

# Cyberjournalism

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Journalism Mass Media

By Sebastian Mallaby

BACK in 1960, when Steve Case was learning to walk, television found its political stride in the debate between Nixon and Kennedy. If you listened to that debate on radio, Nixon won. If you watched on television, Kennedy won. The TV victory proved decisive.

Forty years later, that same Steve Case is asking the follow-up question: Which candidate would have won if there had been an Internet? And since Case happens to run an online community 23 million strong, he's in a good position to find out what happens when you add cyberspace to politics.

At a time when the big TV networks are withdrawing from campaign coverage, cybermedia like Case's America Online are rushing in to fill the vacuum. NBC, ABC and CBS are giving the conventions just a few hours each, but AOL, along with cable TV operations such as CNN and C-SPAN are covering the whole thing gavel to gavel. Just four years ago, AOL had trouble getting credentials to cover the conventions. This time AOL produc-

ers are covering the proceedings from the grandeur of a skybox.

Just as TV revealed Nixon's five o'clock shadow, online coverage of the conventions is offering things that other media cannot. Cyberspace is unlimited, so there is room for add-ons to the usual news, such as diaries from ordinary convention delegates. It is interactive, so people can interview the politicians and pundits who once delivered one-way lectures. And it is social. If you watch the conventions on AOL's Webcast, you can swap comments on the spectacle with other AOL viewers.

How might this change politics? Even though most visitors to campaign Web sites are confirmed political junkies, the new medium is drawing some people who would otherwise have ignored the campaign. The Internet allows you to choose the type of political coverage you want - chat, analysis, headlines, even trivia. A site called pseudopolitics.com is experimenting with 360-degree cameras that simulate the feeling of wandering the convention floor.

The washingtonpost.com offers riddles derived from a museum-caliber collection of campaign buttons.

Cyberjournalism also shifts attention away from personalities, an undoing of television's influence. In the era of the search engine, a candidate who charms and lies is less likely to last: it's too easy to check his rhetoric against his record. In the era of the online voter guide, you are more likely to be led to the candidate you agree with rather than the one you find viscerally attractive. AOL has a programme called Presidentmatch, based on software that helps customers choose the perfect car for them: You plug in your views, and the computer tells you which candidate fits them.

Is this necessarily all good? The standard worry about e-politics is that it is only for the better off. Less than 50 percent of Americans have an Internet connection at home; people in high-income, urban areas are 20 times more likely to have access than people in poor rural ones; low-income whites are three

times more likely to log on than low-income blacks; able-bodied people are three times more likely to do so than people with disabilities. Until that changes, the answer to Case's question is that nobody will win elections online, or at least that nobody should.

But the rise of cyberjournalism raises other worries too. Television began by shedding light on the human dimension of politics - and ended up driving all candidates to conceal their humanity beneath makeup and sound bites. The Internet may begin by sharpening the focus on candidates' policy pronouncements - and so drive candidates to rededicate themselves to the gods of fuzz and caution. The humourless search-and-summarize programmes may not distinguish irony from serious statements, so irony will be verboten.

Then there is the prospect of a nifty new device that AOL hopes to test out. This invites AOL viewers to respond positively or negatively as they listen to a speech.—Dawn/Washington Post Service

## PTV's unbridled rush to liberalism

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Pakistan. We cannot justify "liberal PTV" revolution by taking refuge on the low grounds of realism, snorting that it presents what is actually going on.

We must stop what has corrupted the West and neighbouring India. Cable TV and dishes antennas are available and anyone who wants to enjoy these facilities can enjoy them any time they may like. In this age of information, we cannot avoid dish and cable but its up to the individual conscience and sense of responsibility how to use them for the greater benefit. PTV, on the other hand, is everywhere — unavoidable and uncontrollable. So, it has to provide entertainment and information in a balanced manner without relaxing its moral standards.

The potential cumulative impact of Western media and entertainment should not be underestimated by our leaders and decision makers. Scholars know that coverage of social issues can alter public opinion very substantially, even when the coverage diverges from objective indicators of reality. Even those who downplay the media's ability to reshape attitudes concede its power in reinforcing existing beliefs and forging new ones on unfamiliar topics. These considerations lead George Coin-stock to conclude from his

according to Newton Minow, former Chairman of the US Federal Communications Commission, is like a stranger in the American house "blathering on to (them) about sex and violence all day long," and there is no option but to tell the stranger "to shut up or get out." Why, then, shall we consider it less than an enemy and dare not shut it up, if it did mind its ways.

The first and foremost step is to keep PTV's policy in constant check. Reinstate all restrictions needed to maintain the moral standards of our society, and effectively censor all objectionable parts of homemade and foreign programmes, keeping in mind that the problem with TV content is not just how it depicts sex, but how it depicts life—in an infantile, mindless and debased way. If art of "deconstructing television is the solution to avoid every instant getting wilder TV in America; if installing V-Chips on TVs is the only key with the US government to avoid junking TV altogether, and if inventing new systems to black out certain channels is the only answer with the helpless Americans; we, comparatively, are in a more commanding position to control the collapse of Islamic civilisation and prevent the present unbridled rush towards liberalism.

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In *American Political Science Review* 81 (1987, p.23-43) Micheal Robinson proves that the new research techniques have begun to validate scientifically the massive impact of media and entertainment that the public had long taken for granted. We may never fully comprehend the force of its impact on everyday life. Yet, the more our understanding grows, the more we reduce its subtle power to shape our lives behind our backs and under our noses everyday.

We must not forget that nasty problems demand nasty, nasty nostrums. If TV,

television is the solution to avoid every instant getting wilder TV in America; if installing V-Chips on TVs is the only key with the US government to avoid junking TV altogether, and if inventing new systems to black out certain channels is the only answer with the helpless Americans; we, comparatively, are in a more commanding position to control the collapse of Islamic civilisation and prevent the present unbridled rush towards liberalism.

Serious academic work is needed in this area, and our intellectuals must make possible the avoidance of these problems altogether by providing unmistakable disincentives for PTV's willful violation of our social norms. Instead of following the footsteps of Indian TV, if PTV lacks the moral courage to create such circumstances to wean teenagers from MTV and persuade housewives hooked on "The Bold and The Beautiful" to return to their cultural roots, our enforced amorality will dissolve even further into immorality.

Things will be set aright if a majority of Pakistanis starts feeling truly offended and not revelling on the slop. Mere censorships and bans will not save us, if we prefer to indulge our worst instincts because our leaders and our intellectuals prefer to stay silent and dare not persuade that social order presumes certain values and requires that shame be experienced when they are transgressed.