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The Presidency in the New Media Age

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NOWHERE ARE THE DIFFERENCES between journalism and history more evident than in assessments of the presidency of the United States. If journalism is generously described as “history in a hurry,” so is it shortsighted and sloppy as it lurches forward, gathering news in bits and pieces, coming to conclusions based on short-term accomplishments and the court of public opinion.

There has hardly been an instance in U.S. history when the immediacy of the news did not bypass its larger truths, whether positive or negative. Washington and Lincoln suffered more than their share of bad press, as did Wilson and Truman. On the other hand, McKinley and Harding got enthusiastic appraisals, only to be downgraded later by historians. Journalists and their associates, the pollsters, treated Harry Truman with ridicule and contempt, while historians later judged him great or near-great.

Thus, any review of the relationship between the presidency and the media’s court of public opinion is necessarily precarious.

With these caveats, we introduce this issue of the Media Studies Journal, which examines “The Presidency in the New Media Age.” Just when the “new media age,” with its satellites and computers, began is open to debate, but it clearly was in full flower in the 1990s during the last years of the Bush administration and the beginning of the Clinton presidency. The “new media” are the abundance of communication made possible by the convergence of cable and fiber optics, by computers, satellites, telephones and television.

If there was an orderly pace to mass communication from
World War II until the end of the Cold War, it was greatly accelerated with the blossoming of television capacity (from a few channels to many, even eventually an infinite number) and the flow of high-speed data that has created whole new forms of communication (from fax to E-mail and various data streams serving traditional print and broadcast media).

Scant months before he assumed the presidency in January 1993, William Jefferson Clinton was an obscure Southern governor, a man who would not have been recognized by most Americans had they met him face-to-face. The media changed all that, as it does with most public people in the world these days, and in a relatively short time. Soon after taking office, the new American president was probably the best-known and most easily recognized person on the planet, especially in the age of a single superpower.

Clinton, the outsider, came to office decrying traditional media, which had been skeptical of him at first, subsequently caustic and, then, more accepting. From January 1992 to the first week of November of that year, Clinton went from “second-string upstart” in a field of Democratic presidential hopefuls where people expected better-known figures like Mario Cuomo, to a potential casualty of the character issue and tabloid revelations, to a viable, highly attractive candidate. Meanwhile, if his chief rival, President George Bush, had been an apparently unassailable wartime leader a few months earlier, his candidacy was mortally wounded by the end of the campaign. The media, of course, played a role in all this, in shaping and reflecting images, and in portraying weakness or confidence.

For the most practical of reasons—the desire to win the presidency—Bill Clinton was an early user of the “new media,” some of which were not new at all, but, rather, unusual venues for a presidential candidate: televised town meetings, appearances on previously verboten morning and late-night talk shows, interactive call-in programs and even MTV.

Where once the network news programs and the Sunday public
affairs interviews were the favored outlets for those seeking the presidency, the 1992 campaign changed all that. Dissatisfied with the predictable nature of political news opportunities on television as they had played out in 1988, when mere "photo-ops" and truncated sound bites took command, candidates and their campaign managers in 1992 took no chances, daring to enter enclaves previously off-limits for contenders who wanted to be taken seriously. Ross Perot got an early start on "Larry King Live," followed by Clinton and eventually by Bush. And there was Clinton's famous performance with saxophone and dark glasses on the "Arsenio Hall Show," followed by endless radio and cable interviews. All this was stirred and augmented by new technology of various kinds, from the satellite news conference to E-mail and fax messaging and much more.

In the process, Clinton was credited (or charged) with circumventing the traditional media, often forcing the evening news shows to pipe in sound bites from "Donahue" or "Oprah." It was amid these changes in basic presidential communication that Bill Clinton brought a new media age to the White House.Immediately on his election, while still living in Little Rock, he faced for the first time the raucous and fragmented press corps that follows the presidency. Some of these representatives of the Fourth Estate would go with him to Washington and join the White House press corps, while others would take their places elsewhere in the media, where they observed the new president and his administration from the perspective of national politics. Still others would return to Arkansas on occasion to track and cover scandal and potential scandal, Little Rock being a constant broadcast backdrop and visceral reminder of Clinton's outsider status and inexperience on the national scene.

O NCE ENSCONCED in the White House, Clinton and his wife, Hillary Rodham Clinton, who emerged boldly after the election as a kind of co-president, met the White House press corps. For reasons specified in more detail later in this issue of the Media Studies Journal, it was anything but love at first sight. The
Clintons' relative inaccessibility and their inexperienced press-relations team quickly bred a mutual hostility between the administration and the press. While the administration felt besieged by skeptics and critics, the press corps faced doors that closed literally in their faces and a president who seemed more accessible to press and public than he in fact turned out to be. The new president was slow to give his first press conference, guided perhaps by the painful lesson of George Bush, who had been exceedingly generous in daily contact with the press only to feel betrayed in the end. Hillary Rodham Clinton, the first presidential spouse to have her own independent career, was given a powerful portfolio, yet kept her distance from the press, so much so that leading correspondents, initially friendly to both Clintons, were complaining bitterly a year later that she still had not granted them an interview.

In the beginning, Bill Clinton entrusted the press to administrative conduits who were young and brash. Few had any significant experience working with the media or in Washington. No middle-sized American corporation would staff its communications program and public relations office in the way the Clinton administration did. But then, no American president has selected a highly respected communications professional with national experience to shepherd its public relations and communications since Dwight Eisenhower persuaded James Haggerty to leave ABC in the 1950s.

The difference in the 1990s, however, is the complexity of a new media age. Ignorant of the collected intelligence about the media and of the communications aspects of public policy, the Clinton administration amateurs began their on-the-job training, testing their greenness on an experienced and tough-minded press corps, both within the White House and outside among columnists, commentators and others, grown-ups all and resentful of the youthful recruits running the White House. Of course, all new administrations can rightly be accused of a degree of amateurism but, this being the first Democratic president since Jimmy Carter, seasoned Democratic talent was in short supply in virtually all areas, especially in the commu-
The communications sector, which has gotten a reputation over the years as a kind of last vestige of purely patronage appointments. The general belief is that there is not much to know about media and communications and that anybody can do it. On the other hand, the president did give the press corps George Stephanopoulos, who, while young, was one of Clinton's closest advisers and far more knowledgeable about his boss's views than were many previous presidential press spokespeople. Within months, however, Stephanopoulos had fallen from grace, among the media at any rate, leaving the uncomfortable public limelight while at the same time moving closer to the Oval Office. In his place came David Gergen, experienced in previous Republican administrations and popular with Washington insiders. Here at last was the ultimate media "grown-up," coming to reassure the press and the country in the midst of the president's faltering public opinion ratings. While Gergen plotted communications strategy, Dee Dee Myers handled the daily press briefings and Stephanopoulos remained in the background.

The first year of the Clinton presidency was inordinately active. One newsmagazine pointed to 21 different and rather complex goals and programs on the administration's agenda. These, intertwined with the drama and uncertainty of public life, have become the stuff of media coverage and of public support or criticism.

As this is written, the Clinton presidency is engulfed by a cloud of scandal, the Whitewater affair, which is either "a grave national crisis" or "much ado about nothing," depending on which commentator one believes. An ongoing investigation by a special prosecutor will soon be joined by a congressional inquiry, which has already heated up as a partisan struggle. No one is quite sure just when criticism, rumor, innuendo, fact and evidence really add up to the stench of serious scandal that must be pursued by the media, or, on the other hand, when it is of more interest to the press than to the people. There is no easy guide to this at any time, given the fickle nature of public opin-
ion, but one thing is sure: Whatever Bill Clinton and his associates do in this administration is likely to be confronted by new media, scores of outlets where there were once only a few serious ones.

In this crowded new media marketplace, a pattern of sensationalism and scandalmongering is sweeping across virtually all the electronic media and infecting even traditional print outlets. Where broadcasters were once reluctant to editorialize, incendiary radio talk hosts revel in continuous criticism. It is a time when the very loyalty of the press to serving the public interest is being severely questioned, not as an artifact of partisan politics, but as part of a continuous erosion of confidence in the media. This is not new with the Clinton administration, since there was never much love lost between the press corps and Ronald Reagan, for example. What is different today, however, is the savage nature of collective media comment, criticism and reporting. Driven by ratings and a desire to distinguish themselves in a growing field of news reports, newsmagazines and other formats, the media are now less predictable and more volatile than ever before.

It is, in short, a bad time for the American people to get coherent and comprehensive reports, to distinguish trivial accusations from serious charges, to understand important public policy matters while dismissing the peripheral and petty. In the midst of a powerful flow of news and information, increasingly fragmented, the media cling to “the wilderness of singular instance,” rather than the contours of the road over the long haul. Perhaps this was always true to a degree, but today it is more accentuated, possibly more dangerous for a nation and world that is so information sensitive. A downturn in the polls, fired by accusation—proven or not—can and will affect the stock market, relations with foreign powers and, potentially, national security. Most certainly, it could weaken our role and effectiveness as the world’s only surviving superpower. The flip side is that economic upturns can similarly have a positive effect and swing elections.

IN WASHINGTON, this administration, intelligent by any standard, seems on the one hand to recognize the potential power
of new media and uses them (though not as frequently as one might have expected from the campaign). It must be said, however, that the U.S. government generally and the White House specifically have run well behind most U.S. businesses and even academics in harnessing the new technology for communication, whether with the American people, other nations or specific institutions or interest groups. Any second-rate direct-mail house is better positioned to reach its clients than is the White House. This may be changing: Bill Clinton is the first president to be able to pick up the phone in the Oval Office and get a dial tone, the first to encourage the use of E-mail. While he himself, like Lincoln (or Coolidge), uses a pad and pencil and has not yet learned the ways of the personal computer, he is surrounded by a technologically sophisticated staff and benefits from Vice President Al Gore’s championing of the electronic superhighway. Since developing nations are daily demonstrating the “leapfrogging” effects of communications technologies, there is yet hope for our White House, if not for the Congress or Supreme Court, still Luddites by comparison.

Historians eventually rate presidents on the basis of their effective orchestration of several presidential roles, as well as in their claims of significant accomplishment, and it is important to recall that media images of a president must necessarily vary when discussing each of these roles. The portrayal of Clinton the chief of state and thus the country’s ceremonial leader is different from how he performs and is perceived as head of government, commander in chief of the armed forces, architect of policy or leader of his political party. Most of Clinton’s public presence has been as head of government, steward of a complex series of policies and goals including national economic reform, health care and other initiatives. He has also been visible as chief of state, visiting the Far East, Europe, Russia and other sites of summit meetings with other world leaders. Notably, he is the first U.S. president to venture onto a world stage that lacks the Cold War framework that helped structure international relations, a factor that also adds uncertainty to perceptions of Clinton at home and, especially, abroad.
His image as commander in chief has been tarnished somewhat, first by the draft issue during the campaign and subsequently by his relative unpopularity among the armed forces, brought about in part by the collision between his policy self, who pressed ahead on the issue of gays in the military, and his commander-in-chief role. Still, he is the commander in chief who orchestrated the Somalian operation, which he inherited, along with the problems in Bosnia. Both the responsibilities and the image of Clinton the policy wonk head of state and Clinton the military commander who ordered Iraq bombed in retaliation for an alleged Saddam Hussein plot to assassinate George Bush are very different. Thus, if there is a single image of a president that survives into history, it is at best a composite of the various roles that go with the office, and of the president’s relative effectiveness in each. Judgment on the accuracy of the media’s portrayals of the moment must be reserved.

While we will necessarily have to wait for the verdict of history to tell us definitively how Bill Clinton did as a communicator in his first year in office, and whether his presidency was marked by great leadership or by failure, we believe that an examination of this administration in its confrontation with the new media age has value for all who want to understand public communications and public life. To that end, we have invited correspondents and commentators, scholars and students of government, politicians and others to critique and assess the Presidency in the New Media Age.

If our effort here has one great failing—one that we acknowledge at the outset—it is that it comes without any representation from the president himself or from his top aides. This was not for lack of trying on our part. Every one of our repeated efforts—via both old communication methods and new—to secure interviews, essays, comment, or other discourse with the White House was ignored or sidetracked. There were promises made and appointments set and then canceled. Even our proposed telephone, fax and E-mail “interviews” with the president and his top aides were scuttled in the end. We recognize, of course, that the White House may have more
to do than engage in this kind of exercise, but we regret the absence of the president and his associates from this "symposium," because, if past experience is a lesson, this Journal will likely help fuel the national conversation in which the president, by rights, should take part. We will happily save room in our Summer 1994 issue for comment or commentary from the White House on this Journal and the issues it raises and hope it will be forthcoming.

This issue of the Journal is framed around three considerations: an overview of the factors involved for a president "Navigating the New Media Age," questions surrounding "The Contours of Clinton Coverage," and an evaluation of "A New President-Press Equation." In addition to the 19 commentators on whose expertise we depend to make sense of the impact of "electronic democracy" on the presidency, this issue also includes two extended roundtable conversations with scholars, members of the White House press corps and other media professionals, who are best positioned to witness the changes brought by the new media.

Stephen Hess, a senior fellow at the Brookings Institution in Washington, D.C., and a scholar and observer of these questions, begins the discussion with an assessment of "President Clinton and the White House Press Corps—Year One." Neither party gets very high marks, Hess concludes—the press never came down from its campaign-induced adrenaline rush, and the Clinton team mishandled the media beginning on the day after the election. The result was a very bumpy ride for both press and president. Part of the problem, of course, was the president's "outsider" character that helped elect him in the first place, observes Frank Mankiewicz, a longtime Washington watcher who prides himself on being "the consummate outsider." In his essay "Can the Media Tame the Outsiders? (And Can the Outsiders Tame the Media?)," Mankiewicz continues the review of Clinton's "media wars." Casualties are high on both sides, he says, attesting to an enduring truth—presidential outsiders still need media insiders, and vice versa. Then political scientist Thomas E. Patterson of Syracuse
University weighs in with a look at what he calls a “Legitimate Beef—The Presidency and a Carnivorous Press.” “Clinton’s presidency was dogged from the start by hypercritical news coverage” that serves no one, he contends. And to conclude this section, the views of a dozen experts from both the media and the academy, convened for a roundtable discussion, are contained in a freewheeling conversation “Assessing the Press and Clinton in the New Media Age.”

HAVING SET THE GROUNDWORK, the Journal moves on to examine “The Contours of Clinton Coverage” during the first year of his administration. The first step is to quantify media attention to the Clinton White House, which database expert and 1987-88 Center research fellow Timothy R. Miller of California’s Information Access Inc. and Center Associate Director John V. Pavlik do in “Year One—Presidential Coverage by the Numbers,” a bibliometric computer comparison of the amount of news coverage in the first years of the Clinton and Bush administrations. The bottom line? Clinton got 40 percent more stories than Bush.

Meanwhile, of course, the new media also were covering Clinton’s first year. In “Adapting to Clinton and the New Media Reality,” media researcher James B. Lemert of the University of Oregon examines the various new avenues through which the White House got the word out. Then Betty Houchin Winfield, a journalism historian from the University of Missouri and 1988-89 Center fellow, takes a close-up look at one of the biggest news stories of the Clinton administration—Hillary Rodham Clinton—in “‘Madame President’—Understanding a New Kind of First Lady.” And Eleanor Clift, Newsweek’s White House correspondent, evaluates “The Surprising Mr. Gore—Miles Ahead on the Information Superhighway” as the administration’s point man on new media: “Technology has always been Al Gore’s ticket to tomorrow,” she writes.

Coverage of these key players of the Clinton administration, while a major component of media focus, has regularly been of secondary interest in a year punctuated by repeated missteps and con-
troversies that have swept the news. Chief among these appears to be Whitewater, which at press time seems to have all but stopped dead the Clinton ship of state. Martin Schram, a syndicated columnist and 1985-86 Center fellow, looks at how the press and the White House are handling the scandal that already has been called "Whitewatergate" in "For the Media, an Overdose of Scandalgate."

"Has everyone seen enough Whitewater rafting cartoons yet?" asks Joel Pett, editorial cartoonist for the Lexington (Ky.) Herald-Leader, in examining "What's So Funny?" about the role of op-ed cartoons. "Too much editorial cartooning today is uninformed gag writing," he complains. Elsewhere on the op-ed page, however, editorial writers work to offer informed and thoughtful analysis of issues in serving as the conscience of their newspapers and the communities they serve. Center researcher András Szántó directed a project to see how Bill Clinton fared on the editorial pages of 12 leading U.S. dailies and reports the results of that research in an essay titled "In Our Opinion . . . Editorial Page Views of Clinton's First Year."

Faring even worse than the Clinton administration is the national media, from the perspective of Little Rock, at least. In "From the Little Rock End of the Media Microscope," veteran Arkansas journalist Max Brantley, editor of the weekly Arkansas Times, critiques the standards and performance of the big-time journalists who have been descending on Little Rock since the start of the Clinton candidacy. And then, from the micro view of Little Rock, we move to a broader global view as Center research associate Jon Vanden Heuvel concludes this section with a look at how the foreign press perceive President Clinton in "A Domestic President Ventures Abroad."

MAKING SENSE of the "New President-Press Equation" is the goal of the Journal's third section. Where better to start than with a conversation with the man who has become the symbol of the "new media age"—Larry King. In "The Father of 'Talk Show Democracy'—On the Line with Larry King," the national oracle known as the "top banana of talk show hosts" reflects in an interview
with the *Journal* on “what he hath wrought” in bringing talk and pols together.

Talk shows are just one of the “new media” technologies actively employed by this White House, as the Center’s technology manager, Mark A. Thalhimer, reports in “Adventures in ‘Ideaspace’—The Electronic Age Comes to 1600 Pennsylvania Ave.,” an essay based on interviews with administration staff who manage the president’s new media facilities.

Then Robert MacNeil, executive editor of PBS’s “MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour” and a member of the Center’s National Advisory Committee, reflects on how television threatens to create instant presidential decision making as he examines “The Flickering Images That May Drive Presidents.” From there, author, journalist and political scientist Michael Nelson of Rhodes College in Memphis, Tenn., takes on the question of whether anything really is different with this administration’s president-press relationship in an essay called “Why the Press Exalts Presidential Power.” But does it? Eight members of the White House press corps, who gathered at Washington’s venerable Willard Hotel for a conversation with the *Journal*’s editors, seem hardly to exalt Bill Clinton in “Stranded Outside the Inner Sanctum—A Conversation with the White House Press Corps.”

Johanna Neuman, *USA Today*’s former White House correspondent and a 1993-94 Center fellow, concludes this section with a lighter look at White House coverage in “The Press and Presidential Pets, Children and Embarrassing Relatives.”

This issue’s book review essay is provided by political scientist Michael X. Delli Carpini of Barnard College, who offers an overview of some key works in the area of president-press relations while contributing his own insights into the relationship between the media and the leader of a democracy in “Critical Symbiosis—Three Themes on President-Press Relations.”

*LIKE MANY OF THE TOPICS* examined in the *Media Studies Journal*, that of “The Presidency in the New Media
Preface

"Age" is a moving target whose characteristics are evolving as quickly as the media technologies themselves. As essayist Nelson observes, there are few relationships so changeable as that between the press and the president; this volatility has never been so great as in the current administration, due in part to the style of this particular president and his policy agenda, but also because of the high octane added to the mix by the new media that helped Bill Clinton gain the office in the first place. It seems unlikely that presidents and other political figures, having discovered the new media roadways around an inconveniently critical press, will pull back from traveling them, or that the impact of these new technologies on the governing process won't continue to expand. President Clinton told TV and radio news directors that he could afford to "stiff" them "because Larry King liberated me by giving me to the American people directly." The quality of that "liberation"—to the American people, at least—remains to be seen, even if King himself asserts that the public will be better served. The benefits to presidents are self-evident. For the traditional news media, the task is to redefine once again the way they do their jobs in the context of a brave new electronic world.

—THE EDITORS