down and that nothing was available. But just one hour later, the forty-third President of the United States appeared on the web page. Links to the biographies of

⁵¹ Hacker, p. 53.

⁵² Hacker, p. 52.

Bush, Vice President Dick Cheney, First Lady Laura Bush and Lynne Cheney were available by 12:30 that day.

Today the White House Web Page is just as informative as it was under the Clinton administration. A second web site was also launched, www.whitehousekids.gov. This site features the Bush family's English Springer Spaniel, Scottish Terrier, cat, and even Ofelia, their long horn cow who lives on the ranch in Texas.⁵³

It is clear that the Clinton administration developed a new strategy that will become a permanent fixture of the modern presidency. The Internet meets the objective of allowing the president to bypass the manipulative press and communicate directly with the American people. The drawback is that the only people who most likely access information about the president are the people who are already politically knowledgeable and inquisitive, the people the President does not have difficulty in reaching. Therefore, increased use of the Internet will have a positive impact on people who are already active in politics, but will most likely not have a great impact on how the president is perceived by the American people in general. Yet as the Internet becomes more and more accessible and expansive, its use as a communication tool will increase in value.

Defining Bush's communication strategy

Although it is early in his presidency, certain characteristics of Bush's communication strategy have become apparent. Only time will tell how history will regard the effectiveness of his methods. Before Bush even took office, his communication team took the time to study the strategies of past administrations. Bush's press secretary Ari Fleischer stated in an interview, "I studied a lot of previous briefings,

and I met with all my predecessors, or as many as I possibly could... So I would read Mike McCurry's briefings; I read Marlin Fitzwater's.... I met with them to hear their guidance, to get their advice."⁵⁴ The closeness of the election signaled to Fleischer and the rest of Bush's communication team that they would need to develop a strong initial strategy. Bush was not coming into the office with as much public support as past presidents due to the loss of the popular vote and the Florida recount. Fleischer states, "Well, it is really interesting, because particularly coming off of the election – we have to put our coverage in the context of where the president just came... and I think there was a presumption in the press that the president would come in from a weak point of view; that he would not have any strength coming into his administration."⁵⁵ In order to reassure the American people of Bush's legitimacy as president, it was necessary for him to come across as a strong leader.

Bush's team set out to "manage the message" that the president was sending out to the people; they wanted to convey a clear, unified impression. Fortunately, Bush began his administration focusing on big themes such as Social Security and Medicare, tax relief, and school improvement, and this concentration of ideas helped his communication staff. Fleischer states, "...It's kind of easy to have a unified message when you have a president who has a unified approach to... to conduct[ing] his business."⁵⁶ By sending a strong message, the President's communication team hoped to reinforce the idea of Bush as a strong leader.

⁵³ www.whitehousekids.com.

⁵⁴ Interview with Ari Fleischer by Terence Smith, April 10, 2001. *A NewsHour with Jim Lehrer* Transcript. www.pbs.org/newshour/media/100days/fleischer.html, p. 7.

⁵⁵ Interview with Ari Fleischer by Terence Smith, p. 2.

⁵⁶ Interview with Ari Fleischer by Terence Smith, p. 3.

Bush also took time to develop his public speaking skills in order to be a more effective communicator. Throughout his campaign and into the beginning of his presidency, Bush has been criticized for his limited ability as a public speaker. The public was accustomed to the impressive rhetorical style of Reagan and Clinton, and the grammatical errors made by Bush caused many critical Americans to doubt his intelligence.

In order to remedy this doubt, Bush spent the month of August 2001 "honing his communication skills and trying to shake the early media label of him as a tongue-twisted Texan."⁵⁷ Being able to reach a television audience has been difficult for modern presidents, and it is imperative that Bush makes a strong impression when he does have the opportunity to reach the American people.

Bush also deemed President Reagan's use of visual imagery as an important strategy and sought to incorporate it into his own communication method. Like Reagan's staff, Bush's team realized the importance of a picture to grab the attention of the viewers. Reporter Martin Schram recounts the similarities between the visual communication strategies of Reagan and Bush. Schram states that Bush "is a president at work, carrying out a made-for-tv strategy that was first developed by Reagan's grand master of political imagery, Michael Deaver."⁵⁸

More generally, Bush's initial communication strategy was very similar to President Clinton's. This could be attributed in part to the help offered by Clinton's communication team to the new President. Ari Fleischer states, "...Jake Siewert,

⁵⁷ Francine Kiefer, "Bush Burnishes Communication Skills," in *Christian Science Monitor* (September 5, 2001, Volume 93, Issue 173) p. 3.

⁵⁸ Martin Schram, "Martin Schram: Behind the Scenes of Bush's TV Tricks," in *Naples Daily News* (June 6, 2001).

President Clinton's last press secretary, could not have been more professional and more helpful in the transition period."⁵⁹ When characterizing Bush's initial strategy, an aide stated, "Think of the administration's first eight months as an 'homage to Bill Clinton' - dominated by political and communications advisers, micro-initiatives, and a never-ending campaign to keep the president's approval ratings over 50 percent."⁶⁰ Yet this strategy all changed after the terrorist attacks of September 11th.

A new communication strategy

In the aftermath of the events of September 11, 2001, Americans looked to their President for leadership and confidence. A new communication strategy was necessary for these unprecedented times. President Bush needed to focus on comforting and reassuring a nation of stunned and grieving Americans.

The use of the formal address has been the most powerful tool in reaching Americans. The very night of the attacks, President Bush addressed the nation. His words were comforting, and the repetition of "we," "us," and "our" throughout his speech reminded Americans that we are all unified through our shared sense of loss and confusion. Bush began, "Today, my fellow citizens, our way of life, our very freedom came under attack." He also stated, "The pictures of airplanes flying into buildings, fires burning, huge structures collapsing, have filled us with disbelief, terrible sadness and a quiet, unyielding anger." Yet Bush's words were also reassuring. He stated, "American was targeted for attack because we're the brightest beacon for freedom and opportunity in the world. And no one will keep that light from shining." He ended by stating, "This is a

⁵⁹ Interview with Ari Fleischer by Terence Smith, p. 7.

⁶⁰ Ryan Lizza, "Spin-Off," *New Republic* (October 15, 2001, Volume 225, Issue 4526), p.14.

day when all Americans from every walk of life unite in resolve for peace. America has stood down enemies before, and we will do so this time. None of us will ever forget this day, yet we go forward to defend our freedom and justice in our world.”⁶¹ Bush’s words conveyed his shared sense of terrible loss as well as his desire to lead to Americans when they needed it most.

Bush’s September 20th speech reinforced images of comfort and leadership, as well as a desire to rectify the horrible wrong that was done; this speech focused more upon the work to be done in the immediate future. Dan Balz of the *Washington Post* stated, “There is no question that this was the best speech George Bush has ever given, and –and probably one of the best speeches most of us have ever heard under the most difficult of circumstances... This was a call to arms last night... this was very much aimed at getting the country ready for what’s coming ahead.”⁶² Again, Bush used words such as “we” and “our” to unify Americans. He stated, “Tonight, we are a country awakened to danger and called to defend freedom. Our grief has turned to anger and anger to resolution. Whether we bring our enemies to justice or bring justice to our enemies, justice will be done.”⁶³ Gloria Borger of *US News and World Report* and CBS News noted these unifying statements as well as Bush’s personal statements. She stated, “...At the end of the speech he started using the first person. He started talking about himself, and he said ‘I will not yield. I will not rest. I will not relent.’ And I think that he was

⁶¹ Text of Bush’s Address, September 11, 2001. www.cnn.com/2001/US/09/11/bush.speech.text/

⁶² Interview with Dan Balz, Gloria Borger, Tom Gjelten, and Ray Suarez by Gwen Ifill, September 21, 2001. *Washington Week* transcript. www.phs.org/weta/was...onweek/transcripts/transcript010921.html, p. 2.

⁶³ Text of Bush’s Address, September 20, 2001. seattletimes.nwsource.com/cgi-bin...id=268448413&slug=speech21&date=20010920, p. 1.

making a very personal promise to the American people....”⁶⁴ The American people needed to hear this promise, and President Bush was not afraid to make it.

President Bush’s use of the formal address has made him come across as a true leader to the American people. He has been perceived as a grieving, compassionate American, a tough Texan, and an international leader. Bennett Roth, a reporter for the *Houston Chronicle*, stated, “In both addresses, a president not known for his rhetorical elegance came across as both compassionate and reassuring to a jittery nation....”⁶⁵ Borger believes that Americans have been searching for an authentic hero and cites this as one of the reasons why John McCain was able to connect so well with the voters. Bush has the authenticity for which Americans have been searching; Borger states, “Suddenly now we have a leader and –and we must trust him.”⁶⁶

Bush came into the office with some Americans questioning his legitimacy, but his leadership through this hardship has quelled these fears. Roth states, “That cataclysmic day transformed Bush from a domestic-oriented politician trying to overcome the contentiousness of a disputed election into a powerful and popular commander in chief who may be accomplishing more abroad than at home.” David Kennedy, a historian at Stanford University states, “It does seem to me he had an aura of insubstantiability and illegitimacy. And both of those have disappeared.”⁶⁷

Yet members of Bush’s communication team assert that these qualities have always resided within Bush and that the events of September 11th did not force him to develop new qualities of leadership or authenticity. Karen Hughes, Bush’s

⁶⁴ Interview with Dan Balz, Gloria Borger, Tom Gjelten, and Ray Suarez by Gwen Ifill, p. 3-4.

⁶⁵ Bennett Roth. “9/11 Events Transformed Bush Image,” in the *Houston Chronicle*, December 28, 2001.

⁶⁶ Interview with Dan Balz, Gloria Borger, Tom Gjelten, and Ray Suarez by Gwen Ifill, p. 5.

⁶⁷ Roth.

communication chief stated, "I don't think you develop leadership and character overnight... You don't suddenly have a crisis and it brings out qualities you never had. This stuff about (being) transformed. From my perspective his is the same President Bush that I saw going through difficult issues in Texas."⁶⁸

A second part of the new strategy is to have more contact with foreign leaders, and to make this apparent to the American people. Roth states, "Since Sept. 11, hardly a day has gone by when a prime minister or president has not trooped through the White House to meet with Bush and have his photo taken in the Rose Garden." Bush wants Americans to know that he is seeking out and cooperating with world leaders. During his campaign, Bush was unable to name the leaders of Pakistan and two other countries.⁶⁹ Now he is proving to Americans that he has the strength and the ability to lead a world fight against terrorism.

The public's response to Bush's communication strategy

Polls have shown that Bush's efforts to communicate to and reach out to Americans have clearly been effective. After his September 11th speech, 91 percent of Americans approved of Bush's response to the terrorist attacks. Furthermore, the public response after his September 20th speech was overwhelming. A Post-ABC poll showed that 79 percent of Americans watched or listened to Bush's speech.⁷⁰ Tom Gjelten of National Public Radio states, "Now, how unprecedented is that? To me that says that Americans are looking to their president for leadership."⁷¹ These modern times have

⁶⁸ Ibid.

⁶⁹ Roth.

⁷⁰ Post-ABC Poll: Bush Addresses Nation; War on Terrorism, conducted Thursday, September 20, 2001.

⁷¹ Interview with Dan Balz, Gloria Borger, Tom Gjelten, and Ray Suarez by Gwen Ifill, p. 5.

been characterized by a lack of viewer interest in what the president has to say. But, in times of crisis, the people have proven to be very interested.

Furthermore, 95 percent of the people who watched the speech approved of what Bush had to say.⁷² And, most importantly, 80 percent of those who watched Bush's September 20th address stated that it made them feel more confident in the country's ability to handle the crisis. And Figure 4.2 indicates that even four months after the attack, President Bush's approval ratings remained in the high eighties. These results suggest the success of the President's post-September 11th communication strategy; the President has been able to comfort and to reassure the nation, as well as to demonstrate his ability to lead a war on terrorism.

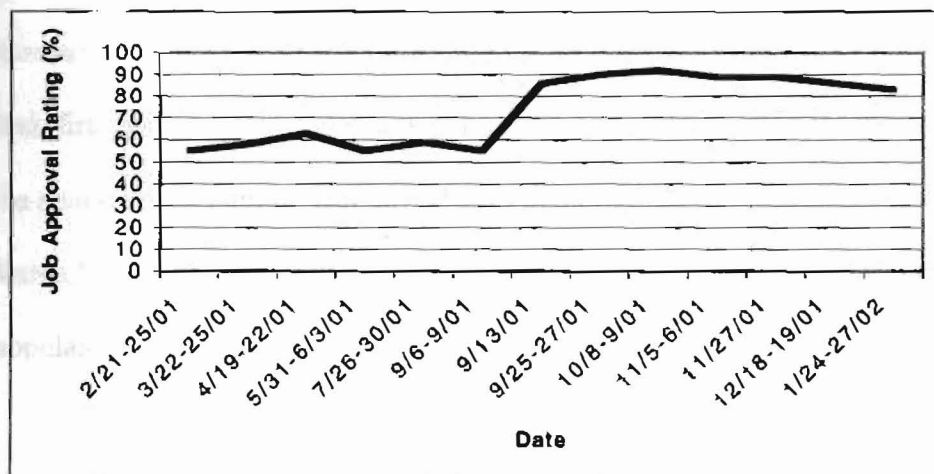
Figure 4.2 goes here

The communication strategy must evolve once again

Bush came into office with the same objective that Clinton and other predecessors had when they entered the presidency: to keep popularity ratings high by reaching out the public. In order to gain approval from a large voting bloc, Bush invited the Mexican president to the first state dinner at the White House. A proposal to help grandparents e-mail their grandchildren and a proposal to encourage the media to report positive news were placed on the fall agenda. When the terrorists first attacked, Bush was reading to a group of elementary school children in Florida, the famous "swing state."

With Bush's approval ratings as high as they are, there is now no need for his communication staff to be preoccupied with improving Bush's standing in the eyes of

Figure 4.2: President Bush's Job Ratings from February 21, 2001 to January 27, 2002



Source: ABC News and *The Washington Post*

Americans.⁷³ Dan Harris states that no president wants to be in wartime, but that in terms of message control, these are great days for the President.⁷⁴ Therefore, it has been necessary to re-define the focus of Bush's communication strategy. As discussed earlier, their first task was to develop a way for Bush to comfort and to reassure Americans after the attack on the nation. But now Bush's communication strategists such as Karl Rove, Karen Hughes, and Ari Fleischer have a different task: to maintain the appeal of a popular president.

Conclusion

The modern age has confronted presidents with new communication challenges. The new communication environment is one of 24-hour all news channels, live broadcasting from virtually anywhere, and an increasingly fragmented television viewing audience. Furthermore, the editorializing of the press continues to turn the television medium into a potential enemy of the modern president. Instead of working with the media as presidents have done in the past, presidents are now experimenting with new technology in order to bypass the press corps and communicate directly with the American people.

Yet the events of September 11th prove how powerful a communication tool the television continues to be. Although modern times have shown a decrease in audience share during a presidential address, in times of crisis Americans go to their televisions in order to be reassured by their leader. Without the power of television, Americans would have been lost after the tragic events. What have we learned from our half century of

⁷² Interview with Dan Balz, Gloria Borger, Tom Gjelten, and Ray Suarez by Gwen Ifill, p. 3.

⁷³ Lizza, p. 14.

presidents on television? Has television improved or diminished the quality of presidential performance in American government? The final chapter will seek to answer these remaining questions and to determine the future of presidential communication with the American people.

⁷⁴ Interview with Dan Harris, conducted by the author, March 8, 2002.

Chapter 5

What Now?

The future of presidential communication

Much can be learned from the successes and the failures of presidential efforts to communicate with the American public over the past half century. The technological advances offering hundreds of options to American television viewers have created a new era of presidential communication. It is now necessary to look back and evaluate what worked well and what did not work well for past presidents and to base our assessment of effective, new communication strategies upon these lessons of the past.

But, it is also necessary to include innovative thinking in today's modern strategy. President Clinton's experimentation with town hall meetings and the Internet, for example, is a sign that inventive planning is now necessary in order to communicate effectively with the highly atomized American audience. Unprecedented communication challenges inevitably lie ahead, and future presidents must be prepared to keep their communication strategy in tune with the American audience. This chapter will predict the character of television in the future, identify the challenges that will come along with the new technology, and suggest the most effective communication strategies to confront and overcome the hurdles that future presidents will face.

The future of the television medium

In order to identify the future challenges to presidential communication, one must look ahead and envision how the television medium and the television audience will

change in the years to come. What is the next stage of television? The evaluation of the evolution of television in Chapter 1 can serve as a guide to help us imagine the character of television in the future. In the television industry, there is a pattern that new technology is initially slow to catch on, but then a boom takes place in which the new technology becomes commonplace in every American home. This pattern is seen with the initial commercialization of television, color technology, videocassette recording, and cable television.

This precedent suggests that the new technology of digital cable can be predicted to explode in the upcoming years. Today, only a small percentage of American homes are subscribers to digital cable, but 10 to 20 years in the future, the majority of American homes will most likely subscribe. Thus the near future of television can be envisioned as the majority of Americans having access to over five hundred different channels. And, in ten years, experts are predicting that digital technology will have the potential to send 1000 to 2000 channel options to American homes.¹ Media consultant Tom Giarrosso believes that with this abundance of channel options, viewers will be able to watch several channels at the same time and will simply adjust the audio to the channel that they would like to hear at that one second. Multiple channels will be viewed simultaneously, and it will most likely be wireless transmission that will bring these options into the home.²

This pattern of new technologies starting off slowly in the consumer arena and then exploding in popularity is also playing out right now with the emergence of the

¹ Kim Love, Omar Shaikh, and Jon Ward. "The Future of Television" (<http://www.student.brad.ac.uk/ktlove/academic/misc/futuretv.html>).

² Tom Giarrosso, media consultant, phone interview conducted April 13, 2002.

digital versatile disc (DVD). Before long, DVD players will replace videocassette recorders (VCRs). *Reuters* reports that "sales of video cassette recorders (VCRs) fell about 35 percent in 2001, while sale of digital versatile disc (DVD) players rose almost 50 percent." Furthermore, in the past year, VCR sales fell from 23.1 million units to 14.9 units, while DVD player sales rose from 8.5 million units to 12.7 million units.³

Reuters also reports that the Consumer Electronics Association predicts that 14.9 million DVD players will be sold in the next year.⁴ Yet according to Consumer Electronics Association analyst Sean Wargo, a complete conversion from VCRs to DVD players will not take place until the price of DVD players decreases. Wargo states that the average VCR sold for \$50 in 2001, while the average DVD player sold for \$193. Wargo believed that the 95 percent market penetration of VCRs will remain "for some time to come."

Giarrosso's predictions of DVD player market penetration echo those of Wargo. Giarrosso states that DVD players will become common in homes as soon as the price becomes more affordable, which he predicts could be in the next year or so. Once the conversion from VCR to DVD players takes place, Giarrosso foresees great things. He states that it will be possible to transfer old VHS movies onto DVDs and send them to friends and family via the Internet. Giarrosso predicts that we will eventually be getting all of our television through this method.⁵ Americans will become indifferent to network

³ *Reuters*. "Report: VCR Sales Fall, DVDs Surge in 200," Thursday, January 17, 2002.
http://dailynews.yahoo.com/hx/nm/20020117/tc/tech_television_digital_dc_2.html.

⁴ *Ibid.*

⁵ Tom Giarrosso, phone interview conducted January 3, 2002.

programming; they will have the ability to watch pre-recorded programs whenever they wish.

The new high definition television, known as HDTV, will also change the television medium in significant ways.⁶ The inspiration for HDTV was the introduction of wide screen movies. Producers wanted all viewers, even those seated in the back rows, to feel as if they were seated in the front row of the theater; they wanted all audience members to feel as though they were amidst the action. To achieve this goal, Sony and NHK developed a high-definition system called the NHK Hi-vision in the late 1970s. This system offered audience members a picture quality comparable to the quality of a photograph taken with 35mm film. HDTV made such an impact in the film industry that it was soon expanded to commercial broadcasting, and now it is just starting out in the consumer market.⁷

HDTV offers consumers a much better picture than today's traditional, analog televisions. The HDTV set is distinguished by its high image definition and by its "wide screen." An analog television has a width to height ratio of 4:3, whereas the HDTV set has a width to height ratio of 16:9. The picture of an HDTV set is made up by more horizontal and vertical lines than an analog television, thus improving the definition.⁸ The number of lines is actually increased by 100 percent when upgrading from an analog television to an HDTV.⁹ Furthermore, because of the wide screen of the HDTV, the

⁶ Giarrosso, phone interview conducted January 3, 2002.

⁷ Professor Keln J. Kuhn. "HDTV Television – An Introduction," www.ee.washington.edu/conselec/CE/Kuhn/hdtv/95x5.html.

⁸ "FAQs" www.hdtvgalaxy.com.

⁹ Kuhn.

picture will be more comparable to a movie theater screen and will not display the "cropped" version of a program as do analog televisions.¹⁰

How far away is complete market penetration? When will the HDTV set replace the estimated 750 million television sets worldwide? As with the market penetration of DVD players, it all depends on the price. HDTV sets are actually available now in most major electronic stores.¹¹ Yet prices for HDTV sets range from Samsung's TSL2795HF which sells for \$979.00 to Sony's 42B1 which sells for \$5,495.00.¹² As soon as these prices drop to more affordable levels, HDTV sets will invade the market.

Yet this is not likely in the near future because there is not enough demand for the new high definition television to cause prices to drop. Without the demand for the HDTV, no mass production has been necessary, thus the price for an individual set remains high.¹³ Philips continues to produce almost 75,000 televisions per week, proving that the demand for the traditional analog television is still strong.¹⁴ Yet when more and more consumers catch on to the new HDTV set, the television medium will undergo even more changes.

According to Giarrosso, HDTV will offer much more than simply an improved picture. The high definition television will also allow the viewer to pick and choose what he or she would like to watch, thus weakening even further the hold of the network stations. All programming will be based on the individual demands of the viewer. The

¹⁰ www.galaxy.com.

¹¹ www.hdtvgalaxy.com.

¹² www.nextag.com.

¹³ www.hdtvgalaxy.com.

¹⁴ Love, Shaikh, and Ward.

new television can store programs for the viewer and play them whenever the viewer would like to watch. For example, when a person comes home from work, he or she will have access to the program of his or her choice. It will even be possible to send favorite episodes to friends and family so that they can watch at a time that is convenient for them.¹⁵

UltimateTV is an example of one of the many companies experimenting with this personalized programming. The UltimateTV service developed by Microsoft uses a Digital Video Recorder (DVR) and automatically stores and records television programs onto a hard drive. The UltimateTV Web site boasts, "Digital recording means no more tapes...no more flipping back and forth between channels, and no more fighting over the remote... You can control live TV shows just like you were watching a tape or DVD. Pause, fast forward, reverse, use instant replay or slow motion, so you'll never miss a thing."¹⁶ This service is only in the beginning stages right now, but when it becomes more common in American homes, television viewing will transform into something radically different.

This new television technology is all tied into the idea of interactive television. Instead of being a passive viewers, future generations will interact with the television. Viewer/television interchange will take place in a variety of different formats. Video on demand, or pay-per-view as we know it today, will expand greatly in the future, offering viewers a multitude of movies, concerts, and sporting events. It will also be possible to enroll in distance learning courses through the television, allowing the viewer to have an

¹⁵ Giarrosso, phone interview conducted January 3, 2002.

interactive link to the professor. Because there will be so many programming options available to future viewers, interactive television will offer personalized, computerized television agents in order to help viewers find the programs that they would like to watch, as well as to offer viewers complete indexes of television programs. "Civic networking" will also be a part of the interactive television medium; the television will evolve into a sort of "town hall." It will be possible to hold community events such as debates, town meetings, school committee meetings, and book clubs via the television.¹⁷ This "civic networking" may encourage more citizens to get involved in their community because it will be so much easier to contribute interactively from the comfort of one's own living room. Interactive television could provide for a more politically aware and active American electorate in the future.

Furthermore, when viewers choose the program that they would like to watch, little boxes will appear on the bottom of the screen that offer the viewer more information about what they are seeing on the program. If, for example, you are watching a Red Sox game and would like to know individual biographies and statistics of a given player, it will be possible to call this information up on the television just by using your remote control.

This feature will be especially useful to advertising agencies. The HDTV technology will enable viewers to simply skip over commercials, thus rendering commercials as we know them today useless; no one will watch them. Advertising agencies are strategizing now as to what form commercials will take in the future. It is predicted that advertisements will become integrated into the program. For example, if a

¹⁶ www.ultimatetv.com.

viewer sees a lamp that he or she likes on an episode of "Friends," the viewer can have the option of clicking on that lamp and learning how much it costs and how to purchase it. All advertisements will become internal; they will be woven into the content of the program.¹⁸

Commerce.TV is one the many companies that is experimenting with the idea of integrated advertisements. The people of Commerce.TV hope to successfully "capitalize on the universality of television and familiarity of the remote control" in order to offer products to the consumer. Television viewers will see icons appear on the screen, encouraging them to learn more about the product and possibly purchase it, all with a click of the remote control. The Commerce.TV web site declares, "Commerce.TV is so easy, it's an impulse action-'That looks cool. I think I'll buy it.' Without changing the channel, lifting the phone or turning the computer on, the purchase is made." The website also claims that Americans will just need to "press a few buttons on the remote, and whatever they need will be right at their fingertips."¹⁹ The idea of internal advertisements will remedy the problem of viewers skipping over commercials when that power becomes available to them in the future. It is strikingly clear that the new technologies now emerging—DVD players, digital television, HDTV, and interactive television—will bring about great changes in the television medium as we know it today.

¹⁷ Love, Shaika, and Ward.

¹⁸ Giarrosso, phone interview conducted January 3, 2002.

¹⁹ www.commerce-tv.com.

Consequences of digital cable and television by demand

The increased popularity of digital cable will further fragment the viewing audience, diminishing the ability of a president to reach large groups of Americans through television. Recent presidents have struggled with the fragmentation of the television viewing audience; with each new administration, television has become a less and less direct venue to a captive American audience. An explosion in the number of subscribers to digital cable will cause this challenge to intensify in the future years. With the audience dispersed over 1000 to 2000 different channels, appearances on network television will reach an even smaller audience than recent presidents have struggled to attract.

An increase in the number of digital cable subscribers will not only bring about a further fragmentation of the audience, but will also act as a deterrent to watching a presidential appearance. Recent experience suggests that the more control the audience has over the programming that they consume, the less they want to watch a presidential appearance. Today Americans have a significant amount of control over what they consume on the television, and viewers are bypassing presidential television appearances in favor of other programming options. An explosion of digital cable will give the American television audience more control than ever before. Future presidents must find ever more sophisticated communication strategies in order to stay in touch with the decentralized audience. They must discover a way to communicate with Americans who are not as willing to listen to the president as they were in the past. They no longer have the captive audience that the age of network-dominated television provided.

And, when the new television-by-demand technology is available to Americans, the only way that the president will be able to reach the public is if the individual viewers choose to watch a presidential address. With the new technology, all programming is by demand, so it would be up to the viewer to call up and watch a presidential message, which would be highly unlikely. These new technological advances that are predicted to emerge in the future will require that presidential communication strategies undergo major changes.

Determining the future of presidential exposure

Another future difficulty facing modern presidents is to determine how much exposure will be necessary or desirable. Some scholars such as Theodore Lowi, a Cornell University professor of government, believe that there has been an over-exposure of the president in recent years. Since the president began to utilize television as a method of communication with the American people, his aura has been augmented; Americans today feel more of a connection with the President. Lowi asserts that a "personal presidency" has developed in the United States, "an office of tremendous personal power drawn from the people..." He states, "This is a new social contract: in return for delivery on promises, American citizens identify directly with the presidency...."²⁰

But Lowi believes that over-exposure has caused unrealistically high expectations to be placed upon the office of the presidency. "As visibility goes up so do expectations and vulnerability," he states. "There's more of a chance to make really big mistakes. It's a

treadmill to oblivion. It's why modern history is filled with so many failed presidencies."²¹ Today the president is more of a celebrity than ever before. But this raises the bar of expectations and invites unfavorable, as well as favorable, attention to the president—as it does to all celebrities.

Jeffrey Tulis, professor of government at the University of Texas at Austin, also believes that the relationship between television and the President must be re-examined and re-cast. Tulis argues that the present "teledemocracy" has had a detrimental effect upon the office of the presidency. Tulis believes that it is necessary for the president to allow himself some distance from the American public in order to consider passionate ideas in a realistic manner.²² In his book *The Rhetorical Presidency*, Tulis argues that the media "reinforces the tendencies of the rhetorical presidency to undermine the possibility of deliberation."²³ According to Tulis, presidential television coverage is invading the President's personal contemplation of important matters.

Plans for the future

The communication strategies of future presidents will have to be profoundly different from the strategies that we have seen in the past and are encountering today. But different in what ways? How should future presidents tackle the challenges that lie ahead? Let us imagine.

²⁰ Theodore J. Lowi. *The Personal President* (Ithaca: Cornell University Press, 1985), p. 140.

²¹ Steven Stark, "The First Postmodern Presidency," in *The Atlantic Monthly*, April 1993.

²² Ibid.

²³ Jeffrey K. Tulis. *The Rhetorical Presidency* (Princeton, New Jersey: Princeton University Press, 1987), p. 188.

The following is a memo from me to the president elected in 2020, advising her on the most effective ways to communicate with the American people.

January 2020

To: Ms. President
From: Jenna Wasson
Re: Political communication strategy

POLITICAL COMMUNICATION STRATEGY

In order for you to communicate effectively it will be absolutely necessary for your presidential communication strategy to counteract the highly fragmented American viewing audience and to harness the power of today's television technology. Here is my assessment of how you can best accomplish that goal.

I. POSSIBLE STRATEGIES TO OVERCOME AUDIENCE FRAGMENTATION

In the past, presidents have focused a significant part of their communication strategy on live prime time appearances. These prime time appearances would air on all three networks and be a sure way to reach millions of Americans. Yet the diversification of the audience has made this tool ineffective. The audience is no longer concentrated among three network channels, but decentralized among 2000 available cable channels. And this decentralization has intensified in recent years, especially since all television programming is now based upon demand.

In order to overcome these obstacles, you must consider decentralizing your communication approaches as well. Pursuing a variety of different venues that are targeted to reach smaller audiences will enable you to reach more Americans more effectively. Prime time network appearances could be replaced by appearances on morning shows, talk radio, C-SPAN, MTV, and local television stations.²⁴

This type of strategy would make polling and audience research an absolute necessity for your administration. Information regarding the types of audiences that different programs draw must be readily available to you. Your target will no longer be large audiences, as was once the case with the dominance of network television and their captive audience. Instead, the group or groups of individuals to whom your message is directed must be identified and then you can make appearances on the types of programs and channels that attract that certain group. For example, if you are seeking to reach out to females in order to gain support for a certain bill, appearing on a morning show, a venue that typically attracts a large female audience, could be a consideration. There should be continuous polling of audience members for each major program. You should have a target show for each group of people that you would like to address. Reaching out to a large audience is now impossible, but with reliable, up-to-date polling, it will be possible for you to reach out to Americans in an individualized way.

This strategy could prove to be an extremely effective way to target younger Americans as well. A poll conducted in 2000 revealed that 50 percent of voters under thirty years of age stated that their vote was influenced by information they acquired by

²⁴ Steven Stark "The First Postmodern Presidency," in *The Atlantic Monthly*, April 1993.

watching Jay Leno, David Letterman, Saturday Night Live, Politically Incorrect, and MTV. By making appearances on shows such as these, you will be able to reach a large part of the electorate. You will be tapping into a potentially huge source of support.²⁵

Yet it is important to keep in mind the effects informal appearances will have on the prestige and dignity of the presidency. Is it really appropriate to have a presidential appearance followed by a music video? What does that say about the true importance of your message? I believe that the public's response to informal appearances should be closely monitored, but that these appearances will have a positive effect on your communication effort. Being able to come across as a "regular person" with a sense of humor who is genuinely interested in reaching out to young Americans can only increase your popularity.

Media analyst Stephen Hess believes that a mixture of different venues is a very effective strategy and states, "The more the better."²⁶ Furthermore, Ron Nessen believes that an appearance on any show can be successful as long as the president presents herself as a "good sport" and can engage in "self-deprecating humor."²⁷

In general, adhering to programs with a sense of formality about them, such as local news programs, morning shows, or CNN, will be one effective way to reach a targeted group of Americans. And appearances on more informal programs will allow you to connect effectively with the young generation of voters.

²⁵ Interview with Ron Nessen, March 11, 2002.

²⁶ Interview with Stephen Hess, March 4, 2002.

²⁷ Interview with Ron Nessen, March 11, 2002.

II. A MODERN "DIRECT RELATIONSHIP" STRATEGY

Examining and adding to past presidential strategies that were not adopted is a possible way to develop a new strategy that would assist you in combating the increased fragmentation of the American audience. Doug Ross and David Osborne, part-time advisers to President Clinton, created a presidential communication strategy for Clinton that was not fully adopted by the administration. Yet a second look at this strategy reveals that it could work well if it were modernized and further developed. Ross and Osborne proposed a plan based on the idea of a "direct relationship" between the president and the public. Their strategy, created in 1992, entailed communicating with Americans through video and audiocassettes, direct mailings, and also providing the public with 800 numbers that they could access in order to gain a greater understanding of a certain issue.

Ross based this strategy on the ideas of popular business theorists such as Max DePree, author of *Leadership Jam* and *Leadership as an Art*, and management expert Tom Peters. Ross believes that the federal government can be compared to large companies because both are having difficulty reacting to public demands through traditional centralized strategies. An "era of decentralization" has emerged and will remain into the future. Just as companies are reaching out to consumer demands on a more individualized basis, so too should the president seek to communicate in a more decentralized way as opposed to sweeping, prime time communication efforts.²⁸

²⁸ Ibid.

Although not fully adopted by the Clinton administration, I believe that Ross and Osborne's plan shows promise for your communication strategy. Maintaining Ross and Osborne's underlying theme of a "direct relationship," while modernizing certain aspects of the strategy could be an effective way to combat the challenges of audience fragmentation and viewer reluctance to watch presidential appearances. Ross and Osborne mentioned video and audiocassettes, direct mailings, and 800 numbers as possible communication avenues. In their strategy, the vast power of the Internet was overlooked.

You should seek to communicate through the venues mentioned by Ross and Osborne, but also through the Internet. Clinton experimented with the power of the Internet during his administration by creating the White House Web site and by making himself and vice-president Al Gore accessible to Americans through e-mail. Why not go even further in the future? Give Americans the opportunity to sign up for emails on issues that are of particular concern to them. Develop web sites dedicated to certain events that your communication team wishes to highlight or to certain issues for which your administration is looking to build support. This way you will be communicating with people who are interested in what you have to say. Today's viewers are likely to turn the channel when they see the President on television. This happens out of a sense of disinterest and political unawareness. But there are bound to be issues of particular concern to every citizen, and if those issues can be highlighted, those citizens who were once disinterested may become more politically active and aware.

As the Clinton administration realized, the Internet is also a way to circumvent the intermediation of the press. By posting presidential speeches on the Internet, the American people have access to the entire speech. Your communication team should adopt this method as well. All of the information that you would like to convey to the public should be posted on different presidential websites in order to ensure that the public has access to un-manipulated, un-editorialized material.

Future presidents should also build upon the Clinton administration's idea of making the president and the vice president accessible to the American people through e-mail. Setting up e-mail systems that would allow the public to e-mail you and the vice-president about their concerns, and establishing an effective way to respond to these e-mails would foster healthy communication relationship between you and your constituency.

Furthermore, e-mails would also be beneficial to your administration as an instantaneous indicator of public opinion. Your administration will no longer have to wait for polls to be conducted; you will have an idea of the public's opinion as soon as the e-mails are read. The Internet should be viewed as a key communication tool. It is true that the American audience has become extremely fragmented; yet it is important to remember that the world has also become extremely interconnected through the Internet at the same time. For this reason, the Internet must serve as an important piece of your communication strategy.

HDTV and the existence of interactive television also offer features that you can take full advantage of in your effort to form a "direct relationship." Internalizing

commercials, the strategy that the advertising industry took when traditional commercials became useless, is a strategy that can be modified to work effectively for you as well.

Interactive television is another way in which your message can be individualized. As we all know, it is now possible to call up more information about certain products that we see on television programs. For example, it is very easy for viewers to use their remote controls to purchase a lamp on "Friends" or to purchase anything they desire through CommerceTV.

Would it not be just as easy for viewers to use their remotes to gain more information about a certain political issue that is being discussed on a program? The viewer could simply click on a box and then have access to more information. This "click of a box" could link the interested viewer to presidential websites and give the viewer a list of e-mails addresses to which the viewer may write in order to express his or her opinions about the issue. The viewer could also be given the option to participate in opinion polling. These polls would serve a two-fold purpose: Americans would be given another outlet in which to express their opinions, and you would have a constant gauge of the sentiment of the American electorate. Although the television technology of 2020 has rendered the past sweeping communication strategies ineffective, the features of modern television can be used to your advantage.

Ross and Osborne were onto something with their idea of a "direct relationship" between the president and the American people. Building upon and modernizing their ideas could bring much success to your administration. It is clear that the sweeping

communication strategies of past administrations are outdated. The fragmentation of the audience demands a fragmentation of your communication strategy.

III. STRATEGIES TO DEAL WITH THE QUESTION OF OVER-EXPOSURE

Several decades ago, Theodore Lowi was critical of the relationship that presidents had formed with television over the years. He claimed that the president had been overly visible and that the presidency had evolved into a "personal presidency." Lowi pointed to high visibility as the source of the unrealistic expectations placed upon the president. Back in 1993, Lowi believed that President Clinton should limit his relationship with television and the media in an effort to reduce the expectations placed upon him. In effect, Lowi was suggesting that the Clinton administration work to diminish the grandeur of the role of the president.²⁹ It is clear that Lowi's opinions were not shared by the Clinton communication team. Yet inflated expectations continue to exist today. Lowi's suggestion to avoid a "personal presidency" could have relevance in your communication strategy.

But is diminishing your relationship with television the correct way to approach communication with Americans? Do you think that you should seek to weaken your relationship with television? Horace W. Busby, a former aide to President Lyndon Johnson, believes that a diminished role of the president is inevitable. Busby states, "The president will become more of an irrelevancy. The old image of the powerful President wasn't due only to the Cold War. It was the product of a more primitive era. People

today have far more education and exposure to the outside world. They don't need to attach that importance and responsibility to the office anymore."³⁰ Author Steven Stark points out that Busby's hypothesis rings true not only in terms of the president, but also in terms of major groups and authority figures. He writes, "Indeed, in the new age of fragmentation, when it's tougher to assemble a mass following, virtually all colossal entities and authority figures of the old age have seen their power recede."³¹

Lowi may call for a reduction in the visibility of the president and Busby may believe that the role of the presidency will naturally diminish; yet it cannot be denied that your role as president is central to our unity and success as a nation. To reduce visibility and to allow for the role of the president to become irrelevant would leave Americans without a strong leader and without a sense of political unity. Furthermore, you rely upon communication with constituents to build popularity and upon popularity to generate support for policy initiatives. To suggest that you remain aloof would lead to a feeling of detachment among the American electorate.

Furthermore, the events of September 11, 2001 underscore the relevance of a national leader in the modern era. Twenty years ago, Americans looked to President Bush for reassurance and hope. The period after September 11th demonstrated to us that during times of crisis, the American people need a person whom they can depend upon for security and leadership. Therefore, I believe that *less* communication with the American

²⁹ Stark.

³⁰ Stark.

³¹ Stark.

people is not the answer for your strategy of political communication. *Different* forms of communication, however, are the answer.

It is true that many scholars see a diminished role for the president in the future. Yet maybe the key to effective communication is just the opposite. Today's society is infatuated with Hollywood; there is a huge craving among the public for information about the lives of television and movie stars. To focus more attention on making yourself a "celebrity" in the eyes of Americans could bring back the people's interest in what their president has to say. This will be done not by decreasing your visibility, but by increasing it. A fine line must be drawn in order to disassociate yourself from the petty, superficial world of Hollywood and to create a dignified, trustworthy celebrity. If this line can be effectively determined and adhered to, you will see much success.

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