

# *Politics & Media* | **Randall Baker**

## **Abstract**

*We rarely look at the process and pace of change itself, but more at its manifestations. The way in which the technical ability to convey information, since the invention of writing, has changed is a good example of a “geometrical or exponential curve” in which the accumulating body of ideas promotes ever more change at a faster and faster speeds. The major impact of most technological changes can be covered by the term “unintended consequences”. So it is with the way that different information media have changed the operation of the political process. This paper examines this relationship through several key epochs of information technology that have brought us to the Information Age.*

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“*The Medium is the Message.*”<sup>1</sup>

“...the printing press, the computer, and television, are not simply machines which convey information. They are metaphors through which we conceptualize reality in one way or another. They will classify the world for us, sequence it, frame it, enlarge it, reduce it, argue a case for what it is like. Through these media metaphors, we do not see the world as it is. We see it as our coding systems are. Such is the power of information.”<sup>2</sup>

Politics is, on the one hand, about delivering a series of messages to those empowered to vote so that they may make informed choices at the time of election. On the other hand, it is about putting pressure on representatives to influence the policy process and induce desired change. Consequently the nature of the information received by the public, how it is delivered and how timely it is, all will change the perception held by the voter: Plato’s “informed citizen.” But changes in the nature of the information medium change the nature of the message and the nature of the political process.

Some years ago, in a book,<sup>3</sup> I examined the nature and pace of the process of *change* itself, and how it builds on science and the application of science as technology. We have gone through several revolutionary changes that have enabled radical changes in social organization. At first these were rare and widely-spaced, such as the discovery of agriculture and the domestication of animals approximately 10,000 years ago, which enabled us to lead settled lives, form communities, and develop the instruments of civilization. With the rise of science and the machine between the sixteenth and eighteenth centuries, the foundations were laid for a rapidly accelerating pace of change, to which we have less and less time to adapt. The same story is revealed if we look at the collection and distribution of information, especially the way it is distributed, and how it has become a—perhaps the—commodity of our times. This innovation has changed the face of the political message and how the process works. In the following table, I have attempted to indicate the main transformative points by which information has been disseminated over time:

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1 McLuhan, Marshall. *Understanding Media: The Extensions of Man*. New York. Mentor. 1964.

2 McLuhan, Marshall. *The Playboy Interview*. Playboy. pp. 26–27, New York. March 1969.

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3 Baker, Randall. *The Future isn't what it used to be*. Sofia. Paradigma. 2007.

## Changes in Information Technology

4 eras or waves: 1. Premechanical, 2. Mechanical, 3. Electromechanical, 4. Electronic.	The innovations described below can be organized into 4 main eras as shown to the left.
<b>3000 BC</b> evolution of writing	Now possible to make a permanent record of thoughts and utterances, replacing oral tradition.
<b>2600</b> Pens and Papyrus	Increase the ease of recording the message.
<b>1450</b> Gutenberg's movable type, newspapers begin to appear. Printing popularizes information. 1 <sup>st</sup> daily paper 1650	Enables the "mass production" of information to reach a wider audience, replacing manuscripts, shaping opinion.
<b>1830/7</b> Development of the electric telegraph (Morse code)	First step in wide distribution of <i>instant</i> information.
<b>1840s</b> cheap public mail system & railway development.	Rapid, cheap delivery of printed and written word. Steamship had same effect globally.
<b>1876</b> Alexander Graham Bell invents the telephone.	Instant delivery of the spoken word.
<b>1880s</b> Portable photography (Kodak film)	Instant record of the visual aspects of a message.
<b>1894</b> Guglielmo Marconi invents radio ("wireless")	Instant communication independent of wires to and from fixed or moving locations (ships).
<b>1910</b> talking moving pictures (Edison) the <i>Newsreel</i>	Mass rapid diffusion of image and word globally.
<b>1925</b> John Baird invents television.	Instant diffusion of live-time images and words into the home.
<b>1927</b> Radio networks begin to form in the USA	Networking opinion and feeding into homes, forming local and national opinion.
<b>1944</b> First computers and age of information begins.	Mass analysis of information, policy analysis.
<b>1948</b> Transistor invented that will shrink communications devices.	Radios become personal and portable—no longer any need to "gather around them." Information goes with you, in the car, office, outdoors.
<b>1949</b> Network TV starts in the USA. The visual aspect becomes important. "Sound bite" follows.	Networks able to shape the information taken into homes by TV. Visual image now part of message—image consulting born.
<b>1958</b> The integrated circuit makes miniaturization easier.	Beginning of digital and miniaturization revolution
<b>1969</b> ARPANET is first internet	Computers linked: instant, free interpersonal global communication among people.
<b>1970s</b> Personal Computers	Access to global networking expands. Censorship compromised—control of news less possible.
<b>1980s</b> Mobile Phone. First laptops sold.	Person no longer tied to location of phone—truly "interpersonal messaging."
<b>1980</b> CNN launched—first 24-hour news channel, then CNN International begins global news (whose news?) Seen in 210 countries and territories.	Instant global dissemination of news raises question of "whose news?" and is global news shaped by the influence of the "West."
<b>1992</b> Beginnings of the World Wide Web, streamed broadcasts. Continuous flow of information—news becomes increasingly live and immediate.	Multi-media, the result of digitization reduces all information to a common medium. Bloggers. Instant, live, global messages.
<b>1996</b> Al Jazeera founded—first non-western challenge to global news domination.	The beginnings of a global choice of information rather than CNN, BBC etc. RT follows etc.
<b>1998</b> Google founded	Global information sources, death of print medium, libraries etc.
<b>2000</b> Smart Phone	Many media melded into one portable form
<b>2001</b> iPod launched	Take your information with you when you want it.
<b>2007</b> iPhone launched, putting it all together.	Many separate media made redundant.

When science and technology combine to produce radically new opportunities and products, the potential social impact of these technologies is rarely foreseen. When the car appeared, for instance, in the last two decades of the nineteenth century, it was essentially a “rich man’s toy.” Once Henry Ford applied the principles of mass production, with the Model T, it became widely accessible, and truly took off in the prosperity of the post-World War II era. In the process, it totally changed the geography of how we lived, with the rise of suburbia and the death of neighborhoods, the growth of malls and the death of downtown and small retailing, the merging of regional economies into a national market, and so forth.

Similarly, the arrival of innovations such as the personal computer brought about changes we could never have envisaged, such as the rapid demise of newspapers, printed books and libraries, as well as instant (and largely free) global communication. We have seen, over the period since the rise of the World Wide Web (WWW) in 1992, a “democratization” of information in a way that would have been impossible to conceive of even twenty years ago, when it began. In effect, if you have (or think you have) a message that needs to be heard, then you have a medium that potentially allows you to reach millions—even billions—of people. This has *never been possible before*,

and the political process is awakening to the changes that this enables—either by mobilizing the opportunities, or preventing them. Every word a politician says is recorded, out there waiting to come back to haunt him or her. Every thought, move and gesture is discussed in thousands of blogs, and politicians have an entirely new way of interfacing with potential voters anywhere and at any time. At the

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same time, people have a new way of organizing, mobilizing and telling the rest of the world what is going on. This is changing the face of politics, and raising some fundamental policy dilemmas.

### **The Political Message**

The current article is concerned with the emergence of the wider voting public.<sup>4</sup> Before that, the right to vote, usually tied to property, was the preserve of a limited number of people (all men) who had a certain common perspective shaped by class, property, and literacy. Many advances combine to create the contemporary information age, and they are neither independent, nor exclusively technical.

<sup>4</sup> Probably the period from about 1840–1860.

Each reinforces or changes the other. The ability to distribute the printed word, for instance, is somewhat limited in its impact if the majority of the population is illiterate. With democracy comes the spread of education—an essential component—and the incorporation of broader elements of the social spectrum in the political system and philosophy. Education, the vote, and the political process go hand-in-hand. Similarly, anti-democratic systems have found it necessary from their beginnings to control, restrict, censor and deny information in order to prevent political opinions from forming around news, or new ideas, whether internal or external to the system. It could be argued that once fax, the phone, satellite TV, and the Internet opened windows to other societies, the USSR could not control how people thought. Today, in North Korea, Syria, and China, among others, attempts are made to restrict the global information revolution, seen as an instrument that can foment change and thus threatening to those maintaining the status quo.

If we go back to the age of the printed word, particularly books and newspapers, literacy was the principal barrier, and the lack of democracy the second. However, pamphlets existed in abundance, and were particularly influential in pre-Revolutionary France, in shaping opinion. Cheap and rapidly produced, they were read aloud at meetings of political groups. Initially, the state found it easy to

control the press, and it was no accident that freedom of press was a constitutional underpinning of the American Revolution as an element of “freedom of speech.” Indeed, if we complain about the “tabloid press” at the present time, it is mild compared with the scurrilous personal character assassinations that featured in eighteenth century political commentary. However, the press, and books even more, faced the challenge of getting news out while it was still fresh. The railways changed that, but still the newspapers carried a variety of items, stopped in time, and articles were shaped by the perceived necessity of a “beginning and end.” Opinion was shaped by the political complexion of the newspaper and its writers, and was usually “preaching to the choir” because people bought newspapers that reflected what they wanted to hear. Nevertheless, by the 1850s, it was quite possible to be well-informed and up-to-date on *yesterday’s* world. The telegraph and the railroad made it quite possible for political news to be “around the country” for digestion by breakfast.<sup>5</sup> News agencies emerged, and gathered and distributed news to outlets such as regional papers, and from different parts of the country—or world—to the metropolitan headquarters of national papers. These agencies, as we would say now, “networked” the

<sup>5</sup> In the 1820s it took 6 months for news to cross America by river and wagon; the stage coach reduced that to 6 weeks, the railroad to 6 days. The telegraph reduced the transmission time to almost nothing.

news for papers all over the nation, who subscribed to their service (*Reuters* is a good surviving example).

However, opinion, even in democracies, was shaped by the outlook of the newspaper, though there were different newspapers to fit most tastes—even anarchists had publications. Politicians still found it necessary, as a way of delivering their message personally, to address large public gatherings (hustings) which could then be reported in newspapers. Presidential campaigns during the height of the newspaper era inevitably featured the “whistle-stop” tour, during which the candidates would address large gatherings of people from the back of a train. Otherwise the candidate was destined to be someone “reported on” by someone else in the morning’s newspaper. The more limited the opportunity for face-to-face campaigning, the larger the campaign became (local, provincial or national).

### **Radio**

Radio changed the political medium in several ways. It was now possible for a politician to speak personally to large numbers of constituents, either in campaign speeches or in the “fire-side chats” developed by Franklin Roosevelt in the 1930s. This immediately “personalized” the process, and the listener was able to form an opinion of the candidate’s “personality”; their honesty, integrity, sincerity, etc, as conveyed by their method of address (accent, affectations, use

of colloquialisms, etc). By this point, the huge “delivered-speech” was not necessarily the primary medium; more important was the need to sound as though you were addressing a family. These families were, after all, listening to you in their homes, sitting around their large radio, not in some railyard with thousands of

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other people waiting for the presidential train. This *personal* appeal was reinforced by the photographic press which worked on “image”, making the candidate a visible, “real” person who could be seen in the press as well as heard on the radio. The posed campaign photograph began to be replaced by family images, “at-home” photos and the like. This required the candidate to “look right.” They had to “relate” to the public - and so image-consulting began. Roosevelt was one of the first presidents to understand this, making sure that no image displayed his paralysis (from polio). He is almost never seen standing up or in any position that suggests his disability. He always appears to speak *to* rather than *at* the people when employing the “personalized” media communication strategy.

The other significant feature of radio is that it can be *live*; in other words, the constituents can hear things as they are actually happening. Indeed, the first live broadcast in the U.S covered the results of the campaign between Woodrow Wilson and Charles Evans Hughes in 1916. There was now a sense of immediacy in politics. Politicians and candidates could be asked, in real time, for their reactions to and opinions on every current situation.<sup>6</sup> This reduced preparation time, and the candidates had to be able to think on their feet. Previously this time of immediate reaction was required only in question and answer sessions during campaigns, etc. Speechwriters had traditionally played a much bigger role. They remained central to larger occasions, but the broadcast press conference required very different skills—at which Ronald Reagan, as a former actor, excelled. The first non-stop live broadcasting of a major political event was the Munich crisis of 1938, when the nation assessed the threat of war from Europe in real time.

In many countries without democracy, it was relatively easy to control the dissemination of “subversive” information during this era of radio and the newspaper - by “owning” the news, (like *Pravda* and all broadcast media). People didn’t necessarily have to believe what was written in such “news”papers, but they had

<sup>6</sup> This was greatly enhanced by the invention of the portable tape recorder, particularly the cassette recorder that became the journalist’s tool in the 1960s, replacing the notebook.

nothing against which to measure this information. As long as these barriers against “counter-revolutionary” or “subversive” attacks could be maintained, truth could be massaged in many ways. “Radio Free Europe” was a late child of this era, as were the “jamming wars” in which Communist states tried to block “American propaganda”, perceived as a threat to the state information apparatus.

As with newspaper conglomerates, radio *networks* (providing national coverage) became opinion shapers with their own political agenda, or served as national institutions that were largely independent (BBC, PBS). Once more people tuned in to the station that reinforced their own political beliefs.

Today radio has been sidelined and localized in most Western countries. The younger age-group (17-28) has been shown to listen to radio almost exclusively in cars and for entertainment, and almost never as a source of news or public affairs discussion.<sup>7</sup>

### Television

Technically, the television age began in the 1920s, but it did not become a real force for change for another couple of decades, when it became affordable and there were networks to carry signals across countries. After World War II, television displaced radio, which meant that news and po-

<sup>7</sup> I have never rented a car in the UK in which the radio was preset to a news or “serious” station. It is always music or chat shows.

litical messages had to be visual as well as audible. This would dramatically change the nature and delivery of the political message. News was shaped around what had immediate visual “impact.”

Politically, in the U.S, we can say that the defining moment for the transition to TV was the election campaign between Nixon and Kennedy in 1960. Nixon had not taken the “image” issue seriously and looked dreadful, perspiring profusely and tensely gripping the podium, while Kennedy maintained a poised, comfortable image. Those who *heard* this interview were strongly of the opinion that Nixon had “won.” Those who *saw* it televised were equally convinced that Kennedy had won. The important factor is that Kennedy *did* win. From there on, the TV could not be ignored. As with newspapers and radio, television in the U.S (and increasingly in Europe) has been consolidated into giant corporations with their own political agendas. Two notable modern examples are the Fox Network in the U.S; at the state level this exists in the *de facto* monopolization of the medium in Russia.

The importance of personal *image* in the age of television has encouraged “negative” campaigning, which has come to dominate so much of “paid-time” campaigning through advertisements. It now seems more important to weaken or destroy the “image” of the opposition than it is to have a coherent agenda of your own,

or a reasoned critique of the opposition’s message. Coupled with this is the phenomenal cost of campaigning, since it requires candidates to *buy* time. Many argue that the cost of this medium is restricting the political process and driving potential candidates into a frenzied attempt to raise money. The message isn’t enough—the cost of the medium may well be the defining element. Until very recently, the political campaign had been overwhelmingly a television phenomenon with enormous exposure time, commentary and commercials. But this is set to change.

### **Social Networking and the Internet**

Since the arrival of the WWW in 1992,<sup>8</sup> and the emergence of social networking - *Facebook 2004, YouTube 2005, Twitter 2006* - the information/politics interface has been changing dramatically and impossibly fast. Essentially, the web is potentially *anarchic*, or totally democratic, if you wish to express it that way. Now everyone’s opinion can be posted for the world to see without an editor, agent or publisher to impose their views. It is global, immediate, visceral, and rapidly increasing in size. Now, with “smart-phones,” this interactive information and communication source goes with you wherever you are, so the flow of information is immediate and ubiquitous. Of course, it excludes those who do

<sup>8</sup> The essential difference between the WWW and the Internet before its arrival, is that the former is multimedia, consolidating all forms of media. The internet carried the written word.



not have a computer or smart phone, such as the poor and, often, the older segment of society. But smart technology is much too big to ignore. It is, furthermore, a two-way street; you can *participate* in the political process full time. You can derive your information from literally thousands of sources, and from every type of political bias or leaning. With the disappearance of edited news and prepared speeches, there is potentially no way to evaluate the quality or veracity of the message you are accessing. Conspiracy theory, for instance,

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can provide a substantial part of your online diet, if you so choose. How to know what to believe? There is no quality control unless you go back to, say, online newspapers, or broadcasting companies. The challenge for the young is how to evaluate the news and the political messages they encounter.

Everyone, after all, has the medium

and potential to become a political pundit, or “go viral”.

The online political process began with Jessie Ventura's 1998/9 gubernatorial campaign in Minnesota, unsurprising for someone launching a political career out of nothing (Ventura was a former professional wrestler). It worked. The next candidate to use the Internet, particularly for his direct fund-raising appeals, was Howard Dean in his 2003 presidential campaign. Interestingly, his phenomenal online success (adding 1.1 million Democrats to the registered electorate) was wiped out by his hysterical behavior on *television* and he disappeared instantly from the race.

The power of the Internet political campaign was truly seen in President Obama's winning campaign. Reaching out directly to the younger Internet savvy voters in 2008, Obama engaged potential voters, campaign funders, and campaign workers very personally through my.BarrackObama.com, and his campaign was accessible and incorporative. Previous campaigns used cold-calling—a strategy that is often perceived negatively, on the grounds that it can be intrusive. Online, you take the message at your own convenience, and you are more receptive—it never interrupts you. There is no doubt that Obama's was the first online campaign, and it worked.

So, now we have multi-media messages delivered to us personally any-

where, anytime. This will be the vehicle for future political campaigns as more and more computer-savvy people get older; older people will increasingly be incorporated in the online mode of campaigning. But this very freedom, this personalization and “anarchy”, are also threatening. This same medium (the *Blackberry*, with its coded signal) was the

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instrument of choice for mobilizing and directing the looting and burning of British cities during the summer of 2011. Calls from the police for this service to stop were resisted by *Blackberry*. The “Arab Spring” was mobilized by *Facebook*, *Twitter*, and the mobile phone. Recently, Syria has been shutting down mobile-phone servers to prevent protesters from organizing and gathering; the CSTO has announced that it will take control of social networking sites in CIS cyberspace to prevent “destabilization”. This, of course, looks like good old-fashioned censorship to muzzle change. The battle is between

anarchy or democracy and the “privacy” issue on the one hand, and the perceived need to prevent dangerous or threatening misuse of the medium on the other. During the recent London riots, while the *Blackberry* coordination of crime continued, it was later possible to arrest 1,600 of the participants within a week because of the ubiquitous nature of the closed-circuit TV coverage in London. In London you are photographed over 300 times a day.<sup>9</sup> So, the question arises, what is the role of the information medium, since it can serve many purposes: control or safety, order or chaos, monitoring or spying? Privacy and freedom of expression will be the central issues in shaping the Information Age. The stand-down by Google over the censorship of its site in China was a notable expression of this dilemma. Google argued that it was able to play a more useful role in promoting free speech by working with China’s information industry than by refusing, and being entirely excluded from China.

The real dilemma is: when are you protecting internet users from predatory organizations or individuals, and when are you intruding further and further into free expression and participation in the social and political processes? How universal are the Western values of democracy underpinning “free expression” in other cultures? The U.S has an historic

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<sup>9</sup> Norris, C and Armstrong, G. *The Maximum Surveillance Society: The Rise of CCTV*. Oxford U.P. 1999.

sense of “Exceptionalism” which has put it on a missionary track to bring democracy to all who suffer under tyrants, on the basis that democracy is a “one size fits all” philosophy. To some cultures, it might be that too much democracy further destabilizes dangerous situations—like bringing democracy to a country like Iraq, which is not a nation in the European sense,<sup>10</sup> but elements of much broader religious and cultural and ethnic groupings through which history drew arbitrary lines. Is the basis for democracy there?

powering and free. It threatens some states because it can become a mobilizing instrument for radical ideas and change; it can promote pornography and scams as easily as it can bring knowledge and information. No government has ever been faced with the threat of total openness and potential lack of control over ideas and information before. It is, quite possibly, the biggest and fastest moving element of change since the Industrial Revolution and the Age of the Machine.

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Politics is now set to become much more global, continuous in real-time, personal, interactive and immediate as the online community continues to grow, and move from the computer to the smart phone and iPad. Image is now total, and the sound-bite and the photo-op have come to represent that. Campaigning has become personal and negative, focused on destroying image. The process of the Information Age is as dangerous and misleading as it is enlightening, em-

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<sup>10</sup> But, of course, neither is the U.S. However, the US is collected around an idea to which hundreds of years of immigrants have subscribed. Madison said that “America is an idea.”