THE NEW MEDIA IN THE 2008 U.S. PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN:

THE *NEW YORK TIMES* WATCHES ITS BACK

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Abstract

A reading of New York Times' coverage of the 2008 presidential campaign demonstrates that America's most influential newspaper paid a great deal of attention to the role of new media (and some old media – television, cable television, television advertising) in the campaign. As a kind of reader's diary chronicling the Times' account, this article finds that the news coverage emphasised a new intensity, a remarkable ubiquity, and a note of anarchism in the new communication media, enabling citizens with little connection to candidate or party power centres to at least briefly gain national notoriety in political news.

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Most aspects of the 2008 American presidential campaign were familiar from earlier campaigns. Grass roots door-to-door campaigning and get-out-the-vote activities are nothing new. They have long been vitally important, and candidates and parties invest in these efforts heavily. Political rhetoric is as old as politics itself, and it still matters. A winning rhetorical style was a great edge Barack Obama had over Hillary Clinton in the primary elections and over John McCain in the general election.

Frequent personal appearances of candidates before crowds have been an essential part of campaigning for more than a century in U.S. presidential elections, and have grown only more important with jet travel. Presidential candidates move to a new geographic location almost every day by plane, repeating this process month after month.

Fund raising is not new, nor television advertising, nor television news, nor the massive audiences that presidential TV debates have attracted beginning in 1960 and continuing in every election since 1976.

Nor is there anything new about the fundamentals of campaigning across a multiplicity of regions and interest groups in what James Madison in 1787 referred to as the "extended republic." Madison saw that many substantial differences among people, stemming from "the different circumstances of civil society" bred "a zeal for different opinions" and constantly threatened to dissolve social unity. Madison saw what we would call class differences as the most important – differences between creditors and debtors, and differences among the landed interests, manufacturing interests, and mercantile interests. He also worried about differences of opinion arising from religious differences. He noted that where no substantial occasions for difference arose, "the most frivolous and fanciful distinctions" proved sufficient to excite "unfriendly passions" and "violent conflicts." This has not changed, and now it has become the playing field on which the game of presidential politics is contested.

But if much remains the same in presidential election campaigning, not everything does, and in 2008 the "new media" played a newly prominent role in the wild jamboree that evolved during the primary season in an unprecedented, elaborate and extravagantly expensive mobilisation of men and women, money and symbolism and mass media and shoe leather. Observing the unfolding impact of new media led me to wonder, *What does the proliferation of new media do?* This paper reflects on that question. My observations and reflections are based on one source in particular – they all come from reading the print edition of the *New York Times*, especially the campaign stories in which the *Times* paid attention to some feature of the role of media in the campaign. This work began as a kind of reader's diary from the beginning of July 2008 to the end of October of the same year, but each of the entries has been edited, sometimes weeks or months after I read each newspaper article. What this loses from the spontaneity of a diary entry, I hope it gains in coherence.

The *New York Times* looks over its shoulder these days, not because of newspaper competition in its local market, not because of a rivalry with the *Washington Post* for national news, and not because of rivalry with the *Wall Street Journal* for business news – although all of these competitive factors still matter. Rather, the *Times* now has a certain skittishness because of the new ecology of public information avail-

able through multiple sources, many of them new since the previous presidential election year of 2000 or even since 2004. Organisations that either did not exist in 2000, or wielded next to no influence during the presidential election campaign that year, include Craigslist, Wikipedia, the HuffingtonPost, and YouTube.

The world was different by 2008. The *Times* was anxiously aware of these growing, varied, and unpredictable new mediators and marketers of news. It attended to them (and still does) in its own columns. It cannot help but recognise how different the contemporary news ecology is and how quickly the cultural context for what we mean by news has shifted ground. Mainstream journalism's anxiety about its own future can be observed in how the *Times* covered the campaign.

June 2008

Consider a front-page story by business writer Jim Rutenberg on June 29, 2008. Writing from Culver City, California, the story begins at "a cluttered former motel behind the Sony Pictures lot" where Robert Greenwald, a veteran director of feature films along with "his small band of 20-something assistants" produced an influential Internet-distributed video montage that interspersed sharply anti-Islamic statements by the Rev. Rod Parsley, a conservative evangelical minister, with statements from Senator John McCain warmly praising the Rev. Parsley. This and other anti-McCain videos produced by Greenwald had already been downloaded five million times on YouTube when Rutenberg wrote his news story – more often, Rutenberg reports, than Sen. McCain's own campaign videos. (The significance of Greenwald's video is that Sen. Obama had come in for heavy criticism during the primaries when he initially failed to distance himself from the extremist political opinions of his own minister, the Rev. Jeremiah Wright.)

This was the centrepiece of Rutenberg's story about how the "cheap new editing programs" and the speedy dissemination of videos through YouTube and other sites "empowered a new generation of largely unregulated political warriors who can affect the campaign dialogue faster and with more impact than the traditional opposition research shops."

Greenwald had substantial Hollywood credentials. Others highlighted in the story had none at all – an anti-Obama activist producing video ads "from his apartment in Wilkes-Barre, Pa." for a hundred dollars or Jason Mitchell, a producer of evangelical Christian programming, one of whose anti-Obama videos – made for fifty dollars – had been viewed millions of times.

Almost anyone can play the political game in this brave new world. In fact, almost anyone can influence the rules by which the game is played; the campaign game itself is no longer so securely in the hands of the candidates, the parties, their donors, and their aides. It is porous. Rutenberg asserts that "the better-circulated political videos have generally come from people with some production experience" but, in his story, this claim is in tension with the evidence that new media products are easy, quick, and cheap to produce and distribute and that they can be made in an ordinary Wilkes-Barre apartment. True, Robert Greenwald "has built a mini-factory of anti-McCain propaganda," as Rutenberg reports, but a photo accompanying the story shows Greenwald in a modest, cluttered office, whereas Rutenberg, in describing this same office, refers to it as "a darkened room" where "three young assistants edit digital images on equipment that barely takes up a full desk." The

reader senses his urge to picture the Internet as the democratic slingshot that will break all the rules of political campaign warfare orchestrated by giants.

It is not apparent that the controversial statements made by the Rev. Wright or by the Rev. Parsley – or any number of other moments along the campaign trail that grabbed media attention – had much impact on the campaign as a whole. The basic strategies for Obama and McCain to win nomination seemed clear enough. Senator Obama needed to draw closer to the centre of the American political spectrum in order to attract voters, including moderate evangelicals and Jews leaning toward McCain because of his tough support of the U.S. military presence in the Middle East and hence presumably a willingness to defend Israel at any cost. He had to soften some his liberal stands to court blue collar and labour voters – all without causing panic or a weakening of passion among his liberal supporters. Senator McCain's task was more complicated but also just as obvious from the beginning: He needed to court evangelical voters without compromising his reputation for "straight talk," which would have weakened his "brand" as a maverick, and to cater to Bush loyalists while distancing himself from the President's policies.

July 2008

Did the Internet and other new media alter any of this? I think so, but only at the margins, and in ways that raise important questions about who owns or controls presidential campaigning. Who controls a candidate's efforts to present himself or herself to party leaders, potential donors, possible endorsers, and the general voting public? The Rutenberg story of independent activists with enormous capacity to get their views widely distributed at trivial cost raised this question. Later, when tens of thousands of people saw comedian Tina Fey impersonate Sarah Palin on "Saturday Night Live" before they ever saw Sarah Palin, the question was raised anew.

Another question that was brewing in the political subconscious was, *Who even owns a candidate's Web site?* On July 2, the *Times* reported that Sen. Obama had run into heavy opposition in his own camp for his view that telephone and other communications companies should not be prosecuted for cooperating with the FBI in ways that compromised the privacy of ordinary citizens. The companies had turned over to the agency private records without benefit of a court-endorsed warrant when the FBI overstepped its constitutional authority. (All of this arose in relation to legislation before the Senate to amend the "FISA" or Foreign Intelligence Surveillance Act to regulate more carefully government eavesdropping on and gathering information about American citizens that had been greatly expanded by the post-9/11 Patriot Act.) Suddenly there was mutiny aboard the S. S. Obama; the Obama website was drenched in angry messages from young supporters who found the Senator's position to be a serious betrayal of the ideals they thought he represented. In terms of campaign strategy, Obama was simply moving to the center, showing that his opposition to the war in Iraq was one thing, his commitment to a tough war on terrorism something else. He could not hang the Iraq war on Sen. McCain if he could be pictured as someone unwilling to get tough on terrorists, civil liberties or no civil liberties. He could be a successful anti-war candidate only if he were not an anti-military or anti-national security candidate.

On July 5, a small follow-up story focused on the Obama Web site. "A Post from Obama" (Sarah Wheaton) in "The Caucus" (the printed version of the *Times'* online

political blog) reported that thousands of Obama supporters "have organized on the Obama campaign Web site" to attack his position on FISA. On July 3, Sen. Obama posted a response on the Web site defending his views, and his aides responded to questions in the "comments section" for some 90 minutes.

The "news" angle of this event was not the statement Obama made but where – and why – he made it. There have often been conflicts between the leaders and the followers of a campaign, but generally, in the past, they have not been so public and certainly not so instantaneously public, and they have not had a presence in a space maintained and normally controlled by the candidate.

On July 6 (Noam Cohen, "A Political Agitator Finds a Double-Edged Weapon," p. 5), the *Times* provided an anatomy of the windstorm on the Obama Web site. Mike Stark, a self-appointed left-wing gadfly whose efforts in the past had confounded conservatives, initiated the Obama Web site protest by suggesting to liberal activists on an e-mail list that they use the Web site to protest that Senator Obama was selling out. Within ten days of Stark's floating his ideas, 18,000 people had signed on to the new group called "Senator Obama Please Vote NO on Telecom Immunity – Get FISA Right."

Also on July 6, which was a Sunday, a traditionally slow news day, the only front-page story on the campaign was Mark Leibovich's "McCain Battles a Nemesis, the Teleprompter." The story was about McCain's shortcomings as a rhetorician and it included examples of McCain misstatements that "become instant YouTube fodder." It also cites Stephen Colbert's remark that described his rhetorical style as "tired mayonnaise" after which Colbert encouraged the audience to join in the "Make McCain Exciting Challenge." Colbert is a comedian who hosts a fake news program called *The Colbert Report*, which airs five nights a week on the Comedy Central cable channel following Jon Stewart's *The Daily Show* (and is a 2005 spin-off of that show).

Candidate bumbling is old; the ongoing, citizen-initiated capacity to see missteps repeatedly and then to be able to forward them to friends and acquaintances is no older than YouTube (created in 2005). With YouTube, though, anyone with Internet access has a chance to be a mini-Colbert – irreverent, outrageous, and almost invulnerable to criticism. The comedy shows implicitly answer criticism with the retort, "What's wrong with you? Can't you take a joke?" Just how seriously the *Times* was taking Comedy Central was underlined on Aug. 17 when Michiko Kakutani, the paper's formidable leading reviewer of both fiction and non-fiction books, provided a long lead piece in the Sunday "Arts and Leisure" section with a large colour photo of Jon Stewart and the headline, "Is This the Most Trusted Man in America?"

The McCain teleprompter story gave considerable prominence to new media, especially irreverent new media with a comic and sarcastic tone. The *Times* was watching the signs of a shifting political culture, observing political style as it transitioned from being party-guided and issue-oriented, enthusiastic but dutiful, to something more edgy, more irreverent, something that could be described as more anarchistic than organisational. One suspects that reporter Leibovitch was empowered by quoting Colbert, as doing so was a way to point out with subtlety that McCain's rhetorical flaws weren't just lacking but instead had grown to laughable size, something that would have been difficult or impossible to say in his own reportorial voice.

On July 13, Adam Nagourney and Michael Cooper did a front-page story titled "McCain's Conservative Model? Roosevelt (Theodore, That Is)" based on a rambling 45-minute interview with Sen. McCain. What became the most notable feature of the interview was McCain's confession that he relied on his wife and his aides "to get him online to read newspapers…and political Web sites and blogs." He told them, "They go on for me. I am learning to get online myself, and I will have that down fairly soon, getting on myself. I don't expect to be a great communicator, I don't expect to set up my own blog, but I am becoming computer literate to the point where I can get the information that I need." Sen. McCain said he looked at Matt Drudge, at Politico, and at RealPolitics. Mrs. McCain, sitting nearby, looked up and corrected him, adding one more all-important site he visited – "Meghan's blog!" – to remind him that their daughter had her own blog on the McCain campaign Web site. "Meghan's blog," he said sheepishly. McCain does not use a BlackBerry and does not use e-mail. In this news story, McCain's generalised reference to using "email and the Internet" is treated as a glaring indicator of his lack of awareness of contemporary culture, another sort of discrediting fumble.

Three stories on July 17 suggested the complexity of campaign communications. One story (Larry Rohter, "Obama and McCain Expand Courtship of Hispanics," p. A16) reports that both candidates had recently addressed Hispanic organisations. Cuahtemoc Figueroa, director of Obama's effort to reach Latinos, speaking to members of La Raza (both candidates addressed the La Raza convention in early July), held that the Obama campaign would "spend more money on Latino TV and radio than has ever been spent on a presidential campaign, and by a lot."

A second story (Jim Rutenberg, "Obama's Media Star Keeps Rising, With Anchors Now Following Him Abroad," p. A17) featured a photo of the top network anchors (ABC's Charles Gibson, CBS's Katie Couric, and NBC's Brian Williams) and reported that all three were negotiating to secure interviews with Obama during his forthcoming foreign travels. All planned to broadcast from one of Obama's foreign stops – and much of the story discussed whether this was fair to the McCain camp. The final paragraph of the story observed that the negotiations between Obama and the networks were "first reported on the Web site of *The Washington Post* on Wednesday" (July 16). While most of the story suggested that the Obama trips were newsworthy because of Obama's inexperience abroad, the unspoken question seemed to be whether "the liberal media" were exposing a pro-Obama bias. The networks gave Obama double the amount of coverage they gave McCain in the first weeks of July. Furthermore, the report noted that Obama had twice been on the cover of *Rolling Stone* and once on *Us Weekly*, "both of which are owned by the company of a prominent Obama supporter, Jann S. Wenner."

The third story (Katharine Q. Seelye, "New Name but Similar Cause as Web Activists Gather," p. A16) reported that "Netroots Nation," an annual convention of progressive bloggers, was about to meet in Austin, Texas. The various net activists quoted all took pains to assert that the growing criticism of Obama over what Seelye called "Mr. Obama's perceived creep to the center" was coming from the voices of a loyal, not a disloyal, opposition (in the language of Micah Sifrey, editor of techpresident.com and a convention speaker).

Obama's travels in the Middle East and then in Europe attracted a great amount of media attention, particularly Obama's high-level talks in Iraq and the crowd of

200,000 he drew in Berlin. Meanwhile, the McCain campaign ran anti-Obama ads in Berlin, New Hampshire, Berlin, Wisconsin, and Berlin, Pennsylvania. There was little doubt that Obama had developed a Kennedyesque "star" quality that McCain could not match. The mood at McCain headquarters was apparently glum when they contrasted a photo of McCain in a golf cart with former president George H. W. Bush on the same day Obama was photographed "in sleek sunglasses" with General David Petraeus in a helicopter in Iraq. The *Times* took a sort of "who cares" attitude about these developments. As Elisabeth Bumiller wrote in her July 26, 2008 article, "Hey, Obama: There's Bratwurst in Ohio, Too (but no Cheering Masses)," (p. A14), "People on both sides also said that it was only one week in July, and that Mr. McCain recovered from far worse last year when his campaign went nearly broke and speculation was rampant that he would drop out of the race." The *Times* here was second-guessing itself – wanting to make something of it, noticing that the McCain campaign took some meaning from it, but wondering in the end if it meant anything at all.

Meanwhile, Katharine Q. Seelye reported on "Citizen-Journalism Project Gains a Voice in the Campaign," stating that OfftheBus.net had 7500 citizen correspondents as an arm of The Huffington Post Web site. Begun in 2007 with 300 correspondents, it gained notoriety in April when Mayhill Fowler, a correspondent, reported Obama's remarks on "bitter" working class and small town voters who "clung to their guns and religion." This was one of the moments in the primary election season when the growing presence of non-mainstream media had a strong impact, throwing off the Obama campaign at a time when the contest between Clinton and Obama was very hot.

On July 29, both new media and old were in the paper. In a small, bottom-of-the-page item in "The Caucus" (the print excerpts from the *Times'* online political blog), Katharine Q. Seelye ("The Man and the Money") reported that *The Daily Show With Jon Stewart* and *The Colbert Report* would both run an Obama campaign ad. Comedy Central, the cable network that airs both these shows, had not previously run political advertising. The political action group that produced the Obama ad is MoveOn.org, which spent $150,000 to run the ad for one week on both Comedy Central and MTV. MTV had refused political advertising for over a decade but changed that tune recently. (Viacom Networks owns both cable channels.) MoveOn.org, an organisation that arose as one of the first effective on-line political organisations in this case made use of an old technique that began with early broadcast television in 1952 and used it on cable television, attracting the notice of print.

August 2008

The media were abuzz. Senator Obama made the humorous comment that he does not look like the presidents pictured on the one dollar and five dollar bills (Washington and Lincoln). The remark was publicised by the McCain camp, who accused Obama of "playing the race card." Obama supporters replied that the remark was innocent and that the McCain camp was playing the race card by calling attention to such an innocuous comment (See Michael Cooper and Michael Powell, "McCain Camp Says Obama Plays 'Race Card'" p. 1, August 1). Now, half a year later, the idiocy of this kind of media-fuelled controversy seems apparent, but at the time, it caused a great stir.

On August 6, one of the items in "The Caucus" (Brad Stone, "MySpace to Enhance Debates") reported that MySpace, through its MyDebates.org, would provide real-time video streaming of the three presidential debates as well as the vice-presidential debate. Even better – there would be no ads, would allow viewing the live or recorded video of the debates, and would of course enable interaction with others on the site around the topic of the debates.

At the end of August, all eyes were on the Democratic National Convention in Denver, and among those eyes, David Carr took note of the new legitimacy of bloggers at the convention (David Carr, "Lost in a Convention Haze, With Bloggers Lurking at Every Turn," p. A14, Aug. 26). Google provided a tent for hundreds of bloggers. "Reporting," wrote Carr, "has become a performance art." At every conceivable reportable event, "the people formerly known as the audience refused to behave like one. They brandished video cams, iPhones, and recorders, doing their own documentation of what was under way." When Carr interviewed Craig Newmark, founder of Craigslist, "a blogger nearby perked his ears up from three feet away and started live-blogging the conversation."

Carr did get his interview and reported that Newmark told him, "When you think about the network democracy or participatory democracy thing, this is a turning point in American history, potentially realizing the vision of the founders of this country because they and we wanted a more direct form of democracy. And with the Internet, we can start moving a little bit more in that direction." Never mind that this is complete nonsense about the founders, who wrote more than enough about their political visions to make it clear that they abhorred direct or participatory democracy. They constructed a Constitution that made participatory democracy all but impossible – and this was no accident. But the enthusiasm of Newmark's observation speaks for something real and important in the new media environment.

On the last day of the month, one reporter stuck to the tried-and-true. In "At a Skeptical Diner, a Poll Finds a Need for More Than Speech" (p. 31), in the Sunday "Metro" section, Peter Applebome did what political reporters have long done – looked for the man and woman in the street. In this case, he went to the Valley Diner in the small Connecticut town of Derby, and he talked to a variety of customers there. At least one customer, who refused to give her name, declined to talk to Applebome because (as she said) she didn't know who was running for president. A young Army recruit training for deployment in Afghanistan said simply that "politics was not his thing and that he was not paying attention." (Beginning in October, "The Caucus" reporters began travelling Route 80 from San Francisco to New York, largely by car, and had gone no further than Elko, Nevada before discovering citizens who had not made up their minds about which candidate to support and, in fact, had almost no information about the candidates. It was as if the reporters had found Martians or, even more unsettling, had discovered that they might be the Martians themselves.)

September 2008

On Sept. 1, David Carr, reporting in the business section on the media coverage of the Democratic Convention ("In Denver, A Thousand Little Pieces," p. C-1), struggled to make sense of it all. Google had hosted the "Big Tent" for some 500

bloggers and "vloggers" and other "nontraditional media types" at the convention. The more celebrated political blogs were out in force with 20 people in Denver from the HuffingtonPost, 9 from TalkingPointsMemo, 10 from Daily Kos, 7 from Slate, and 9 from Salon. Mainstream print and broadcast media generated vast quantities of news and chatter, but the portrait of the convention "was also rendered in a thousand other pixels of coverage." At a HuffingtonPost panel during the convention, Rep. Rahm Emanuel said the big fish still counted, but media coverage overall would be a "collective, intuitive consciousness," something like a school of fish: "You won't hear anything; you'll just see the air bubbles and then the whole group will suddenly decide to turn at the same time." Joshua Marshall of TalkingPointsMemo also reached for a metaphor adequate to the emerging distributed consciousness that was more like an ecosystem, he suggested, than a jungle, "with lots of different sorts of news orgs playing different and sometimes complementary roles." Here, as elsewhere, the media were coming to seem less an elite group talking down to the public and more the public itself talking intensively, incessantly, and obsessively.

Taking the spotlight from the Democrats, John McCain selected Alaska Gov. Sarah Palin as his running mate, and thus began several days (and in some ways the rest of the campaign) of a surreal soap opera. The Sarah Palin story was everywhere and on everyone's lips. In the days after the announcement, as I waited for a tennis court in New York's Central Park, I overheard people talking about it. Riding a bike back home, I overheard other bike riders talking about it. People were discussing Gov. Palin online; the mainstream media were all over the story. Online, according to a front-page *New York Times* story (Jodi Kantor and Rachel L. Swarns, "A New Twist in the Debate Over Mothers") someone identified as "cafemama" posted her wonderment (with an implication of disapproval) on the blog "urbanMamas.com" about Gov. Palin's returning to full-time work as chief executive of Alaska three days after giving birth.

Why was the unknown, unidentified "cafemama" cited in a front-page news story? This is not the same as an interview with a man or woman in the street where the journalist takes the initiative to bring someone into the public media. Cafemama ventured there on her own, but the *Times* made her much more visible. I went to urbanMamas.com where it was easy to see why reporters Kantor and Swarns were drawn to cafemama's post. It was personal, thoughtful, and measured, written by a young woman trying to combine motherhood and paid employment, someone conscientiously seeking to think through what a woman could reasonably and humanely do in the working world that would not jeopardise a cherished and demanding attachment to an infant. Little of this comes through in the *Times*. What also eludes the *Times* in its brief mention of "cafemama" is that the urbanMamas Web site she posts on regularly is attractive, upbeat, and frequented, it appears, almost entirely by young women primarily located in the Portland, Oregon area.

What the cafemama post provided Kantor and Swarns that very few woman-on-the- street interviews ever can is the strong sense that her opinion was not voiced off the top of her head. Nor, as far as one could judge, was there anything partisan about her opinion, and that was why cafemama offered considerable advantages as a source even though, in the end, her post was too discursive for the reporters to actually quote. (In the archived record of urbanMamas.com that I accessed on

Oct. 4, 2008, not only is the original post still there along with more than 200 replies it generated in the first several days after its Aug. 29, 2008 publication, but there is also a proud note that the post got picked up by the *New York Times* along with a link to the Kantor and Swarns article.)

One of the oldest forms of communication – the rumour – blended quickly with the news as word spread that Gov. Palin had not given birth to infant Trig but had faked a pregnancy to cover up the out-of-wedlock birth of Trig to her daughter Bristol. The announcement of Bristol's actual pregnancy (she was visibly pregnant on the campaign trail when Sarah Palin's baby Trig – Bristol's little brother – was five months old), according to the McCain campaign, came as a response to these over-the-weekend Internet-generated rumours. The McCain camp, having just dramatically seized public attention with the surprise choice of Gov. Palin as running mate, lost control of it through the Internet-accelerated and Internet-amplified rumour mill (Monica Davey, "Palin Daughter's Pregnancy Interrupts G.O.P. Convention Script," p. A19, Sept 2).

In the new media environment, political candidates are not the only ones vulnerable to losing control of their communications. In February, a black pastor in Harlem, James David Manning, posted a sermon on his church Web site in which he labelled Senator Obama a "pimp" and Obama's mother a "trashy white woman." Suddenly this unknown minister's angry talk was on YouTube, on right-wing talk shows, and also on the radar screen of a watchdog group that formally complained to the Internal Revenue Service, asking that Manning's church's tax emption be revoked (Paul Vitello, "Pastors' Web Electioneering Attracts U.S. Reviews of Tax Exemptions," p. B1).

Nor was Manning's a unique case. A "blogging tax lawyer" complained about Bill Keller, a Florida televangelist who had declared on his Web site that casting a ballot for Mitt Romney was "a vote for Satan." The I.R.S. is reviewing the tax status of Keller's church. I.R.S. regulations require that tax-exempt churches and charitable organisations (known in the tax code as "501(c) (3)'s") refrain from "activities that favor or oppose one or more candidates for public office." In practice, they can act politically so long as no one really notices or objects. As long as they are literally preaching to the choir, objections do not arise. The visibility of a church Web site changes all of this. The churches, like the campaigns, are unable to control information leakage due to the browsing and lurking on their Web sites of obsessive Internet users, who then scatter that information literally around the world on blogs and discussion forums.

The lead item in "The Caucus" on Sept. 9 was about the blogosphere ("An Economic Pan…" Leslie Wayne, p. A21). Sarah Palin had given an address in Colorado Springs where she complained that Fannie Mae and Freddie Mac had become "too big and too expensive to taxpayers," indicating that she believed these private corporations to be government-run and funded. Ms. Palin's statement went largely unnoticed by political reporters, who are often more schooled in political rhetoric than economic theory. But liberal bloggers picked it up and portrayed it as "a gaffe, noting that Fannie and Freddie are not government entities but instead are private-sector companies." The item does not mention that these businesses began as government agencies. The Federal National Mortgage Association (FNMA), otherwise known as Fannie Mae, was established in 1938 under the Roosevelt administration and remained a government agency until 1968, and FHLMC, known

as Freddie Mac, was created in 1970 to expand the secondary mortgage market. Until their recent demise, these businesses had a special, privileged relationship to the federal government even as formally independent, profit-making corporations. But it's no surprise that these details were left out of "The Caucus" reporting, as it covered the froth of the campaign and not necessarily its deeper currents (not that it is always easy to tell the difference).

As the race got down to serious business after the nominating conventions, the *Times* seemed to devote more ink to the most mass of the mass media – television, not online media. There was regular attention to analyzing individual television ads. On Sept. 19, for instance, in a short item on "The Ad Campaign," Larry Rohter offers a very critical analysis ("Obama Attacks McCain in a Bid to Attract Hispanic Voters," p. A15) of an Obama TV ad for Spanish-language television.

There was also attention to that most traditional venue of all – the candidate in front of a live crowd. A story on McCain's appearances (Adam Nagourney, "The New McCain: More Aggressive and Scripted on the Campaign Trail," p. A19, Sept. 19) described McCain in Florida and Ohio as he "unsmilingly raced through a series of relatively brief speeches, reading often from a teleprompter, and served up a diet of the kind of sound-bite attacks that he used to dismiss with an eye roll."

October 2008

However important the new media might be in the campaign, nothing attracted such massive attention – from both the candidates and the public – than what has become since 1976 the central media event of presidential campaign activity between the parties' nominating conventions and Election Day: the televised debates. On Oct. 1, the day before the vice presidential debate between Joseph Biden and Sarah Palin, the *Times* offered a full-page preview. Two long articles by Katharine Q. Seelye analyzed the verbal skills of Biden and Palin. Both stories offered critical judgments of the candidates' skills as speakers. On Palin, Seelye focused on strengths and weaknesses – particularly her weaknesses – as a debater in her race for governor of Alaska. Meanwhile, Seelye gave Senator Biden high marks for his knowledge about public affairs but warned of his verbal overkill in debate: "His innate exuberance and gusto in speaking without stopping for air can make him sound like he is clubbing his points – and his opponent."

A short piece by Dave Itzkoff "Messsage to Your Grandmother: Vote Obama," p. C1, "The Arts" section) on Oct. 7 focused on the online video produced by a political action committee, the Jewish Council for Education and Research, starring the well known television comedian, Sarah Silverman. The few minutes of this video, posted online the last week of September and viewed more than seven million times in its first two weeks, urged young people to go to Florida to visit their grandparents to persuade them to vote for Obama – and to threaten never to visit again if they didn't! The video (www.thegreatschlep.com) was very funny but also serious at a time when thousands of Obama volunteers from states where Obama's victory was safe were spending weekends or much longer times in battleground states – like Florida. (See also Julie Bosman, "Seeking the Bubbe Vote" in "The Caucus," Sept. 27, p. A14.)

On Oct. 13, the front page featured a surprising story and a long one – the jump filled the paper's entire page A17; it was surprising because the medium it focused

on was an old-fashioned but still potent one: the book (David D. Kirkpatrick, "Writing Memoir, McCain Found a Narrative for Life," p. A1, Oct.13). The story was about McCain's 1991 memoir, Faith of My Fathers. Sen. Obama's memoir had been perhaps more significant than any of his senatorial achievements in making him a national figure, and so Obama, too, made strategic use of the book form. But the emphasis in Kirkpatrick's story was that Sen. McCain's book came to have something of a life of its own. It became a blueprint for all of McCain's later public communications. Early in McCain's career, he avoided discussions of his experience as a prisoner-of-war in Vietnam, not wanting to lean on his suffering to define himself. After the co-authored memoir in which he portrays his imprisonment by North Vietnam as a second coming-of-age and an awakening of a new urgency about his mission in life, he reframed himself. His campaign manager in 2000 is quoted at the end of the story as saying that the book "played a major role in creating the brand that has served McCain so well."

MoveOn.org was one of the first groups to make good use of the Internet for political organising, mobilising people by the tens of thousands to defend President Clinton against the efforts of Congressional Republicans to impeach him and remove him from office over his sexual adventures. MoveOn was in the news at the end of October 2008 (Sarah Wheaton in "The Caucus" on "Casting Blame, by Name," p. A22, Oct. 31) due to a radical strategy they had come up with to impel people to vote for Obama: MoveOn users were able to enter the name of an individual friend or acquaintance into a short video that identified that person as the one whose failure to vote for Obama in November led to a one-vote margin of victory for John McCain. The MoveOn user could then send the video to their acquaintance – and as of Oct. 30 close to 10 million people had done so, all of this in the course of a week.

Also on Oct. 31 (Larry Rohter writing for "The Caucus": "Obama Backers Get the Message," p. A22) was the news that text messaging was valuable to the Obama camp. In the last days before the Nov. 4 election, the Obama campaign was getting text messages out to supporters in the Northeast with information on how to help their candidate in Pennsylvania, the only battleground state in the region. In California, text messages directed supporters to field offices in Colorado and Nevada. Chris Hughes, the campaign's director of online activities (and an inventor of Facebook), commented that text messaging is "the primary means of communication we have with lots and lots of supporters, and it has proven to be very effective." A database for text messaging emerged in August when Senator Obama said he would disclose his vice presidential running mate first by text message. In September and October, those who had signed up for Obama text messages were being reminded regularly of important upcoming events (such as voter registration deadlines).

Conclusion

What holds the American nation together? In the 1790s, the answer to that question in the minds of many national politicians was, "very, very little." They did not have great confidence that the union would endure – and, of course, Americans should not conveniently forget that the union did not ultimately endure without four years of civil war at a cost of more American lives than World War I, World War II, Korea, and Vietnam combined. All the king's horses and all of Madison's

carefully calculated institutional safeguards failed to prevent this.

Secessionist movements have been rare since then, although we learned during this past election about the Alaskan Independence Party with which Gov. Palin's husband has had some involvement. Substantial battles between federal power and state authority remain. Presidents Eisenhower, Kennedy, and Johnson all battled with Southern governors over what role the federal government legitimately had in enforcing civil rights. Other battles continue over a range of issues, including taxes, law enforcement, and environmental concerns.

Presidential campaigns have the paradoxical quality of bringing Americans together while exposing the great divides that separate us – divides over when life begins (the abortion debate); the legitimacy of federal economic power from taxation to eminent domain (always in doubt in the Republican Party); the legitimacy of state violence (almost always suspect at the leftward side of the Democratic Party); "the culture wars" over whether American national identity is Christian or a secular structure enabling religious, areligious, and antireligious pluralism; and whether the good society is accomplished through policies of restraint and discipline over dangerous impulses or through policies of tolerance and expressiveness.

Most of the time, these battles are avoidable. People take a live and let live approach: You go your way, and I'll go mine. People compartmentalise their lives and selectively attend to the world around them. Some listen to Rush Limbaugh, some listen to Amy Goodman. For some people, their entire world is on Fox News, others only listen to NPR. One reads Bob Herbert and Paul Krugman in the *New York Times*, another listens to his pastor in an evangelical church. The new media make it possible to do this more easily than ever, but it is something that Americans, who began as a crazy-quilt of thirteen societies with different ethnic, religious, economic, and political roots, have dealt with for a very long time.

How is this different today, particularly now that we have blogging … YouTube … *The Colbert Report* … and so many other online forms of expression? This informal survey of the 2008 presidential campaign as seen through the window of the *New York Times'* news coverage has not answered this question. What it has shown is that the new media have provided a source for an anarchistic, populist element to insert itself visibly and vocally into political campaigns as a disorganising force playing off against the most ambitious, organised efforts at mass mobilisation, apart from war, that Americans ever engage in.

In the *New York Times* reporting of the 2008 presidential election campaign, this produced a narrative of anxiety. It is there between the lines in the paper's attention to new media. It is there visibly in an August 31 column by Frank Rich, a writer so sure of his own opinions that anxiety would seem to be an emotion entirely foreign to him. But there it is ("Obama Outwits the Bloviators," Sunday "Week in Review," p. 10) when he writes that journalists are confused and may be just as "discombobulated as everyone else" these days. Sources of confusion, he finds, include both the economy in free-fall and the new media – YouTube, he observes, didn't even exist during the previous presidential election. By the end of the Democrats' convention in August, he writes, CNN had a larger share of the TV audience than any of the three broadcast networks, but what comfort can CNN find in this? The "share of the television audience," Rich notes, may have already become an outmoded measure of success: "The Web … is eroding all 20th-century media."

It may be that the technological changes all around us and the cultural changes, too – *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report* are products not of a new technology but of a newly exploitable cultural opening for irreverence – will become familiar, will settle into predictable patterns. Perhaps traditional centres of economic and political power that seemed shaken in 2008 will regain control, but that does not seem likely in the near future. The new media singly and collectively are sponsors of a new intensity, ubiquity, and anarchism in our mediated public world.