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Discussion Paper Series

The Road to Wikipolitics: Life and Death of the Modern Presidential Primary b. 1968 – d. 2008

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INTRODUCTION

“So it is that one sees no great political parties in the United States today.”
—Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1835

When Jeremy Ring reached across his desk in the Florida Senate Chamber last spring to vote Aye on an omnibus election-reform bill, his intention was modest. “I wanted to get Washington to do something to bring about a national catastrophic insurance program,” he told me in a telephone interview several months later. “My goal wasn’t to blow up the presidential-primary system or the Democratic Party.”¹

Whoops.

Among the many items contained in that bill, one provision—a seemingly minor one at that—fixed the date of the next Florida presidential primary as January 29, 2008. Ring and his colleagues knew that date would place the Florida vote close on the heels of the venerable New Hampshire Primary, which itself came days after the season-starting Iowa caucuses. As important, it set the Florida vote a week before what is being called “Super-super Tuesday,” the date when 24 states from the Bering Sea to the Sea Islands of Georgia hold primaries delivering nearly 50 percent of the delegates.

To Ring, this seemed the perfect spot in the campaign calendar for Floridians to occupy so he could push his pet issue on to the agendas of the Democratic candidates—a national insurance fund protecting property owners against such catastrophes as hurricanes, tornadoes and earthquakes. “This issue can only be solved on the federal level,” Ring said, “and I wanted some way to force the

presidential candidates to have to campaign in Florida so that they would take a position on it, just like they've had to take positions on Iowa's issues and New Hampshire's issues."

However logical this argument seemed in Florida, it smacked of high treason inside the Washington, D.C. headquarters of both the Democratic and Republican parties, as well as within the borders of the early-going states. The parties' rules held that only four states – Iowa, New Hampshire, Nevada and South Carolina -- could select delegates before Feb. 5. How dare voters in America's fourth-largest state divert candidates (and their armies of following reporters) from extolling the virtues of ethanol, warning of the evils of importing Canadian lumber, praising casino employees or attending Sunday services in South Carolina?

The Democratic National Committee reacted quickly and harshly. If Florida didn't step back into line, not a single one of its 210 delegates representing 4.25 million Florida Democrats would be seated at the National Convention in August. Moreover, state party leaders in Iowa, New Hampshire, South Carolina and Nevada browbeat the major Democratic candidates into signing pledges that they wouldn't campaign in Florida (although they could sneak into the state long enough to hold fundraisers closed to the public).

Said DNC board member Alexis Herman before voting to sanction Florida: "Are we going to uphold the rules or just have open season on the entire process?"²

Suffice it to say that the DNC got both: it upheld its rules *and* it got "open season" on the process. The GOP was only slightly less harsh, threatening to

whack Florida's Republican convention delegation by half but not asking candidates to stay away from the Sunshine State.

Florida's reaction, as *New York Times* political writer Matt Bai put it during a visit to Harvard, "could be counted on the finger of one hand." The reaction of Michigan Democrats a few weeks later when they, too, scheduled a primary on Jan. 15, was the same. The Democratic leadership in both states vowed to press ahead with the earlier dates, undeterred by the threat. Indeed, Democratic Chairman Howard Dean, in a subsequent attempt to quell rebellion, told reporters in Tallahassee that he fully expected that Florida's delegates would participate at the convention—a tacit admission of the party leadership's weakness.³

And what of the Florida legislators who precipitated the confrontation? "I think we have successfully blown up this antiquated primary process," Sen. Ring told Salon reporter Michael Scherer. "I have absolutely no regrets."⁴

Like Dean and others, Senator Ring is confident the 2008 Democratic nominee will ensure Florida's place at the convention "because we all know that Florida is too important to ignore." But he also believes that the intramural squabble he joined will have lasting impact. "They [the party leaders] can't let this happen again. You can't have four little states disenfranchising the rest of the country."

Campaign calendar chaos in 2008

When I arrived at the Shorenstein Center in September, 2007, I envisioned delivering a research paper focusing on the incipient rebellion against the presidential-primary calendar's guarantee of special treatment for Iowa, New

Hampshire and, lately, Nevada and South Carolina. I watched with interest as other states increasingly chafed against national party rules that protected the turf of the special four and they reacted by pushing forward their own primary dates—“front-loading” the process to the point where the whole thing could be effectively determined by Feb. 5, on Super-super Tuesday, seven months before the conventions and 10 months before Election Day. My hypothesis was that when Florida and a similarly defiant Michigan crashed the gates, it laid bare the powerlessness of the national political party leadership as we have known it for more than 150 years.

Although this remains speculation for now, I believe an argument can be made that this calendar chaos marks the end of the presidential-primary process put into place 36 years ago. A CBS News/*New York Times* poll released on Aug. 8, 2007 found growing resistance by voters to the existing process, with 72 percent saying they preferred a national primary. A majority for the first time said they want Iowa and New Hampshire to have less influence.⁵

Party leaders who defend the current system against this growing resentment seem destined to fail. It also seems not just arguable, but obvious that the national parties are but shells of what they once were, reminiscent of the zombie people in “Night of the Living Dead,” able to walk and talk and look alive, yet lacking souls. They are losing members along with influence and are seen increasingly, by candidates and voters alike, as irrelevant to the future.

But this is more than a story chronicling the deflation of the parties and their loss of clout as demonstrated through their inability to control even their own

presidential-nominating calendars. The fate of the parties and the presidential-primary process are but chapters in a larger and more important story.

In that story the parties and the primaries are joined in their decline by what is commonly called the “old media,” otherwise called the press, which incorporates newspapers, news magazines, broadcast television and cable television networks. The derisive tag “old” is to differentiate them from the “new” media that have exploded on the scene in recent years.

Common threads run through these victims’ stories. One thread is that each lost the trust of its constituency and became ripe for overthrow by another mediator, albeit 40 years apart. A second common thread—the one I will focus on in the second half of this paper—is that each in its own way has been marginalized, if not victimized, by the Internet, or more accurately, by the new media that operate there. What we have as we head into the 2008 presidential election is not just a new kid on the block that wants the old kids to share. We’ve entered an era where the new kid threatens to take over, if not now, almost certainly in the foreseeable future. Change is imperative; the old order cannot hang on.

Observers have been declaring the demise of the political parties for decades, although with admitted hyperbole. Esteemed *Washington Post* political reporter David Broder wrote a book entitled *The Party’s Over* nearly 30 years ago. What he referred to were the changes begun in 1968 that stripped from party insiders the nearly unchecked power to control the presidential nomination—to guard the gate. Those “reforms” ostensibly redistributed this power to voters who participate in the party primaries and caucuses. So on that point Broder was characteristically correct in charting the parties’ demise.

New gatekeepers

But what wasn't immediately apparent was that the old gatekeepers—the party bosses—were merely replaced by another set of gatekeepers—the press, especially television, both in its news coverage and its advertising power. On that score, the “people” who were supposed to take over after 1968 were short-changed. Admittedly the new gatekeepers, the media, didn't use their power to anoint nominees directly. But it became clear that indirect influence was enough to direct the outcome. As legendary New York newspaper editor Whitelaw Reid once said, you don't need to be king if you can “nurture and train” the king.

Unlike the old gatekeepers, the media wasn't necessarily interested in which candidate would make the best president, or even which one was most likely to win in a general election. Rather the new gatekeepers—especially television—were interested in which candidates were the most interesting, even the most entertaining. Some candidates quickly learned that the road to the nomination was not unlike the road to Academy Awards. Primary voters favored candidates with star power, those who were charismatic or entertaining or both. To be highly qualified in the general sense was, at best, secondary, a happy addition.

And candidates acquired star power (or a political version of it) through clever use of the media. The media, for its part, did what it does best: tell stories. And what could provide a better narrative than a long primary process featuring a cast of varying characters—some familiar and shopworn, others new and exciting—and played out over months with dramatic twists and turns?

Although none of the reformers intended it when they blew up the party rules in 1968, by the early 1980s it was evident that this new gatekeeper was in place.

“The news media,” said political scientist and pollster Michael W. Traugott “have become central actors in this process, both nationally and locally, because of the chronology of the primaries.”⁶

As the media’s influence grew, the parties’ influence declined until they were left with little more than the ability to milk rich partisans of donations and pour that money into the races of a favored few (where it would inevitably be spent on TV and image making). The media’s run as gatekeeper encountered nary a speed bump for some three decades. Thanks to the media, voters were variously thrilled or appalled by the likes of peanut-farming, garment-bag toting Jimmy Carter; Ronald “morning-in-America” Reagan; Michael “Willie Horton” Dukakis; George H.W. (critics said the W stood for “wimp”) Bush; H. Ross Perot’s giant-sucking sound; Bill “I never inhaled” Clinton; and Bob “Bob Dole” Dole.

The quadrennial show became such a media staple that the states that benefited the most from being in the national spotlight—especially Iowa and New Hampshire—generated envy from bigger states. It is remarkable that it took so long for other states to want a share of that spotlight, as Florida and Michigan did in 2008. An argument is often made that the national parties were able to maintain control over the calendar until 2008 largely because they had retained the ability to raise big dollars and to spend them on behalf of favored candidates in selected states after the nomination was settled. Any state that failed to follow the party’s approved calendar could be threatened with the loss of these dollars.

But such a threat today would barely be credible, as Florida and Michigan demonstrate. Why is that? The parties' last big weapon—the ability to direct the flow of money—shoots only blanks. The McCain-Feingold law, which outlawed “soft” money, is one factor. But another, vastly more important, factor is the emergence of the Internet as the conduit for fundraising, which allows candidates to bypass the parties and tap directly into Web-users' credit cards. One fact illustrates this: In the full year before the 1992 presidential-primary season, Bill Clinton raised \$4 million. In the run up to the 2008 campaign, supporters of Republican Ron Paul—a candidate far out of his party's mainstream—twice raised that amount over the Internet *in a single day*.

When trouble-making states defy party dictates and thumb their noses at threats of punishment, it can only be because the party leadership has begun to look like the Wizard of Oz blustering after Toto has pulled away the curtain.

The Internet made its serious appearance as a political medium in the 2000 campaign, although primarily as a gathering place for fringe characters like Matt Drudge and for conservatives who long felt that the mainstream media leaned sharply to the left. Newly created websites gave these conservatives a base from which to mount their attacks against more liberal candidates—Bill Clinton and Al Gore Jr. being target No. 1—unconstrained by mainstream media ethics or norms. In hindsight, it's safe to say that the 2000 election—settled ultimately not in the media, but in the U.S. Supreme Court—was the last where the “old” media reigned as sovereign.

Within the amazingly short span of three years, a handful of tech-savvy political consultants, who also regarded the party leadership and the mainstream media as

hopelessly outdated, rallied behind upstart Howard Dean, then governor of Vermont. Using the Internet in ways that few others understood, these political geeks nearly won him the nomination. *Nearly* is a key word; when Dean's candidacy imploded after his so-called "I have a scream" speech in Iowa, traditionalists in both the party and the mainstream media exhaled. They thought that his failure proved that the Web and its devotees would remain on the fringes, allowed to push the cart, but not to drive it.

Internet politicking

Even the traditionalists now admit to having been mistaken. Dean's campaign served as the beta test for other insurgents who, like Dean, defied tradition and built campaigns outside of the party structures and largely out of view of the mainstream media, at least at the outset. Two gained national attention in the mid-term elections in 2006. In Connecticut, novice candidate Ned Lamont snatched the Democratic Party nomination from incumbent U.S. Sen. Joe Lieberman, forcing Lieberman to run as an independent. In Virginia, Jim Webb, a former Reagan administration member, switched to Democrat and defeated incumbent U.S. Sen. George Allen, who was priming for a presidential run. Lamont and Webb cited the netroots—the virtual world's version of grassroots—as major factors in their successes.

This paper will explore how the Internet's array of tools is revolutionizing politics, paying particular attention to how it has already disrupted the presidential-primary process. My hypothesis is that the existing primary framework—the one wherein the political parties and the mainstream media worked in concert to control the campaign machinery—no longer fits the changing environment. We are witnessing the dawn of a "new" order in the

post-McGovern-Fraser era where countless citizens connected by the Internet are grabbing power from the old gatekeepers.

Is this good? Some argue that the Internet's ungoverned, everyman-can-be-king, ethos is an assertion of democracy because power is taken from elites and distributed to the people. Others warn that pure democracy can also tilt to mob rule. That's why James Madison argued against pure democracy and in favor of a republic, of representative government, where ostensibly wise leaders, drawing power from their constituents, set the rules for all the rest. So it is, according to the traditionalists, that the old gatekeepers, despite their faults, shaped a process that valued moderation over excess.

As compelling as that argument may be, it is by now anachronistic. The old order is falling and a new order shaped, if not directed, by the Internet is in ascendance. This paper begins by retracing the arc of the modern presidential primary process, from its birth after the tumultuous 1968 election to its near-certain death in 2008. Whether the new order can improve upon the old is an important, although secondary, question that this paper can only raise. Time will provide the answer.

To predict the future architecture of presidential-primary campaigns shaped by the Internet seems folly. But many say the process will follow one of two paths. The first leads to a place where debate in the public square is ungoverned, a kind of Wild West where the mob is able to overwhelm the sheriff who tries in vain to enforce civil conduct. It could be a nasty, intolerant place where insults drive out discourse and combat is valued over compromise. There's no denying that the Internet is already home to places like this.

The second future is more optimistic, what some might call Wikipolitics. In this scenario, the Internet is a place where the better elements of the mob—the *wise* members of the mob—quickly and consistently gather to face down extremists when they emerge. The mob becomes a posse in the Old West meaning of that word, joining with the sheriff to help impose order so that peace and harmony prevail. The bad guys may still be around, but they’ve been driven from the town square.

There is plenty of material to bolster predictions for either future, which will be analyzed in the last section. Here’s one hypothesis based on an historic analogue. In 1948, a team of researchers led by Bernard R. Berelson, Paul F. Lazarsfeld and William N. McPhee set up camp in Elmira, New York, a small manufacturing city that existed outside the orbit of any major city. The goal: to isolate the factors that went into an Elmira voter’s decision about whom to support for president in that year’s presidential election. They analyzed how union workers might be affected by the desires of the union leaders; how business owners might be influenced by economic and tax issues; how Protestants, Catholics and Jews were affected by their religious beliefs. What they learned to their surprise, however, was that none of these institutional factors counted as much as social factors—such as what individuals learned during trips to the barber shop, or in conversations with respected friends and associates. In other words, the personal contacts and community sensibilities weighed heaviest of all.⁷

For many Web users, it is the cyberspace version of community that draws them. Friendships are formed, information is shared and trust is built. Cyberspace becomes Elmira. Just as individuals learn to assign a credibility value to things

they're told by friends, it seems inevitable that individual Web users will assign credibility values to information they glean from their on-line friends. We will end up not as a mob, but as Elmira.

PART ONE: The King is Dead

“At bottom, the result of all these reforms was the diminution, the constriction, at times the elimination, of the regular party in the politics of presidential selection.”

—Byron E. Shafer, *Quiet Revolution*

John Bailey could sense trouble. It was fast approaching midnight in the Chicago convention hall, August 27, 1968, the close of the third, emotion-charged, even violent, day of the Democratic National Convention. The man with the gavel called for a full floor vote on a seemingly harmless resolution that would create a committee to study and recommend changes in party rules that wouldn't take effect for at least four years—if ever.

The resolution drew scant attention, hardly seen as a sideshow to the looming fight over the party's presidential nomination being contested among Hubert Humphrey, Eugene McCarthy and a surge for the young Massachusetts senator, Ted Kennedy, whose brother had been tragically assassinated barely 10 weeks before.

But Bailey, the formidable chairman of the Democratic National Committee skilled at working the smoke-filled backrooms of power, was wary of change, especially change wrapped in promises of reform. He quick-stepped down from the platform and into the midst of the Connecticut delegation—his delegation—and summoned its members to respond like a pride of lions protecting their territory against invading predators.

“Bailey knew immediately what the [resolution] implied,” recalled Ann Wexler, a backer of the resolution. “Bailey laid it down hard to the Connecticut delegation. He was a smart man and he knew. But many state chairmen didn’t understand.”⁸

The measure was the work of a group of disgruntled McCarthy-backers written by two young anti-war lawyers, Tom Alder and Geoffrey Cowan, and put forward by Iowa Gov. Harold Hughes (who would later admit he had only limited input). It called on the Democratic Convention to create a commission to overhaul the process by which delegates were elected. The goal, according to the Hughes Commission’s report: “That all state delegate selection systems which rely in whole or in part on direct appointment of delegates by state party executives should be prohibited outright and replaced with systems which permit meaningful popular participation in the selection process.”⁹

To Bailey, one of those “state party executives” otherwise known as the party bosses, those weren’t words of reform. They were words of revolution. But while Connecticut stood strong, the resolution passed because, as Wexler wrote later, with the exception of Boss Bailey, “nobody understood it.”¹⁰

Understanding would come soon enough. The Hughes Commission’s “manifesto”¹¹ for change gave birth to the Commission on the Selection of Democratic Presidential Nominees, which quickly became simplified as the McGovern-Fraser Commission after its co-chairmen, U.S. Sen. George McGovern of South Dakota, and Congressman Donald Fraser of Michigan. Whatever hopes the old party bosses held out against change were crushed that November in the presidential election as Democratic Party nominee Hubert Humphrey lost to Republican Richard Nixon, in large part because the anti-war

wing of the Democratic Party refused to fall in line. Humphrey, who hadn't run in a single state primary and who failed to forcefully distance himself from the unpopular war, was part of the problem and not part of the solution.

The reform wing found its footing through the McGovern-Fraser Commission. In order to participate in the 1972 presidential nominating convention, delegates had to be chosen in a process that favored state party primary elections or caucuses and they had to be connected, at least generally, to specific candidates. The central point was that voters—not party bosses—would make the decision. The Commission's report also included a number of other important changes, such as mandating gender and racial diversity, and establishing a general calendar within which the states were to conduct their nominating contests.

Taken together, the effect was to render powerless the old way of doing things and to transfer that power to voters in a string of presidential primaries—a system that Harry Truman had called “eyewash.” The McGovern-Fraser Commission's new rules turned that world upside down. “The formal changes were clearly the most extensive in 140 years,” wrote political-scientist Byron E. Shafer in 1983.¹² Larry O'Brien, who was chairman of the Democratic National Committee when the new rules were put into place, put it more colorfully: “This was the greatest goddamn change since the two-party system.”¹³

The king—the party boss as kingmaker—was dead. In the run up to the 1968 Democratic Convention, just 16 states selected delegates through a primary election, and only six of the 12 largest states did so. After the McGovern-Fraser Commission, nearly two-thirds of all the delegates sent to the 1972 convention had been selected through primaries. The number of states using a primary

system rose steadily until its peak in 1980, when 33 states (and the District of Columbia) followed that method, totaling nearly three-fourths of the delegates. “At a stroke, then,” Shafer wrote, “the regular party had been unseated.”¹⁴

On Jan. 24, 1972, as a cold front swept across the Great Plains and brought snow into Iowa, a relative handful of Democratic voters gathered in fire houses, school gymnasiums, church basements and farm houses to queue up in support of presidential candidates aiming to win the party’s nomination that summer in Miami Beach. Where a voter stood in these caucuses would eventually determine the number of Iowa delegates that each surviving candidate could claim as a supporter—just as the McGovern-Fraser Commission’s new rules dictated. Long live the newborn king.

PART TWO: Media as Gatekeeper 1976-2000

“Although it may go too far to say that the politician-as-celebrity has, by itself, made political parties irrelevant, there is certainly a conspicuous correlation between the rise of the former and the decline of the latter.”

—Neil Postman, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*

In late October, 1975, just eight weeks before the 1976 campaign would begin with the Iowa caucuses, a Gallup poll included what political observers thought would be the relevant candidates in that Democratic primary: Hubert Humphrey, George Wallace, Henry (Scoop) Jackson, George McGovern, Edmund Muskie and Sargent Shriver. Missing from the poll was Jimmy Carter, the little-known one-term governor of Georgia known mostly for his liberal Southern views, soft drawl and electrifying smile.

Three months later, Carter made fools of the political odds makers—as well as the party leaders, who favored Jackson or Humphrey, the old war horse—by finishing first in Iowa and leaping into a blinding media spotlight of a magnitude not previously seen in the preliminary stages of a presidential campaign. So astonishing was Carter’s victory that the nation’s most influential weekly magazines, *Time* and *Newsweek*, devoted 726 lines to the newcomer while his opponents were accorded barely 30 lines apiece.¹⁵ He starred on the morning TV network programs and dominated the evening newscasts of CBS, NBC and ABC, the nation’s only broadcasting networks, collecting five times as much precious airtime as his rivals.¹⁶

It was the advent of the media wave, one that Carter would climb atop and surf all the way to the New Hampshire primary, the historic, first-in-the-nation

contest and long a favorite of the news media. The charismatic Georgian—at least that’s what the media said at the time—traveled the Granite State in a down-home style, carrying his own suitcase, sleeping in guest bedrooms and winning the backing of the state’s flinty voters. And he won again.

For the second time, Carter’s toothy grin adorned the covers of *Time* and *Newsweek*. Political scientist James W. Davis, who measured the coverage, found that Carter gathered 25 times more lineage in the magazines than U.S. Rep. Morris Udall, his closest competitor, and nine times more than all Democrats combined. *Washington Post* political writer David Broder called New Hampshire “The most heavily promoted media event of our outrageously *theatrical* presidential nominating system.”¹⁷ The emphasis on the word “theatrical” is mine; Broder was on to something.

Carter proved to be unstoppable. In Florida, the next major primary, he crushed his only southern rival, former Alabama Gov. George Wallace—the surly and bombastic one-time segregationist—and hardly looked back. Carter’s success in riding the media wave from “Jimmy Who?” to the Democratic nomination became the template for a generation of candidates to follow. What Carter taught was that a candidate didn’t need the party insiders to win. A candidate did, however, need an image maker, a kind of magician who could transform a pedestrian campaigner—even one with a syrupy accent and a boyish first name—into a made-for-television celebrity. The fact that presidential primaries emerged from the shadows during television’s golden age—a time before cable and satellite TV brought countless competition to the three big networks—proved serendipitous.

Role of the Calendar

The primary campaign schedule also contributed to this combustible mix, something no one involved in setting it up or in forging the McGovern-Fraser reforms had anticipated. But to television and the media, the calendar provided perfect pacing for the election season, pacing that made possible a kind of gathering drama that today's audiences associate with such programs as "24" or "Survivor." In this political drama, a little-known politician could emerge from obscurity by winning the hearts of audiences in Iowa and New Hampshire, states small enough to enable even candidates on Wal-Mart budgets to compete with the fat cats.

As Jimmy Carter showed, all you need to do is get a slightly bigger slice of the pie than the others to get noticed in the media. Lost to obscurity is the fact that Carter didn't even "win" in Iowa; he finished behind the slate of uncommitted delegates. No matter, the media's launch of his candidacy propelled him into New Hampshire with such a surge that the modesty of his finish was lost.

Thanks to the way the primary campaign schedule was crafted that year, Carter was able to amass new and greater resources as he went along, like the winner in a game of Monopoly who gathers the holdings of those who drop out. George H.W. Bush in 1980 dubbed this "the Big Mo," Bushspeak for "momentum," after he—like Carter four years before—emerged from the back of the pack in Iowa, beating Ronald Reagan and others, and then barreled toward New Hampshire.

Gone from this drama, however, were the parties. Even Bush's collapse and Reagan's revival in New Hampshire could be credited to an ability to perform

when the media spotlight—in that case quite literally—was on. The defining moment of the 1980 New Hampshire primary came during what had been billed as a *mano-a-mano* television debate between Reagan and Bush, although paid for entirely by the Reagan campaign. When Bush arrived to take his seat, Reagan announced that they would be joined by the half-dozen other Republican candidates, who were waiting in the wings. Bush became overtly flustered by this last-minute change and even the moderator objected—only to be verbally slapped down by Reagan who said in a commanding voice, “I paid for this microphone, Mr. Green.”

Never mind that the moderator’s surname was actually Breen. This moment, a fleeting fragment that was irrelevant to any of the issues that might have been on the minds of voters, was the ultimate in theatrics and was replayed countless times in TV newscasts. Gone was Bush’s “Big Mo.” Gone, too, was the naïve concept that campaigning among the rank and file or winning the backing of party leaders mattered more, or even as much, as winning in the media.

Is the ‘new’ better than the ‘old’?

In 1985, barely a dozen years into the McGovern-Fraser era, political scientist Michael W. Traugott framed it this way: “The news media have become central actors in this process, both nationally and locally, *because of the chronology of the primaries* [emphasis added]. They provide information about the candidates, about both their positions and their style, to a public that is relatively uninformed about many of them and relatively uninterested in the process of electing a president at this stage of the game.

“The media,” he continued, “also establish standards of performance for the candidates and report on their progress in meeting them. In this limited but important way, they have replaced the parties in the candidate selection process through their effects on winnowing the field.”¹⁸

Even the national nominating conventions found themselves with no purpose beyond providing another stage at which the media spotlight could shine. “With rare exceptions,” wrote James W. Davis, “the prospective nominee in each of the major parties is now clearly identified by the voters in the primary states and national media several weeks before the delegates flock to the convention city.”¹⁹

Whether the new gatekeepers—the media—served democracy better than the old ones is subject to lively debate. Until the 2008 cycle the process seems to have enjoyed overwhelming support from voters, candidates and the parties. And why not?

Thomas Mann, in an essay written for the American Enterprise Institute in 1985, found much to be praiseworthy about: “The system is said to be open, deliberative, and responsive to popular preferences. It is open to ‘one man and the truth,’ a candidate without extensive resources or national recognition who taps a vein of public sentiment, and open to individuals whose strong feelings about a candidate or issue propel them to active participation in party affairs. It is deliberative in the sense that it is sequential, providing sufficient time and varying conditions under which candidates can be scrutinized by the media, by activists, and by the voters. It is responsive to popular preferences because presidential primaries dominate—candidates cannot win the nomination without demonstrating their appeal among the party’s rank and file.”²⁰

In short, the system seemed to meet the needs of both those who were running the game—the media, which liked the drama it provided—and those who participated—the voters.

Of course there were critics, among them those who, like social critic Neil Postman, decried the way an important part of the democratic process had been turned into something close to entertainment. Mann, the political scientist, lamented that because most of the delegates attending the national conventions were there primarily to cast a vote for the candidate who had won their states, more enduring issues—such as policies that might be in the long-term best interest of the party—were ignored.

“Modern conventions ratify choices made in primaries and caucuses, and delegates are merely agents for candidates and interest groups, not representatives of the larger party constituency,” Mann wrote.²¹

Harvard political scientist Thomas Patterson echoed this concern nearly two decades later in his book, *The Vanishing Voter*. Prior to the McGovern-Fraser reforms, the party leadership took on the function of assessing a candidate’s “electability and fitness” for office. After the reforms that function was taken on by the press, but with a critical exception. “[T]he press is not like the parties,” Patterson wrote. “The parties are driven by the force of their traditions and constituent interests... In contrast, the press is driven by what the *New York Times*’ James Reston described as ‘the exhilarating search after the Now.’”²²

The Media's Basic Instinct

One of the Democrats' most successful strategists, Joe Trippi, said the media's baser instincts took hold, which was to treat the presidential campaign as just another program to be packaged and sold to viewers.²³ The more entertaining or scandalous the candidate, the more attention he or she would get. Examples of this are too numerous to list, but the mention of just two—the sex scandals involving Gary Hart in the primary-phase of the 1988 campaign and Bill Clinton just prior to the 1992 New Hampshire primary—makes the point.

Hart's affair with a Miami model broke as a Page One story in the *Miami Herald* on May 3, 1987 and exploded with such force that he retired from the race the following Friday. Clinton's alleged affair with singer Gennifer Flowers became public with her tell-all story in a supermarket tabloid, the *National Star*, just days before the New Hampshire primary. Clinton, however, had apparently learned from Hart's experience; rather than retreat, he attacked. Seated on a sofa with his wife, Hillary, the Arkansas governor agreed to an interview on CBS' "60 Minutes" program just two days before the primary. By coincidence, the program followed the Super Bowl and drew an audience that *Time* magazine estimated at 100 million viewers—roughly the number that would vote that fall in the presidential election.

That appearance may have represented the high-water mark of audience interest in primary campaigns (if it can be said to have been interest in a campaign and not in a sex scandal). Coverage of the primary campaigns during the first three months of 1992 dominated the networks' evening news coverage. "No other news event in this period received coverage that was even close," wrote Kathleen E. Kendall.²⁴

But audience interest is not the same as public interest. An important, although rhetorical, question is whether the dalliances of either man would have seen the light of day in the pre-reform era when the party bosses vetted the candidates behind closed doors. The intramural conquests of John F. Kennedy, which remained open secrets before and during his presidency, suggest that the answer is no.

This transformation of presidential-primary campaigns into media drama felt to many to be dangerously similar to entertainment programming. And the media, as is its wont, pushed the pendulum too far. A backlash among many Americans was inevitable. “As television transformed political campaigns, people began viewing elections as no different from any other product someone was trying to sell them—a new Chrysler, a new bacon-Monterey cheeseburger, a strapless pair of shoes,” wrote Trippi, the Democratic political strategist. “So they channel surfed. They tuned out.”²⁵

The percentage of voters who participated in the presidential campaign plummeted from 62.8 percent in 1960 to below 50 percent in 2000, Trippi found. The percentage of people who worked for a political party also plunged by 42 percent over the same 30 year period that encompassed the McGovern-Fraser reforms. Similarly drastic declines by Americans in civic or political activities were recorded by sociologist Robert Putnam in his classic book, *Bowling Alone*.

Added Trippi: “Across the board, Americans—made hopeless by a hope-killing process—have been leaving politics in droves.”²⁶

Paradoxically, this rising cynicism among the public hasn't yet slaked the media's appetite for reprising—probably to excess—the quadrennial Iowa-New Hampshire show. Perhaps inevitably, the ability of those two states to attract so much of the media spotlight at the outset of a campaign was bound to stick in the throats of other states. This jealousy long ago gave rise to the phenomenon of “front-loading,” the practice of other states rescheduling their primaries as early in the election-year calendar as possible so as to bask in the after glow of the media spotlight falling upon Iowa and New Hampshire. States that waited their turns—among them until recently were California and New Jersey—usually found themselves irrelevant to the process as the nominees were already known by the time their primaries rolled around.

Until 2008, the parties' leadership had been able to provide a protected space around the early states by ruling that the voting “window” wouldn't open for other states until some weeks after Iowa and New Hampshire voters had cast their ballots and set the race in motion. Any state that crashed that window would face punishment, including forfeiture of its delegates' seats at the nominating convention.

Death of the post-McGovern primaries?

So what change turned the 2008 process into a political train wreck? Why would two major states, Florida and Michigan, and several smaller ones so brazenly defy the party leaders? Simply put, because the addictive pull of the media spotlight is stronger than the threat of the party sanctions. That's why U.S. Sen. Carl Levin, a Michigan Democrat, was nonplussed in early December when the Democratic National Committee voted to strip his state of its 2008 convention delegates because of the state's decision to move its primary to Jan. 15, thus breaking the

window and forcing Iowa and New Hampshire to schedule their votes earlier than ever in the primary calendar. “The threat not to seat the delegates of Michigan and Florida at the Democratic convention is a hollow threat,” Levin said in a statement picked up by the Associated Press. “They will be seated, and when they are, it will be plain for all to see that the privileged position that New Hampshire and Iowa have extracted through threats and pledges from candidates is on its last legs.”

If Senator Levin is correct—and the evidence is strong that he is—the presidential-primary process that has controlled the selection of nominees for the past 40 years is in its death throes. Without drastic reforms in the years before the next presidential election in 2012, other states almost certainly will follow the leads of Florida and Michigan in defying the parties’ central leadership, perhaps even demanding an end to the hegemony enjoyed by Iowa and New Hampshire.

The parties themselves are like wounded soldiers, marching forward, but slowly and inexorably losing strength. Granted, candidates will still brand themselves as adherents to one party or the other, just as sports fans align with particular teams even though they don’t depend on those teams for any real support. But without radical change, they will become models of form and not function.

And the parties aren’t alone in their decrepitude. Following not far behind are the armies of the “old” media, which the evidence shows may have worn out their welcomes after performing as the central actors for more than three decades. The numbers:

- Newspaper circulation has sagged like a four-day-old balloon, dropping 2.4 percent according to the Audit Bureau of Circulation between 1996

and 2004. Readership took an even steeper dive; the Pew Center for the People and the Press found a 16 percent decline during that same period in answer to the question, “Did you read a newspaper yesterday?”²⁷

- Evening news audience has been in something of a freefall since 1980, the period encompassing the golden-era of the television-based political campaign. Some 53 million Americans watched the network news programs in 1980, when Jimmy Carter was battling it out with Ronald Reagan. By 2004 that number was 28 million and slipping.²⁸
- The press as an institution is at an all-time low in maintaining the confidence of Americans. It ranked dead last in the 2007 National Leadership Index by the Harvard Kennedy School’s Center for Public Leadership, falling even below Congress and the White House. *In fact, 64 percent of those surveyed said they don’t trust the news media’s coverage of the 2008 presidential campaign.*²⁹

Just as in 1968, the time is again ripe for change. The two institutions that had framed the presidential campaign process since the inception of political parties nearly 200 years ago—the parties and the press—appear frail, exhausted and vulnerable for replacement.

PART THREE: A Newcomer Spoils the Party

“The days when political parties held a monopoly on organizing their constituents were over; it was just that no one seemed to know it yet.”

—Matt Bai, *The Argument: Billionaires, Bloggers and the Battle to Remake Democratic Politics*

As political events in Virginia go, few are more important than the annual St. Patrick’s Day picnic to raise money for Democrats hosted by Gerry Connolly, chairman of the Fairfax County Board of Supervisors. The picnic features a straw poll where the attendees cast votes for participating party candidates. The 2006 picnic served also as a local kick-off for the Democratic campaign to unseat Republican U.S. Senator George Allen, who seemed so confident of victory that he reveled in talk about a presidential campaign to be launched shortly thereafter.

Truth be told, not many within the state Democratic leadership had much hope that Allen could be stopped. But most, including Connolly, were lining dutifully up behind Harris Miller, a wealthy Fairfax lawyer-lobbyist who seemed willing to act the sacrificial lamb. But the idea of a token candidate was not going down well with a group of activists who wanted to raise hell about Allen’s support for the war in Iraq. They wanted a candidate who would raise hell alongside them and Miller, at least in their minds, wasn’t that guy.³⁰

Jim Webb was.

Oddly, this was the same Jim Webb who had served under Ronald Reagan as Secretary of the Navy and the same Jim Webb who wrote powerful, violent novels lionizing men in war. But in 2006 it was also the Jim Webb who had a

son in Iraq and who had become convinced that the Bush administration had misled the American public in justifying the need for war. The question was whether this former conservative Republican could win nomination as a Democrat.

In fact, this was the question that even Jim Webb himself was raising. But Lowell Feld, a liberal blogger, believed that the answer was yes. The first person Feld had to persuade was Webb himself, which Feld set out to do by launching a draft-Webb petition on-line. In short order, the petition gathered 1,000 signatures and pledges of \$30,000 in donations. Thus armed, Feld met with Webb and Webb's political team to urge him to go ahead. The "netroots" would provide his base, Feld argued. Although the candidate remained skeptical, in late February—just six days before the St. Patrick's Day picnic—Webb agreed to go forward. But showing up at the picnic and competing in the straw poll, which was sure to get media attention, were two different things. Political consultant Steve Jarding recalled in an interview that Webb was reluctant to enter the straw poll arguing that the party insiders likely to participate hadn't had a chance to warm to him. Again, however, Feld persuaded the new candidate to trust the netroots. As St. Patrick's Day arrived, Feld said, "All these people started showing up at the picnic, like in that line about the barbarians crashing the gates. When the tally was taken, Webb won." The party leaders' preferred candidate, Harris Miller, "looked like he'd been hit by a truck," Feld recalled.

If not by a truck, Miller had been hit by the swinging pendulum of emerging technology, namely Internet-powered campaigning. Jarding estimated the pro-Webb crowd at the picnic as between 400 to 500 people, a huge turnout. "People were saying, 'Wow, look at all these new Democrats.' But they weren't

Democrats,” he recalled. “They were bloggers, many of whom hate the parties.”³¹

Webb went on to win the Democratic nomination and the general election—the latter in large part because of the Internet’s ability to spotlight several of Allen’s campaign gaffes, most notably his description of a dark-skinned Webb campaign operative as a “macaca.” Webb’s success that year was replicated in other races across the country where little-known contenders who made smart use of the Internet upset party regulars or campaign favorites. Political bloggers could no longer be described as fringe zealots whose only activism came by tapping their fingers on a keyboard.

Bloggers are players

Bloggers “have established themselves as players,” said Jarding a year after the campaign. “They can generate money and bodies. It used to be that you could dismiss them as just a few people sitting in their basements in front of a computer talking to other people in the same situation. You can’t do that anymore...”

Some political analysts trace the earliest example of Internet-based campaigning to Jesse Ventura’s third-party run for governor of Minnesota in 1998. But the full measure of Internet technology emerged during the insurgent presidential campaign of Vermont Gov. Howard Dean in the pre-primary phase of the 2004 campaign. Credit goes mostly to Dean’s veteran campaign consultant, Joe Trippi, a self-described computer geek, who turned Dean from a skeptic to an apostle about Internet campaigning.

In his book about the Dean campaign, *The Revolution Will Not Be Televised*, Trippi recounts how he learned, often by accident, that the Internet not only enabled the campaign to reach out to supporters, but that it enabled supporters to reach back into the campaign. He said the Dean campaign was picked up and carried by backers who came through the Web. Few of them had previous experience with campaigning and many disdained traditional politics.

The campaign's Web site was designed to enable visitors to contribute both money and ideas. A daily blog kept followers up to date on happenings inside the ropes, both the significant and the trivial. It included campaign videos and other materials that could instantly be shared. A social-networking site, Meetup.com, became the primary vehicle for organizing the governor's supporters around the country and building support for rallies.

“In a system designed after Jimmy Carter's 1976 win with the sole purpose of thwarting insurgents, Dean for America came within two bad weeks of winning Iowa and New Hampshire, and likely storming on to victory across the country,” Trippi wrote. “And the campaign did this even though we began with no major party apparatus, no party money, no support from party leadership, and none of the critical Democratic institutions behind us.”³²

The message sent by the Dean campaign was blunt and unmistakably clear: The right candidate needed only to connect with supporters through the Internet to become viable. The traditional gatekeepers—the party apparatus and the political press—were, if not irrelevant, no longer in charge. *New York Times* political writer Matt Bai framed it well in his book *The Argument: Billionaires, Bloggers and the Battle to Remake Democratic Politics*: “[Until 2004] the party and its leaders derived

their power from a single source: money. Only the party could raise the cash needed for campaigns, and for that reason, the party got to decide who the favored candidates were, what they should say, and which of the cautious Washington consultants would help them say it. But the Internet was sapping that power.”³³

Bai found in 2004 that much of what had previously been the task of the party—things such as candidate recruiting and get-out-the-vote activity—had been shouldered by such rump groups as MoveOn.org, the Center for American Progress and Americans Coming Together (ACT), bankrolled by deep-pocketed liberals such as Peter Lewis of Cleveland, financier George Soros and San Francisco real-estate mogul Herb Sandler and his wife Marion.

For the first time ever, Bai wrote, these activists had created “an alternative structure to the Democratic Party’s voter-turnout machine.” One of the activists likened the movement to a “shareholder revolt” where stakeholders in the organization conclude that the company had failed and “launch a hostile takeover of their own.”³⁴

“In fact,” Bai continued, “the very same thing was just now starting to happen in the world of Democratic politics.... All around the country, a far larger and broader group of ordinary shareholders, *emboldened by the Internet*, had begun to launch a hostile takeover of their own.” The words in italics are mine to emphasize the obvious: It’s not likely that such a revolt could have succeeded without the Internet to coordinate and fuel it.

Jim Webb's experiences in the 2006 election added evidence to the charge that the parties were heading toward impotence. And his race wasn't unique. In Connecticut that year, the Democratic senatorial race pitted incumbent Joseph Lieberman—the party's vice-presidential candidate in 2000—against a little-known Greenwich town selectman named Ned Lamont. Like Webb, Lamont had no support within the Democratic establishment, but plenty of backing among liberal bloggers infuriated by Lieberman's unquestioning support of the Bush administration's war in Iraq.

The Connecticut primary became a national test of anti-war sentiment featured on such sites as Daily Kos, MyDD and Firedoglake. The long-shot nature of the contest was evident in the polls where Lamont trailed Lieberman by more than 40 points just three months before the primary vote. Lamont's vast personal wealth enabled him to stay within range of Lieberman when it came to spending on staff and paid TV ads. But Lamont credited the bloggers with whipping up fervor among those who turned out at campaign events, typically in numbers far beyond what campaign staff estimated.³⁵

Lamont's victory in the Democratic primary forced Lieberman to run as an independent in a three-way General Election race. But the fact that Lieberman held on to his seat with a plurality can be no comfort to the Democratic Party leadership, which had found itself not only twice rebuffed at the polls, but faced with a Democrat-turned-independent in the U.S. Senate.

Internet's impact accelerating

By any measure, the Internet's impact on campaigning has accelerated since the mid-term elections. Political consultant Mark McKinnon, the chief media adviser

to George W. Bush in his 2000 and 2004 campaigns, told a Harvard Kennedy School audience in the fall of 2007 that the Internet tools that were new barely four years ago—social-networking sites, video sharing, fundraising and blogging—are mainstream in the run up to 2008. “This really is the YouTube election,” McKinnon said in late 2007.³⁶ “It has diminished what I do and it has put power into the hands of people who can do ads in their bedrooms.”

In the 2008 pre-primary phase, Republican Ron Paul, a libertarian congressman from Houston, represented his party’s fringe. Yet by the most traditional of yardsticks—money—Paul was equal to the fight with the frontrunners. The congressman’s backers raised an astonishing \$4.07 million on Nov. 5, 2007, which is marked on the British calendar as Guy Fawkes Day. Fawkes was a Roman Catholic zealot who, on Nov. 5, 1605, attempted to kill King James I by blowing up the Parliament—an act that, among libertarians, has become a metaphor for blowing up big government.³⁷

To put that accomplishment in perspective, it exceeds what then-Gov. Bill Clinton raised during all of 1991, the year before his election. Democratic consultant Tad Devine told the *Boston Globe* that this ability raise vast sums via the Web is transforming politics. “You have candidates who have resources that were never available to others before. Suddenly raising five or six million dollars a week isn’t a pipe dream,” he said.³⁸

Consider what this means in a larger sense. Since the advent of the modern campaign, political parties have maintained discipline by using their control over the resources needed for candidates to succeed. A candidate who failed to abide

by the party's rules risked being cut off from critical backing, like a prodigal son stricken from a father's will.

But what happens to the parties when the resources can be found elsewhere? What obligation to the parties are owed by such candidates as Jim Webb, Ned Lamont, Ron Paul and even Howard Dean, who went on to become the Democratic Party chairman? Put in the reverse, what debt can the parties collect from candidates like these to make a do-this-or-else threat have meaning?

The fact is that the parties have lost their leverage here. These candidates have shown that the Internet provides an alternative structure where anyone can raise money, aggregate support and communicate a message at little cost. So where does this leave the parties? As totems, of course, able to garb the nominee in the right uniform to help voters understand which team he or she represents. Parties in the future will likely remain as useful campaign machines able to provide back-shop operations to candidates—for example, candidate recruiting and training—and able to supplement a candidate's own team when the nomination is settled and the General Election underway.

These services aren't inconsequential. But, like the Wizard of Oz, the party today is bereft of the power it once had to hand-pick candidates, to organize the campaigns and do all but control the outcome. It even lacks the power needed to quell restive members who demand that the 36 year-old presidential-primary process—and the calendar that shapes it—be changed to fit the new environment.

The emergence of the Web since 2003 is not the sole contributor to the campaign calendar's collapse and perhaps not even the principal one. Critics have complained for years that the media—paid and unpaid—had turned the process into a circus and that reforms were needed to preserve the status quo. But until the Internet's arrival, the old order held firm, suggesting that Internet campaigning provided the proverbial last straw. Now there can be little doubt that the Web has triggered a tectonic shift in the way politics is conducted—a shift that has profound implications for the future.

PART FOUR: Can “Mob Wisdom” Tame the Web?

“[I]t may well happen that the public voice, pronounced by the representative of the people, will be more consonant to the public good than if pronounced by the people themselves...”

—James Madison, *Federalist Papers* No. 10

Former Vermont Gov. Howard Dean, never short of superlatives, describes the Internet as “the most democratic invention since Gutenberg and the printing press. The Internet is Gutenberg on steroids.” Although Dean went on to run unsuccessfully for president in 2004, then successfully as Democratic Party chairman in 2005, his reference to a democratic Internet is with a small “d.”³⁹

And he’s not alone in that belief. Unlike in the “old” media, where wags say that freedom of the press belongs to him who owns one, there are no significant barriers to publishing on the Web. You don’t need a press or a broadcast license. You don’t even need reporters or training of any kind. To become a blogger requires little more than access to a computer with an Internet connection and an outsized ego pushing the message that “everybody is entitled to my opinion.”

Markos Moulitsas Zuniga, whose blog DailyKos is among the most popular of the liberal sites, epitomizes this. In a speech at Boston University in October, 2007, Moulitsas said bloggers like him are motivated by the mainstream media’s unwillingness or inability to mobilize opposition to the George W. Bush administration in general and to the Iraq war in particular. “We had a dramatic market failure on our hands,” he said. In the pre-Internet years, Moulitsas said he would have had few ways to act on his frustration.

“I could go lick stamps in a dinger campaign office. I could watch a TV ad. I could vote. That was about it,” the lawyer-turned-blogger told the audience. “Technology now makes it possible for us to take charge of our lives. Rather than rail against the media, we are becoming media. No longer content to merely receive messages, we send them ourselves—and not because someone gave us permission, but because we roused ourselves.”⁴⁰

My guess is that if James Madison were around today he would not be a fan of the blogosphere. The founding father and advocate of representative government argued passionately and successfully in the *Federalist Papers*—today we might call it *Wiki-Publius*, using Madison’s pen name—that to place all decision-making in the hands of the people would invite mob rule.

“Democracies have ever been spectacles of turbulence and contention,” Madison wrote, “...and have in general been as short in their lives as they have been violent in their deaths.”⁴¹ Clearly the democratic (small “d”) Web hosts its share of turbulence and contention, more than enough for present-day Madisonians to decry its lack of anointed mediators. But without question, those who use the Internet to gather information are no longer the privileged or nerdy few, as was the case in 1995 when just 8 percent of respondents said they did so in a survey by The Times Mirror Center for the People and Press. A decade later two-thirds of the people admitted to being Internet users and their group portrait was beginning to look a lot like a portrait of American voters.⁴²

In the preceding section we’ve seen how the Web transformed the way campaigns are conducted and how these changes, coupled with others, have affected the presidential primary process. In this section we’ll look at how that

information is spread, consumed and then put into action as votes. To borrow from the car commercial, this is not your grandfather's way of doing things. Voters in the future are less likely to want their political information to come to them after prescreening by mediators in the parties or the press, two institutions now dogged by distrust. Although mainstream journalists contend that their training and ethical constraints add value to the information they pass along, the trend seems unstoppable that people will increasingly use the Web to customize the information they get, compiling what MIT's Nicholas Negroponte famously called *The Daily Me*.

But this carries with it profound implications. Do Americans actually want their political information to be truly democratic in the non-partisan meaning of the word, where every participant's voice is to be treated as the equal of all others? Where something gleaned from the "old" media is treated no differently from something gleaned from a blog on the Web?

Just as Madison two centuries ago saw reason to fear a pure democracy, there is ample concern to fear much of what the Internet is bringing to the political process.* Most news traditionalists would adopt Madison's argument that the blogosphere too often resembles the mob by being coarse in its behavior, often ignorant and caring nothing at all for voices of dissent. Cass R. Sunstein, in his book *Infotopia*, writes that the blogosphere offers "a stunningly diverse range of

* I will leave it to others to raise the legitimate concerns that arise from the Internet's impact on the archaic business models that sustain mainstream news organizations. The shift by many people to on-line news and away from the traditional press is forcing them to cut staffs and investments in news gathering, thus shrinking the pool of verified information. Suffice it to say that despite an occasional "gotcha" by a blogger—the Dan Rather report relying on a discredited letter to accuse President Bush of evading military service during the Vietnam War is an oft-cited triumph—the blogosphere is woefully short of original news reporting and depends on reworking what has been produced by the mainstream media. (Carried to its extreme, the day could come when so little original reporting is available for a growing legion of bloggers that each information nugget will be so finely spun as to be meaningless).

claims, perspectives, rants, insights, lies, facts, falsehood, sense and nonsense.” In other words, Sunstein finds the on-line world to be an information soup where a reader is just as apt to get botulism as nourishment.⁴³

Can anyone play journalist?

“Even the best blogs lack anything like pre-publication peer review,” Sunstein wrote, “and their speed and informality often ensure glibness, superficiality, confusion and blatant errors. Many blogs in law and politics are close to talk radio, or to brisk and irresponsible conversations over the lunch table.”⁴⁴

A British journalist took similar aim at the notion of an egalitarian Web in an article published in a trade-union magazine. The writer, Donnacha DeLong, ridiculed the notion that a blogger with no particular credentials should be accorded the same credibility as a professional journalist’s reporting and commentary. “It’s like saying anyone can play for Manchester United,” DeLong wrote, referring to England’s powerhouse soccer franchise. “In one of the main examples given to explain Web 2.0, Wikipedia replaces Britannica Online. Is that the kind of democracy we want—where anyone can determine the information that the public can access, regardless of their level of knowledge, expertise or agenda?”⁴⁵

DeLong’s reference to Wikipedia bears exploring. Wikipedia is the wildly popular Internet encyclopedia that proudly operates on the idea that there is more wisdom to be found in its crowds of anonymous readers than in the brains of editors and academics. More than 700 new entries are made daily to Wikipedia, with few restrictions as to who can create them. Every entry is subject to review by every other reader, however, and if one or more of those

readers spots a factual error—or at least perceives an error—that reader can jump in and change or challenge it.

As Wikipedia’s co-founder Jimmy Wales envisioned it, an entry could start with a simple skeleton of information—for example, the name of a notable person with birth date, hometown, education and profession. Then as others came to the page with even more information about that person, they could add other pieces until a fully-fleshed out person emerged. In short, the crowd can contribute more than any single individual.

The concept is certainly brilliant—except for this weakness: The accuracy of any entry depends on the quality of the information that those crowd members bring. In other words, it assumes a crowd of “reasonable people” who will create and edit the entries.⁴⁶ Sadly, that isn’t always the case. Wikipedia’s emergence as a credible source of information was badly damaged shortly after its launch when someone hiding behind an opaque username rewrote the entry about John Seigenthaler Sr., a prominent journalist at *USA Today*, the *Nashville Tennessean*, and a former aide to the late Attorney General Robert F. Kennedy. The bogus entry stated that Seigenthaler may have played a role in the assassinations of Robert and President John F. Kennedy in 1963. It also said that Seigenthaler had lived in the Soviet Union for 13 years until 1984 and upon his return started one of the nation’s largest public relations companies.

None of this was true. Yet it remained posted on Wikipedia for four months and was picked up and reproduced without change on two other Websites. Finally Seigenthaler’s son, a reporter for a network news organization, found it and warned his father, who had the false information removed and a correction

posted in its place. Although Seigenthaler spent weeks trying to unmask the on-line vandal's identity, he learned that the identity was protected by federal privacy laws. He learned also that Wikipedia and similar sites have been insulated by law against libel suits arising out of information they carry.

The distinguished journalist recounted his experience with Wikipedia in a column for *USA Today*, where he concluded with a story: "When I was a child, my mother lectured me on the evils of 'gossip.' She held a feather pillow and said, 'If I tear this open, the feathers will fly to the four winds, and I could never get them back in the pillow. That's how it is when you spread mean things about people.'

"For me," Seigenthaler continued, "that pillow is a metaphor for Wikipedia."⁴⁷

Echo chambers and cocoons

Getting things wrong—and escaping responsibility for it—is just one of the problems of this democratized Internet. Sunstein also faults the Internet for making it too easy for people to seek out and support those Web sites and bloggers who already share their views. Liberals gather with liberals and conservatives gather with conservatives in an us-versus-them debate where objective information is the first casualty, he said.

There are two problems here, Sunstein found. The first is an "echo chamber" effect where someone with already strong views can be pushed to the extreme after gaining uncritical support from affirming voices. The second is what Sunstein called the "information cocoon" where people "hear only what we choose to hear and only what comforts and pleases us.... If members of a

political group—or a nation’s leaders—live in a cocoon, they are unlikely to think well, simply because their own preconceptions will become entrenched.”⁴⁸

Other critics, including Harvard University’s Pippa Norris, have complained that as campaigns move to the Web, many people are left behind as a result of the digital divide separating the affluent and educated elites from the poor and less educated. But that concern seems to be fast receding as more and more households connect to the Internet, and a high percentage of those do so with high-speed connections.

A 2007 study by the American Society of Newspaper Editors found that it took 70 years after the telephone was invented for a majority of American households to be connected. Television hit this threshold in 35 years. The Internet required just 10 years and the percentage continues to climb almost daily.⁴⁹ Given current connection rates, it seems likely that in the near future all but a few of the most isolated Americans will be connected to the Web.

Paradoxically, the problem may not be too few people tied to the Internet, but too many with nothing constructive to say. Traditional journalists might say that the answer can again be found in Federalist No. 10, where Madison wrote that the beneficial effect of a representative democracy “is, on the one hand, to refine and enlarge the public views, by passing them through the medium of a chosen body of citizens, whose wisdom may best discern the true interest of their country, and whose patriotism and love of justice will be least likely to sacrifice it to temporary or partial considerations.” That “chosen body of citizens” would be the professional journalists, most of whom worked for mainstream news

organizations, who see themselves as “educated, wise, reflective people,” even though many Americans might disagree.

Blogosphere becoming mainstream

Fortunately, this is not an either-or paradigm where the consumer’s choice of information is relegated to the “old” media with its limitations or the “new” media with its many flaws. The blogosphere is increasingly populated by writers and readers who not only represent more mainstream—as opposed to extreme—opinions, but who also subscribe to the values of traditional journalism.

New York Times political writer Matt Bai, who has specialized in the new media’s impact on campaigns, likens the blogosphere to a teenager that is fast maturing as it approaches adulthood. In an interview for this paper, Bai said that as recently as 2003 the on-line conversations were shaped by “early adapters and they tended to come from the outer edges of society.”⁵⁰ Little wonder that the opinions batted about reflected youthful exuberance.

By the end of 2005, a survey by the Pew Internet & American Life Project found that 60-something Americans went on-line to get their news in roughly the same percentages as those Americans in so-called Generation Y, or between 21 and 40 years of age.*

“In 2008 you have everybody on the Web,” Bai said in the interview. “They’ve changed the nature of the Internet community. It has become more diverse, more representative of more constituencies. And the more mainstream the

* Although in contrast to the seniors the younger Web users were twice as apt to read blogs—and four times as apt to write one—it appears likely that this gap will also narrow.

technology becomes, the more mainstream will be the sensibilities of those who use it.”

Another factor is at work driving Internet news toward the centerline: “old media” is rapidly occupying this new media’s space and soaking up much of the audience. The news reports of newspapers, television networks, National Public Radio, local television and local radio stations, and other traditional producers are expanding on the Web, even as their historic operations have cut back. Between 2005 and 2006, the on-line audience for newspaper sites rocketed upward by 37 percent.⁵¹ And in a hopeful sign for these traditional media, 29 percent of the so-called Generation Y visit newspaper sites “regularly.”⁵²

Most of these “old media” sites also host blogs written by their staffers, which provide counterweight—and maybe role models—to the more extreme bloggers. In a typical week during the run up to the 2008 presidential primary season, the number of visitors to the *New York Times*’ political blog, The Caucus, far outnumbered the hits on ultra-liberal Daily Kos or the conservative Red State.com. Even the pioneering Drudge Report, which has evolved into an aggregator of story links from being a source of sensational scoops, devotes the vast majority of its space to mainstream newspaper and broadcast coverage barely distinguishable from Google News.

Arianna Huffington, whose Huffington Post has quickly become one of the more successful news and information blog sites, recognized in 2007 that if her army of volunteer bloggers were to compete with these traditionalist sites, she would need to achieve similar standards of professionalism. Her solution was to hire such veteran journalists as Thomas Edsall, recently retired after a

distinguished career at the *Washington Post*, and Betsy Morgan, former general manager of CBSNews.com. Morgan's former boss told the *New York Times* that moves of this type are significant in what they bode for the future. "New media companies weren't doing this before," said Larry Kramer, a former CBS executive. "I think it shows that traditional media companies are further down the road than people think" in terms of "being very helpful for how new media plans to expand."⁵³

Old media no longer sovereign

In addition, a rapidly increasing number of sites are launching on the Web staffed by journalists trained in and adhering to traditional practices. Among the longest-running are Salon and Slate (now owned by the *Washington Post's* parent company). And one of the newest practicing this form of cross-over journalism is Politico.com, backed by Washington, D.C. businessman Robert Allbritton. Politico debuted in January, 2007 edited by two of the *Washington Post's* most prominent political writers, John F. Harris and Jim VandeHei, who had been lured away by Allbritton with a promise of long-term financial backing. Its start-up staff also included veterans of such mainstream publications as the *New York Times*, *Time* magazine, the *Philadelphia Inquirer*, Cox newspapers, the *Baltimore Sun* and *USA Today*, to list a few. Although in its mission statement the online publication said it would push against the constraints of newspapers that "tend to muffle personality, humor [and] accumulated insight," it also promised to practice journalism that "insists on the primacy of facts over ideology." Perhaps auguring things to come, Politico also publishes a real newspaper of the same name featuring content previously posted on-line.

Some see this convergence of “old” and “new” media as a win for both sides. Journalism professor Jay Rosen of New York University, one of the early advocates of Web-based journalism, contends that “The rise of blogs does not equal the death of professional journalism. The media world is not a zero-sum game. Increasingly, in fact, the Internet is turning it into a symbiotic ecosystem—in which the different parts feed off one another and the whole thing grows.”⁵⁴

That optimistic view of the future is gathering force. Rosen has enlisted a half-dozen small newspapers in an experiment where beat reporters are linked into on-line social networks that have grown up around that beat. For example, a local government reporter for a small newspaper would enter an alliance of sorts with bloggers who write about that government. The idea, according to Rosen, is to create a “pro-am” relationship. Although the “old” media can no longer act as gatekeeper of information—it is no longer “sovereign” in Rosen’s phrase—“not sovereign doesn’t mean you go away.”⁵⁵

This trend toward the convergence of old and new media could get a huge boost by on-going technological change. Matt Bai believes that by the year 2012 television sets and personal computers will merge into a single device so that a viewer-user will make no distinction as to whether the information he or she is receiving comes from a broadcaster, is being streamed from a Web site, or is part of an on-line conversation with an acquaintance. People will quite literally be able to talk back to their TV sets.⁵⁶

But even if the distinction isn’t readily apparent to the viewer-user, the change in the way news and information is delivered and received will be profound, just as

different as the opinions of Madison and Hamilton. The old model, the Madisonian model, envisioned a vertical flow of news, produced at the top by the mainstream news organizations, filtered thoroughly by elites ostensibly acting in the public interest, then passed downward to consumers. The emerging model, the Hamiltonian model if you will, is horizontal with the consumer in the middle of a flow of information coming from a variety of sources, each bit of information seemingly the equal of every other bit. At first glance, this would seem to leave the consumer vulnerable to the vagaries of the mob, unable to distinguish credible information from garbage.

Colliding packets

But David Weinberger, in his book *Everything is Miscellaneous*, contends that this horizontal world will become self-regulating and there will be little need for mediators to screen information for credibility. In Weinberger's example, a consumer sits at the hub while information flows toward him in "packets." If two packets come together and are in agreement, Weinberger, a fellow at Harvard's Berkman Center for the Internet & Society, says they become the sum of the parts, twice as powerful and thus more credible. If the two packets come together but disagree, they cancel each other out. "That's how validation would work," Weinberger says.⁵⁷

This is a variation on what James Surowiecki called the "the wisdom of crowds," which is the central premise of prediction markets. These work on the idea that if only one person places a bet on a certain outcome, the reliability of that forecast is weak at best. An opposite bet by someone else cancels it out entirely. But if vast numbers of people—a crowd—place bets on the same outcome, and

each of those people has a monetary stake in being right, the odds are good that the predictions will be accurate.

That notion has been transported to the Web by several thinkers, including Sunstein (*Infotopia*), Weinberger (*Everything is Miscellaneous*), Howard Rheingold (*Smart Mobs*) and Jimmy Wales, co-founder of Wikipedia. These scholars would have us believe that the way to snuff out misinformation on the Web is to overpower it with correct information. It's a reverse Gresham's Law where the good eventually will drive out the bad.

Still, there remains an obvious problem with this free-market solution: As John Seigenthaler Sr., learned, a calumny can survive a long time before it "collides" with correcting information and is driven out. Even then, a percentage of people who read the initial bogus information may never catch the correction.

Romenesko, the journalism blog of the Poynter Institute, reported in December, 2007 that an editor at the *Tampa Tribune* had been excoriated by a reader demanding to know why the newspaper wasn't reporting the story about how Hillary Clinton had, as a young woman, successfully defended a Black Panther gang member who had brutally murdered another. The editor responded that the newspaper hadn't carried the report because it was totally false and had been proven so when it first circulated on the Web nearly a decade before. Mark Twain famously observed that "a lie can get half-way round the world while the truth is still tying its shoelaces." On the Internet some lies will never be run down by the truth.

What's the solution? It may well be that in a world where the Internet provides an expanding mixture of bogus and credible news, consumers will have to

practice a more aggressive form of caveat emptor than they already do. Howard Dean, in an interview for this paper,⁵⁸ said that voters have a good start on this because of what they've already found in the mainstream media. Commentators such as Ann Coulter, Michael Savage, Bill O'Reilly, and programs such as CNN's Capital Gang long ago exposed to ridicule any argument that the "old" media provided a respectful environment for political discourse, Dean said.

But the forces for good appear to be growing on the Web at a pace far faster than the other side. Many self-motivated bloggers, for example, are embracing restraint by joining such groups as the Media Bloggers Association, which is attempting to bring more professionalism to the new field. In return for getting access to major events—presidential campaigns, press conferences and conventions, for example—the MBA asks members to adhere to a statement of principles that could have been lifted from the Society of Professional Journalists' code of ethics. The MBA statement says in part: "We accept the Wikipedia definition of journalism as 'a discipline of collecting, verifying, reporting and analyzing information gathered regarding current events, including trends, issues and people.'" It further encourages bloggers to meet such standards as "honesty, fairness and accuracy, [to] distinguish fact from rumor and speculation [and to] act responsibly and with personal integrity."

The MacArthur Foundation lent resources to this movement to establish an interactive news aggregation site called NewsTrust.net. Users are invited to post interesting stories or blogs, which are then subjected to review by other users based on "core journalistic principles, including fairness, sourcing and context." The aim of the site is to highlight those postings—most of which come from "old" media—that meet the highest criteria.

The evolution of Wikipedia is also instructive. As a direct result of the Seigenthaler controversy, Wales instituted a new protocol that bars an anonymous author from initiating new entries, although one could still propose edits to an existing one. Those proposed edits would be subjected to challenges by other users on a “discussion page” attached to the entry and the entry itself would be marked to alert other users to the on-going debate. Discussions would go on offering proposed edits until a compromise in wording and a “neutral point of view” among the interested users is reached.

As the site has matured, Wales, the co-founder, also bowed to the non-egalitarian view that some contributors are more equal than others and thus merited special authority to solve disputes. These “curators” have been given the ability to invalidate bogus edits, block repeat “vandals” from participating, and to temporarily freeze entries that are being hotly debated by partisans (this happened with the wording of the entry over 2004 Democratic presidential candidate John Kerry’s Vietnam war record). The result is to strike the diagonal between the top-down model of the old media and the horizontal-egalitarian model of an unmediated new media.⁵⁹

The future of politics

What does this mean in the political environment? Profound change, for better and for worse. Democratic Party chairman Dean said “things are evolving so fast that I would be a fool” to try to predict what politics will look like in a decade or less. Nonetheless, he said he is “enormously optimistic” that the change will be for the better.⁶⁰ In the previous section we’ve seen where candidates can use the Internet to gain the recognition and resources needed to

become viable without having to rely on such traditional institutions as parties and mainstream media—the old gatekeepers. No gatekeepers can only mean that the process of running for office should become less exclusive, if not quite wide open.

At the same time, new networks are becoming available through which candidates can reach potential supporters. Already, the major candidates in the run-up to 2008 have joined such social networks as MySpace and Facebook, and they have made sure that they have a presence on YouTube to display new ads and to counter the less flattering postings from others. The power of these sites shouldn't be underestimated. Democratic presidential candidate Barack Obama, a senator from Illinois, opened a Facebook site and gathered 174,944 “friends” in barely six months. By contrast, Hillary Clinton launched a MySpace page and gathered 34,826 friends (as well as numerous enemies who bought the advertising banner atop her page attacking her).

Before YouTube, a candidate's gaffe—or, more rarely, a brilliant sound bite—would enjoy a brief, ephemeral life on television before the news would move on and the moment would pass into history. But with the creation of YouTube such moments can be replayed countless times at a viewer's convenience; they can also be copied and passed along to others, creating an endless ripple across the Web. When U.S. Sen. George Allen of Virginia was captured on video hurling the “macaca” insult at the Asian American in the crowd, it was quickly uploaded to YouTube and became a recurring source of stimulation to his political enemies. In fact, Dean, the Democratic chairman, credits YouTube with his party's ability to take control of the U.S. Senate in the 2006 cycle.

New York Times writer Alessandra Stanley pointed out in a column shortly before the start of the 2008 primary season that the candidates had spent thousands of minutes engaging in dozens of debates. But just four of those minutes appear to have been significant enough to hit the YouTube bar and thus supplant all that has gone before. “Television is the ultimate recovered-memory therapy, imposing an ordered narrative to diverse, dispersed moments,” she said. “An isolated segment, shown over and over again, can distill, oversimplify and in some cases distort. Or it can cut through to an indelible essence.”⁶¹

Candidates also will be forced to endure even greater assaults from enemies than they did under the regime of the “old” media. As vicious as were the feeding frenzies of previous campaigns, they were at least somewhat restrained by journalistic filters that caught most of the bogus allegations. In an environment where such filters are largely missing, who can doubt that even the wildest conspiracy theory will benefit from a longer life span because it can penetrate more deeply into the credulous corners of a society.

Finally, future candidates may be expected to be responsive to voters in ways that they hadn’t previously. “When television came in, and advertising on television began, campaigns became entirely one-way campaigns; that is, you gave money to the gurus in Washington and they spent it all on television ads and you talk *at* the people,” said Howard Dean in an interview after his 2004 presidential campaign. “There’s a huge hunger in the next generation for two-way campaigns, where citizens’ votes matter not just because they’re going to elect someone who’s going to do something different but because they actually help shape the campaign.”⁶²

In other words, the top-down campaign model, fostered for nearly three decades by a top-down media, is being replaced by a horizontal campaign where voters will demand to participate, not just watch. Dean's campaign manager in that 2004 race, Joe Trippi, has said that he relied frequently on ideas that came unsolicited from voters to the campaign's daily blog. Trippi came to think of the campaign's strategy as "open sourced," a term borrowed from soft-ware developers who post program codes on-line and invite others to add improvements.

Today's Elmira

The enduring question is how this changing environment will affect the way in which voters arrive at their decisions. That question was first tackled by a team of academics in what came to be called the Elmira Study, which sought to learn how voters in Elmira, New York arrived at their decisions in the 1948 presidential election. The team—Bernard R. Berelson, Paul F. Lazarsfeld, and William N. McPhee—identified such known traits of each voter in the survey as party affiliation, social class, race, religion, blue-collar or white-collar job, choice of newspaper, major concern, then tried to weigh the relative impact of each.

What they found, however, was that no single indicator could predict the outcome in part because voters themselves had trouble identifying the separate factors. Ultimately the team concluded that individual votes rested on an intangible feeling rather than an identifiable trait. That feeling was the desire by each voter to be in harmony with the social circle within which he or she was most comfortable. "The ordinary voter, bewildered by the complexity of modern political problems, unable to determine clearly what the consequences are of alternative lines of action, remote from the arena, and incapable of

bringing information to bear on principle, votes the way *trusted people around him* are voting.”⁶³

The emphasis on the words “trusted people around him” is mine and is relevant even today. In Elmira, those “trusted people” were apt to be ones the voter would see face to face—at home, across the back fence, in the barber shop, union hall or country club. In other words, these are people within the voter’s community. In the age of the Internet, however, the concept of community is expanding and no longer is bound by either geography or face-to-face contact.

The social-networking site Meetup.com, where users can be put into contact with others who share an interest in even the most esoteric subject, has been credited by Joe Trippi as forming the accidental back-bone of the 2004 Dean campaign. Trippi discovered that Dean supporters, without having been contacted by the campaign, were organizing themselves through Meetup.com to hold fundraisers and other events.

Robert Putnam, the Harvard sociologist whose blockbuster book *Bowling Alone* chronicled the decline of American civic engagement into the 1990s, cited Meetup.com’s emergence after 2002 as demonstrating that the nation could be entering a phase of community renewal.⁶⁴ This “community,” unlike those in Elmira, could thrive without face-to-face contacts being necessary or even desired. The glue that binds them is made of shared interests, including political interests, developed through on-line “conversations.” And just as voters in Elmira were influenced by those whose judgment they had come to trust, people who find their communities on Facebook or the blogosphere will also lean on the few who merit trust.

For this reason, David Weinberger takes issue with Nicholas Negroponte's concern that the Internet will lure people in tailoring the information they receive into *The Daily Me*. As users form a variety of communities, Weinberger said, "We are more likely to be reading *The Daily Me, My Friends and Some Folks I Respect...* What's happening falls between the expertise of the men in the editorial boardroom and the 'wisdom of crowds.'" ⁶⁵

The evidence to support the argument that this new form of community renewal is underway is admittedly indirect. Despite predictions to the contrary, voting among younger people—those between 18 and 24—spiked upward by 31 percent from 2000 to 2004, reversing a lengthy trend and giving lie to the allegation that youths are disconnected from political engagement. In the 2006 mid-year cycle, an analysis by Harvard Professor David C. King concluded that it was a surge in this youth vote that provided Democrats with the two wins needed to gain control of the U.S. Senate—for Jim Webb in Virginia and Jon Tester in Montana.⁶⁶

What differentiates this younger cohort from older voters? The obvious answer is their almost instinctive use of the Internet to connect with others, to form associations, to trade information and to encourage voting. And there is every reason to believe that, because of this, the "Millennial Generation" will play an even larger role not just in the 2008 presidential elections, but throughout their lifetimes. "Whether the Boomers and Xers are ready or not, the Millennial Generation is preparing in 2008 to make their voice heard again, perhaps louder than ever," the study said.

In an interview for this paper, Democratic National Committee chairman Howard Dean said he believes that if any political party is to be relevant in this changing environment, it will have to reshape itself to operate more like a social-networking organization—such as Facebook, MySpace or Meetup—and less like an organization reliant upon central planning and top-down decision making. After the collapse of his campaign in 2004, Dean said he learned that many of his volunteers continued to use the Dean for America website to organize to undertake such projects as feeding the homeless, cleaning up a polluted stream or building a Habitat for Humanity home. “Nobody told them what to do,” Dean said. “We just provided a place where they could meet up and take things into their own hands.”

The traditional party model, where direction and resources flow from headquarters outward, is archaic, if not broken. “So now the Democrats are going to be throwing this top-down model out the window because we don’t think it works,” he said.⁶⁷

Although his counterpart at the Republican Party, Mike Duncan, is more reserved about how he views the Web’s impact beyond enhancing communications, he also said in an interview that the Republican National Committee’s website, GOP.com, also was updated in mid-December, 2007, to include social-networking tools emulating MySpace and Meetup.⁶⁸ Cyrus Krohn, who oversees Internet communications for the Republican Party, said if the party failed to host such sites, information of potential use to party strategists would be lost. “Those conversations [among young Republicans] are going to take place somewhere on the Internet, whether we get involved in it or whether we leave them to happen on Facebook.” By providing space on GOP.com, he said, party

strategists will gain a better understanding of what's on the minds of younger members. It can also capture that information for data banks that can be utilized by strategists in future campaigns, he said.⁶⁹

These are incremental steps, to be sure, but clear recognition by the Republican Party's leadership—as with the Democratic Party's leadership—that if it doesn't shape itself to work in harmony with the Internet, it will be left behind, perhaps never to catch up.

CONCLUSIONS

“When Americans have a feeling or idea they wish to bring to the world’s attention, they will immediately seek out others who share that feeling or idea and, if successful in finding them, join forces. From that point on, they cease to be isolated individuals and become a power to be reckoned with...”

—Alexis de Tocqueville, *Democracy in America*, 1835

The presidential-nominating process as we’ve known it since 1972 has devolved into chaos. How it will be reformed, or even if it will be reformed, can’t be predicted as this is written. What is certain is that it no longer can deliver what its architects envisioned: an open, deliberative and educational campaign where ordinary voters had the opportunity to engage directly in choosing the nation’s next leader. The pre-nomination campaign of today has lost the support of many, if not most, of the constituents needed to be repeated four years hence. It has reached the end of its era.

How did this come to be? The two principal institutions that have shaped presidential politics almost since the advent of political parties 150 years ago—the political parties and the press—are themselves in change, if not in disarray. As we’ve seen in preceding sections, the parties have lost influence to an astounding degree, perhaps having real meaning only on the floors of the U.S. House and Senate (ironically, returning them to their founding positions nearly two centuries ago). Every available indicator points in the direction of a continuing loss of influence and membership.

The same can be said of the “old” media, which finds not only its business model collapsing, but its credibility. Like the political parties, the media environment that effectively controlled the presidential-campaign process

between 1972 and 2000, is being profoundly, perhaps radically, reshaped. The pace of change brought by new technologies is so fast, so bewildering, that predictions are foolhardy about what a future environment will look like more than a year two into the future.

The common factor—if not the principle factor—driving changes in the parties and the press is the Internet. As we have seen, the Internet enables candidates to gain viability independent of their parties, and to reach supporters in ways never before possible. The “old” media has had to surrender its sovereignty over the political process to newcomers using Web-based tools, such as blogs and social-networks. The trend toward an electronic future is so immutable that the “old” media is following that time-tested adage, “If you can’t beat them, join them.”

Whether a Web-shaped political environment is a step forward or a step backward for American democracy is the overarching question, one that this paper cannot hope to answer. Granted, there is ample evidence suggesting that a political environment controlled by the Internet would be de-civilizing—extremist voices having sway, unchecked rumors racing about, speed supplanting reflection as journalistic values, to list a few.

But there is also evidence pointing toward a more optimistic future, one that Alexis de Tocqueville saw when he visited a fledgling America more than 165 years ago.⁷⁰ The Web provides everyone with a way to actively engage in the electoral process; it empowers everyone to research issues; it enables them to join others to work toward a goal; it gives a voice to those who previously were only passive consumers. These newcomers to “public journalism,” as Jay Rosen and

others now call it, also seem to be respecting and embracing the methods of “old media” journalists in valuing such traits as accuracy and fairness.

This much is certain: the most important rite of American democracy, the presidential campaign, is in the throes of change that will not be calmed. The only issue is whether Americans gain control of that change and shape it to positive ends, or whether the process tumbles forward into history without purpose or direction.

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