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Warp Speed America in the Age of Mixed Media

By Bill Kovach and Tom Rosenstiel

Chapter One: The Journalism of Assertion

Marshall McLuhan was wrong. If the medium really were the message, Americans would always elect the most able television communicator. Pat Buchanan would have beaten George Bush. Richard Nixon might have been commissioner of baseball but never president.

That, however, is not how America operates. In the fifty years since television became a force in politics, only two masters of the medium have been elected leader of the country -- Ronald Reagan and John Kennedy. Arguably, Bill Clinton might be a third. Buchanan's skills on television take him only so far. His ideas, while they energize some voters, alienate others. Much the same is true for another gifted communicator, Jesse Jackson. Citizens weigh countless factors in making their decisions, including ideology. The most clever ads often do not correlate into votes. The message, not the medium, is the message after all.

No doubt the medium and the media shape what message are sent and how they are put together. But how, and how much? To what extent does the culture of news define our politics? The principle focus of this work is to examine the contours of the new media culture, which we call the Mixed Media Culture, and to explain its effect on contemporary political debate.

That task is made more difficult -- and more necessary -- because the culture of news is changing so rapidly. Journalism is in a state of disorientation brought on by rapid technological change, declining market share, and growing pressure to operate with economic efficiency. In a sometimes desperate search to reclaim audience, the press has moved more toward sensationalism, entertainment, and opinion. In only the last year, journalism has suffered a host of embarrassments over press ethics and still further declines in audience size and public confidence, and has engaged in new levels

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of self-examination. No event signals the changing norms as much as the Clinton-Lewinsky scandal that led to the impeachment proceedings against William Jefferson Clinton. To that degree, this work will try to understand the new media culture through that event.

The ordeal of Monica Lewinsky, Bill Clinton, Kenneth Starr, and the impeachment trial they precipitated were part of a kind of cultural civil war in America in which the press plays a peculiarly important role. As a consequence, this work will also try to assess the role of the press in contributing to that growing conflict that has gripped politics over the last several decades. Finally, this work will attempt to offer some modest suggestions for how journalists might try to cope with this new Mixed Media Culture of news.

At least in its broadest outlines, the sex scandal involving Clinton was not unprecedented. In the summer of 1964, high-ranking law enforcement officials armed with secret tape transcripts made the rounds to selected journalists in Washington. The tapes had conclusive evidence that one of the nation's most respected and powerful political figures was cheating on his wife.

When the transcripts weren't enough, no less a figure than the director of the Federal Bureau of Investigation got involved directly. J. Edgar Hoover invited some reporters to FBI headquarters to actually listen to the tapes themselves. There, you can hear it. He's having sex there. Out of wedlock. Adulterer.

The man caught on the tapes was controversial in his own right. A minister. A man who used the Bible in nearly every speech. A man whose primary tactic was to use guilt, morality, and an appeal to goodness as forces for persuasion. To Hoover, the hypocrisy was overwhelming; it was proof that Martin Luther King, Jr. could be considered a fraud and a hypocrite. This is precisely the kind of criticism of officials that journalists in the 1990s feel they are obliged to make.

Hoover's intent was to "expose" King, the FBI director said, to "disrupt, misdirect, discredit or otherwise neutralize" the black leader.

Not one reporter wrote a story, even those friendly to Hoover and unfriendly to King. Evidence of the campaign against King and the direct use of the tapes did not emerge for nearly two decades.

How different would American history be had the press operated differently in 1964? It is impossible, of course, to place the behavior of a political figure from one period into the context of another period, or impose the judgments of one time on those of another. Perhaps King would have behaved differently.

But imagine Hoover sharing his tapes with professional Internet gossip Matt Drudge. How would CNN handle the leaked tapes if the network knew MSNBC was about to be given the same information? Would rumor of King's extramarital activities be "Issue One" on the *McLaughlin Group*? Or ferried into a debate on talk radio or *Crossfire*? What would the attorney general have done if a special prosecutor were investigating evidence Hoover was peddling of King connections with the Communist party, and King were asked under oath about adultery?

Harris Wofford, the former Pennsylvania senator who had known King since the early 1950s, first wrote about Hoover's efforts in 1980 in *Of Kennedys and Kings*. He believes that in the media culture of the 1990s, one of the most important Americans of the twentieth century would have been destroyed and American history would have been quite different.

Bill Clinton is not Martin Luther King, and Kenneth Starr is not J. Edgar Hoover. The King incident did not involve a lawsuit, a special prosecutor, or allegations of perjury and obstruction of justice. Nor was King an elected official. But the basic issue of what the press is willing to publish today compared with a generation ago is unmistakable. And no doubt it matters.

While the press may not tell people what to think, it gives them a list of things to think about. In so doing the news culture still shapes the lines of the political playing field and the context in which citizens define meaning for political events. The rules of the political and media culture alter not only how politics is conducted, but increasingly who participates, why, and the nature of what can be accomplished.

The Lewinsky story did not change everything in the American media culture. Instead, it represented a convergence of long-standing trends, which came together with the political culture and clarified in part the consequences of both.

To understand these changes, it is helpful to recognize what the Clinton scandal represented for the press: the moment when the new post-O.J. media culture turned its camera lens to a major political event for the first time. What do we mean by the post-O.J. media culture? It is a newly diversified mass media in which the cultures of entertainment, infotainment, argument, analysis, tabloid, and mainstream press not only work side by side but intermingle and merge. It is a culture in which Matt Drudge sits alongside William Safire on *Meet the Press* and Ted Koppel talks about the nuances of oral sex, in which *Hard Copy* and CBS News jostle for camera position outside the federal grand jury to hear from a special

prosecutor.

Previous major political scandals such as Iran-Contra predated this merging of news cultures. Other recent incidents such as Gennifer Flowers were too fleeting to offer more than a glimpse of the new world of competition that batters down the very notion of journalist as gatekeeper. After Monica and Bill, the cultures were merged into one, not merely in the minds of a distracted public but in fact. NBC News owned MSNBC, which merged its own identity with the Clinton scandal. Its *Meet the Press* program turned Internet gossip pamphleteer Matt Drudge into a pundit, and Fox News made him into a TV show host. *Newsweek* reporter Mike Isikoff covers the story for *Newsweek* and is under contract with MSNBC and NBC to offer punditry about it -- to the delight of his managers at *Newsweek*, which encourages reporters to become pundits and pays them for each radio and TV appearance. From *NBC Nightly News* to MSNBC's "The Crisis in The White House" to *Dateline's* infotainment as journalism to Matt Drudge -- the line is more blurred than the Mixed Media Culture likes to admit.

We will base our critique of the Mixed Media Culture on a variety of work we conducted throughout 1998 in our positions as chairman and vice chairman of the Committee of Concerned Journalists, a group of reporters, editors, producers, publishers, and educators concerned about the direction of the craft. This work included three major content studies of the Clinton scandal coverage, as well as three public forums we sponsored involving key journalists who covered the story. We will also draw on numerous interviews we conducted throughout the year with journalists inside and outside of Washington.

We will argue that in the new Mixed Media Culture the classic function of journalism to sort out a true and reliable account of the day's events is being undermined. It is being displaced by the continuous news cycle, the growing power of sources over reporters, varying standards of journalism, and a fascination with inexpensive, polarizing argument. The press is also increasingly fixated on finding the "big story" that will temporarily reassemble the now-fragmented mass audience. Yet these same characteristics are only serving to deepen the disconnection with citizens, diminish the press's ability to serve as a cohesive cultural force, and weaken the public's tether to a true account of the news. The long-term implications for the role the Founders saw as most important for the press -- that of being a forum for public debate and as such a catalyst for problem solving -- is being eroded.

The way in which the new Mixed Media Culture has diluted the stream of accurate and reliable information with innuendo and

pseudofacts had an impact on the Clinton scandal. It partly explains why the impeachment left so many Americans estranged, as if it were a TV show rather than a political crisis. The notion that author Daniel Boorstin introduced in *The Image* in 1961, in which what was true was becoming less important than what one could make seem true, had thoroughly saturated the political culture by the late 1990s. Politicians had created an environment in which lying became respectable by calling it *spin*. They invented "doctors" to administer it. The effect was acute. Pointing out one of the principal differences between the Watergate scandal and the Clinton scandal, journalist Benjamin C. Bradlee observed, "People lie now in a way that they never lied before -- and the ease with which they lie, the total ease.... People expect no consequences This word *spinning*... is a nice uptown way of saying lying." That was at the heart of the disconnect of the Clinton impeachment: a political establishment that had so perfected and celebrated dissembling lacked the authority with the public to evince outrage and try to convict someone for lying. The irony of it was manifestly plain to most Americans, but it was largely missed inside Washington.

During the Clinton scandal, the press, the group with the biggest stake in maintaining the integrity of facts and accuracy, further succumbed to the ethos of pseudofacts. The Mixed Media now elevate to the status of celebrities, and in some cases embrace as journalists, the same spin doctors and dissemblers -- people like George Stephanopoulos or Tony Blankley -- once paid to manipulate them. They create pseudoexperts, people who look good but have limited expertise, to appear on their talk shows. They create news networks without reporters, relying instead on argument to pass as journalism. In the process, the Mixed Media Culture contributes to the blending of fact and assertion, real events and pseudoevents, news and entertainment -- what journalist Richard Reeves has called "the Oliver Stoning of America."

The new Mixed Media Culture has five main characteristics:

* *A Never-Ending News Cycle Makes Journalism Less Complete*: In the continuous news cycle, the press is increasingly oriented toward ferrying allegations rather than first ferreting out the truth. Stories often come as piecemeal bits of evidence, accusation, or speculation -- to be filled in and sorted out in public as the day progresses. The initiating charge is quickly aired. Then journalists vamp and speculate until the response is issued. The demand of keeping up with and airing the to and fro leaves journalists with less time to take stock and

sort out beforehand what is genuinely significant. Ironically, it means the news is delivered less completely. This gives the reporting a more chaotic, unsettled, and even numbing quality. It can make tuning in to the news seem inefficient. It also makes it more difficult to separate fact from spin, argument, or innuendo, and makes the culture significantly more susceptible to manipulation.

* *Sources Are Gaining Power Over Journalists:* The move toward allegation over verification is compounded by a shift in the power relationship toward the sources of information and away from the news organizations who cover them. Sources increasingly dictate the terms of the interaction and the conditions and time frame in which information is used, and set the ground rules for their anonymity. They shop stories from outlet to outlet, striking bargains to their own best advantage, whether it is a celebrity trying to promote a new movie or a leaker negotiating which newspaper or prime time magazine to give the interview to. This shift in leverage toward those who would manipulate the press is partly a function of intensifying economic competition among a proliferating number of news outlets -- a matter of a rising demand for news product and a limited supply of news makers. It is also a function of the growing sophistication in the art of media manipulation.

* *There Are No More Gatekeepers:* The proliferation of outlets diminishes the authority of any one outlet to play a gatekeeper role over the information it publishes. One of the key features of the Mixed Media Culture is that the press is now marked by a much wider range of standards of what is publishable and what is not. On one hand, journalism is richer, more democratic, more innovative, and, given the possibility of narrower targeting of audiences, has the potential of becoming closer to its audience. On the other hand, the loss of market share, fragmentation of revenue, and disorientation has meant an abandonment of professional standards and ethics. Information is moving so fast, news outlets are caught between trying to gather the information for citizens and interpreting what others have delivered ahead of them. In practice, the lowest standards tend to drive out the higher, creating a kind of

Gresham's Law of Journalism. What does the news organization that requires high levels of substantiation do with the reports of those with lesser levels of proof?

* *Argument Is Overwhelming Reporting*: The reporting culture (which rewards gathering and verifying information) is being increasingly overrun by what Deborah Tannen has called the "argument culture," which devalues the science of verification. The information revolution is a prime force behind the rise of the argument culture. Many of the new media outlets are engaged in commenting on information rather than gathering it. The rise of twenty-four-hour news stations and Internet news and information sites has placed demands on the press to "have something" to fill the time. The economics of these new media, indeed, demand that this product be produced as cheaply as possible. Commentary, chat, speculation, opinion, argument, controversy, and punditry cost far less than assembling a team of reporters, producers, fact checkers, and editors to cover the far-flung corners of the world. Whole new news organizations such as MSNBC are being built around such chatter, creating a new medium of talk radio TV.

* *The "Blockbuster Mentality"*: As the audience for news fragments, outlets such as network television that depend on a mass audience are increasingly interested in stories that temporarily reassemble the mass media audience. These big stories might be analogous to a hit movie or song that crosses over traditional audience divisions, and their appeal creates a "Summer Blockbuster" mentality in the media. These blockbusters tend to be formulaic stories that involve celebrity, scandal, sex, and downfall, be it O.J., Diana, or Monicagate. Part of their appeal to news organizations is it is cheaper and easier to reassemble the audience with the big story than by covering the globe and presenting a diversified menu of news.

These new characteristics of the Mixed Media Culture are creating what we call a new journalism of assertion, which is less interested in substantiating whether something is true and more interested in

getting it into the public discussion. The journalism of assertion contributes to the press being a conduit of politics as cultural civil war. The combatants in that war can employ the piecemeal nature of news and the weakened leverage of the gatekeepers to exploit the varying standards of different news organizations. These combatants also flourish amid the growing reliance on polarized argument. The role the press has played in the fight over values is not new. Television is well suited to symbolic, polarizing issues. And the growing heterogeneity of the press, while it more accurately reflects the diverse interests of the audience, makes it difficult for the press to find cultural common ground.

The solution, to the extent that one can be identified, is not in trying to enforce a lost homogeneity on journalism. Rather, it is in individual news organizations becoming more clear-headed and courageous about what their own purpose and standards are, and then sticking to them.

Those who fare best in this new culture, at least in classic journalistic terms, are those who do their own research. These news outlets are governed by their own internal standards because they are having to make their own judgments about when a story is verified, what is true, and what is relevant. They are less susceptible to repeating others' mistakes, and they are most careful about accuracy because they bear sole and original responsibility.

Increasingly, news organizations will be forced to distinguish themselves not by the speed and accuracy of their reporting, their depth, or even the quality of their interpretation. The perpetual news cycle will synthesize virtually all news reporting and interpretation into a kind of blended mix. Scoops remain exclusive for only a matter of seconds. Instead, news organizations will have to distinguish and establish their brand by the values and standards they bring to the news. When and how do they use anonymous sources? Will they publish charges they cannot substantiate simply because others have? When is someone's private life publicly relevant? This means news organizations should do more to think through in advance what their news values and policies are on a variety of key journalistic matters. And as newspapers did a century ago, in a time of similar intense competition, they will do well to articulate and market themselves to the public according to those values.

Whether traditional news values -- such as verification, proportion, and relevance -- survive depends ultimately on whether they matter to the public. News outlets that aspire to high standards on such matters as proof of accuracy and proportionality distinguish themselves by more than self-censorship. They offer the public

reliability and save people time. In a world with growing choices, and one where the depth of information is potentially infinite for every user, the highest value may be given to the source whose information is most accurate, most dependable, and most efficient to use.

In the end, the importance of having an accurate, reliable account of events is profound. "Public as well as private reason depends on it," Walter Lippmann noted eighty years ago. "Not what somebody says, not what somebody wishes were true, but what is so, beyond all our opinion, constitutes the touchstone of our sanity."

The question before us now is whether the search for what is so, the journalism of verification, will be soon overwhelmed by the new journalism of assertion.

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