

Changing Media and Changing Political Organization: Delegation, Representation and News

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Abstract

This article examines the ways that new communications technologies change the organization of politics as well as the content of news. Changes in the media lead to changes in the mediators, the persons who choose and interpret the news for the public. When new mediators convey different news stories or offer different interpretations from the previous regime, they redistribute control of politics and culture.

As media get cheaper, faster and harder to control, state regulation of content becomes less effective. This provides new opportunities for citizens to monitor their leaders and alters the ways that leaders – whether they are democratic or authoritarian – demonstrate accountability.

Political leaders are always trying to control the agenda by limiting information available to the public and convincing the public that they know more and know best. New forms of media, such as the commercial television, cable and satellite television, and the internet change political competition by providing new opportunities for insurgent politicians to challenge their elders. I consider these changes within the context of past innovations, including the rise of the printing press, the telegraph, the newspaper, and radio.

Introduction

Citizens everywhere have more sources for political news than ever before. Satellite, internet, and even cell phones provide access to foreign news sources that were once blocked by governments in some countries. Internet, email, and text messaging provide

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people in countries where governments once controlled all access to news the means to circumvent government controls. Domestic private media and international satellite and internet providers compete with the state-owned media for audience in countries where government once monopolized broadcasting.

At the same time, citizens everywhere also have more alternatives to political news if they are not interested in politics. The same technological and economic changes that increase access to news also increase access to entertainment and sports. The declining costs of broadcasting and receiving news or entertainment, and the resulting proliferation of content providers from specialized cable and satellite channels to online publications are changing the content and organization of politics.

When media options become more plentiful – or less expensive – entrepreneurial politicians change politics through their responses to the opportunities created by these changes. The very nature of political competition within and between parties changes because new communication technologies change both the content of news and the organization of politics. Commercial television, cable TV, satellite television, and the internet change political competition within political parties by providing new opportunities for insurgent politicians to challenge their elders. We can better understand the political effects of these changes when we consider them in the context of past innovations, including the rise of the printing press, the newspaper, the telegraph, and radio.

As media get cheaper, faster and harder to control, state regulation of content becomes less effective. This provides new opportunities for citizens to monitor their leaders and alters the ways that leaders – whether they are democratic or authoritarian – demonstrate accountability.

When the distribution of information changes, gatekeepers whose power depends upon the control of information struggle to preserve their power and stave off challenges from opportunistic rivals taking advantage of the new opportunities. This struggle in turn changes the organization of politics.

Whenever media change, relations between electorate and representatives change. The gap between information available to citizens and information available to officials gives officials latitude in deciding how the benefits of government policies will be distributed. This gives some people an incentive to disseminate the news either: to build an audience for their publication; to change policy; or to advance their political career. This means there is always an incentive for keeping some information inside government and away from citizens to protect existing publications, maintain current policy, or maintain political power.

When the media change, so do the mediators – the persons who choose and interpret the news. When new mediators communicate different stories and different interpretations, they redistribute information among citizens, providing more information to some and less to others, and more information about some issues and less about others. Entrepreneurial politicians, broadcasters, and publishers take

advantage of these changes and challenge political and cultural elites by letting ‘daylight in upon the magic’ in Walter Bagehot’s phrase.

Delegation, representation, and news

Citizens’ knowledge and understanding of government determines which aspects of their welfare they will connect with government – which benefits, in other words, are *attributable* to government in general and to specific officials in particular. When citizens connect specific actions with results they care about, they can judge officials as delegates – those expected to act precisely as the citizens believe they should. When people cannot connect specific actions with results, they have no choice but to treat their officials as representatives – those who figure out what is best for them and are judged on results without knowing what the alternatives were.

Judging by actions as opposed to judging by results is the classic distinction between delegation and representation. When little information about government policies and policy making is available, citizens have no choice but to ‘reason from results’, judging their government – or elected officials – by the general outcomes they observe, not by the bargaining and deliberation process which led to the policy.

Should people want an official they elect to be a *delegate* who acts on the expressed wishes of his constituents or should they want an official who acts as a *representative* who pursues his conception of what their interests would be if they knew what he knew? Edmund Burke’s famous ‘Speech to the Electors of Bristol’ is the classic formulation of the distinction between delegation and representation, and a strong argument that people are better off when officials do as they think best and not as people think the official should act (Burke, 1774: 74). Burke argued that a politician who heeded his constituents’ explicit wishes was sacrificing his own judgment and conscience to the *detriment* of the constituents. Representation, he argued, was what the voters *should* want, not delegation, because if voters delegated the official to carry out their specific directions, they would be instructing officials before they knew the information that would emerge during debate:

Government and Legislation are matters of reason and judgment, and not of inclination; and, what sort of reason is that, in which the determination precedes the discussion; in which one set of men deliberate, and another decide; and where those who form the conclusion are perhaps three hundred miles distant from those who hear the arguments? (Burke, 1774)

Burke argued that the information he learned during Parliamentary deliberation would allow him to deliver more benefits to the constituents since representatives often have information that people did not have. Of course, he said nothing in his speech about the ways inside information also could be used for the advantage of the politician.

Politicians have an incentive to keep some information inside government and away from constituents. While everyone might benefit from a railroad or port, for example, persons with advance knowledge of where the facilities would be located

would gain the additional benefits of ‘insider trading’. People who are privy to what is happening inside parliament can hold politicians accountable for what happens during deliberation, while all others can only pass judgment on the policies after the fact, holding politicians accountable for the final legislation without knowing the alternatives.

Indeed, in Burke’s England, Parliament was striving as best they could to protect their privileges by keeping information about Parliamentary intent away from the general public. Parliament once declared it a criminal breach of the privileges of the house to allow any speeches into print. Three years before Burke’s speech, there were riots in London when three printers refused to bow before Parliament and apologize for printing news about parliamentary debates. And earlier in the eighteenth century, William Pulteney, the leader of the Tory opposition, had candidly spelled out the risk to parliament’s privileges: ‘To print or publish the speeches of gentlemen in this House, even though they were not misrepresented, looks very much like making them accountable without doors for what they say within’ (Parliamentary Press Gallery Committee).

A free flow of information was a threat to the MPs’ monopoly on information and to their inner circle’s opportunities to benefit from inside information. When reporting is not allowed, only those who know MPs personally – or who send their agents to the galleries – get accurate reports of parliament’s debates and likely future actions. The MPs knew that if the general public knew what Parliament was debating they could bring pressure to bear during deliberation. The restrictions on reporting, when they could be maintained, gave the MPs more latitude and power and made those in their inner circle better off. Parliament was still accountable to the electorate, but on a narrower set of interests.

Every time a restriction on the flow of information is removed, formerly private aspects of legislation are made public. Insiders want the concentrated benefits of a bargain to be known only to those who directly benefit from the bargain, and for the persons paying the diffuse costs to know as little as possible about them. Representatives want farmers to know that they are hard at work defending their interests and cutting deals on their behalf. They do not, however, want the information accessible beyond their intended audience – private deals on behalf of farmers can constitute pork barrel and waste to consumers. And they do not want farmers to know when they sacrifice further benefits for farmers in return for contributions from agribusiness.

As media proliferate, it becomes harder to limit the potential audience for news about all bargains or policies and keep them from the people paying the costs of someone else’s concentrated benefits. The distinction between concentrated benefits and diffuse costs rests in large measure upon the lack of motivation to learn about the policy – or even notice it – among persons paying the diffuse, not easily perceived costs (Wilson, 1974).

Rethinking media effects

Changes in communications media bring changes in mediators, in political organization, and in older media as well. Not all media effects are ‘inside the head’ of the audience.

If we were living in the sixteenth century, we could study the impact of the printing press by comparing handwritten and printed Bibles. This could provide the answers to some fascinating questions: Was comprehension better with calligraphy or with print? Which was more easily absorbed, the illustrations or the text? Did recall and recognition differ for vellum and paper Bibles? And which text language promoted more religiosity – Latin or the vernacular? This inquiry, of course, would tell us nothing about how the printing press led to changes in the organization of religion, the content of religious services, and even the content of the Bible.

Paul Lazarsfeld, one of the founders of communications research, joked that if he had been around to study the impact of the printing press after its first decade, he would have missed its significance. Hand copying and printing still existed side-by-side, producing the same old texts for the same small literate audience (Pool, 1990). Such comparisons of printed and hand-copied bibles would only examine media effects inside the heads of the readers. They would entirely miss the ways that lowering the cost of books would increase the number of literate people, increase the number of books literate people had, and change the organization of religions that lost their virtual monopoly on religious books. When costs change, so do the sizes of audience, the number of publishers trying to sell to that audience, and the number of books people can read and compare.

In many ways, the effects of changing media technology are the same today as when Gutenberg developed his printing press. Priests had been nailing theses to church doors for centuries, listing their complaints with church doctrine or practice. Indeed, when Martin Luther nailed his 95 theses to his church door, they created nary a ripple. Then his friends *printed* them. They hired peddlers to sell them over a wide area, and brought previously scattered local complaints into a single framework, a focal point for unifying dissent. Between 1517 and 1520, an estimated 300,000 people bought copies of Luther’s pamphlets. When he translated the Bible into German, he spurred a demand for literacy among lay people eager to read the Bible themselves – and then to challenge the interpretations of their priests (Eisenstein, 1979: 303–310).

When Catholic attempts to develop a Bible as attractive as Luther’s failed, some bishops tried to see to it that young people would get their Bible readings only from priests. When efforts to monopolize control of the Bible failed, and Bible reading by priests was no longer enough to draw everyone to mass, the Catholic Church de-emphasized the Bible and sought to maintain attendance with rituals and music, eventually overcoming objections from specialists in Gregorian chant and developing multi-voice polyphonic masses.

Ambitious clerics working their way up the ladders of ecclesiastical success – men such as Erasmus and Rabelais – found they could now move ahead faster as freelancers, collaborating with entrepreneurial printers who needed books to sell (Eisenstein, 1979: 40). When both the Protestant and the Catholic clergy began to ban books, Protestant printers happily printed books for Catholics and Catholic printers reciprocated for Protestants.

The printing press changed the organization of religion and government. It made books and Bibles widely available to persons of moderate income who did not read Latin. It gave writers outside monasteries access to new audiences. When writers outside the church could publish books and pamphlets, neither the church nor monarchs could suppress dissent easily or maintain a monopoly on ideas. When vernacular Bibles were in the hands of hundreds of thousands of persons, priests had to defend their interpretations and revise policies that did not accord with the Bible (Eisenstein, 1979).

From information to news: patronage, partisanship and advertising

News is information about public life that sells (Hamilton, 2004). The very nature of news, what information is transmitted, who transmits it, and to whom depends upon economics, technology, and politics. What can be sold depends upon sellers, buyers, and what can or cannot be kept out of circulation by censorship, bribes, or force.

Information that sells takes one of three basic forms: information that can be sold directly to individuals, information that sells indirectly by being bundled with advertising, or information the government finances because the government wants to ‘sell you’.

People are willing to pay themselves for some types of news. In America, Bloomberg and Dow Jones both sell market data to millions of investors; bettors and sports fans pay for access to Web sites with up-to-date information about horses and teams; and more than two million people subscribe to the online Consumer Reports to get up-to-date information before purchasing a new appliance. Of course, information so timely and valuable that citizens will pay for it is a tiny subset of all the information available. While tens of millions gladly pay \$15 a month to watch movies without commercial interruptions, few care enough about the news to pay for commercial-free content.

If people won’t pay for information and the government won’t pay to give it to them, then they will get only news that can be bundled with ads – or propaganda – that someone wants them to see. Publishers can support their media with three basic kinds of revenue: political patronage from a politician or party, government subsidies, or advertising. Historically, commercialization of the economy and increasing advertising revenues erode and eventually supplant papers supported by the patronage of a politician or party and force subsidized media such as the BBC or NHK to change their approach in order to compete with commercial media.

In the early nineteenth century, most American papers were partisan mouthpieces that depended on political patronage for survival. Papers that spoke for a politician or clique had no independent viewpoint of their own and were thus of value only to

persons who needed to know what the politician wanted them to know, as Soviet elites once read *Pravda* to learn what they were *supposed* to know, whether it was true or not. Beyond partisans' reports and strident editorials, these six-penny papers reported little more than shipping news and legal notices (Schudson, 1978: 18–19).

Whereas editors in the party press were little more than skills for politicians, the editors of the new penny press that developed after 1830 created independent identities. These independent papers, some nonpartisan and some partisan, began to swamp the older party press. The partisan editors, such as Horace Greeley of the *New York Herald*, sought to distinguish themselves from the 'servile partisanship' of the older papers and strove to maintain their own credibility as independent spokesmen for the interests of their readers (Schudson, 1978: 22).

The 'penny press', Schudson has shown, invented the modern concept of 'news', bringing reports from courtrooms, police departments, and political debates to the middle class. These penny papers targeted the viewpoint and interests of 'an increasingly varied, urban, and middle-class society of trade, transportation, and manufacturing', while the older six-penny papers continued to target the political and business elites. This was a dramatic change: 'Until the 1830s, a newspaper provided a service to political parties and men of commerce; with the penny press a newspaper sold a product to a general readership and sold the readership to advertisers' (Schudson, 1978: 22–23).

In the era when many papers were intensely partisan, the Associated Press profited from being ferociously nonpartisan. The bedrock principle of the AP was 'rigorously enforced' neutrality, so that papers of every political persuasion could safely use news from other cities and states. By 1884, a historian could write: 'So well understood is this rule by the public, and so carefully is it observed, that the world has learned to regard the intelligence conveyed through this agency as uniformly trustworthy' (North, 1884: 109).

In the nineteenth century, as today, the older party papers co-existed with the newer papers, whether nonpartisan or partisan, that were independent of party control. Using data on advertising revenues and circulation for the 50 largest cities, James Hamilton shows that between 1870 and 1900, technological change and the growth in advertising revenue virtually eliminated the older form of party newspaper (Hamilton, 2004: 37–70). Americans preferred an objective partisanship based on the credibility of the publisher rather than on the party line delivered by politicians. Moreover, the large increase in total circulation for all papers between 1870 and 1900 shows that many new readers who had never subscribed to the partisan press were attracted by more objective, less partisan papers.

Competition changes content

American households receive, on average, over 60 television channels, compared to seven in the late 1960s. More channels provide more ways to obtain news, as well as more ways to avoid it. More ways to obtain news means more competition among providers to give people the news they want instead of the news political and cultural elites think they should have. More competition also means lower profit margins and

fewer incentives to cover expensive stories. Cable and satellite channels also mean niche targeting, because a smaller audience now can sustain a show.

In the 1990s, network news covered less legislation than in the 1970s. Whereas two-thirds of the votes deemed critical by Congressional Quarterly were covered in the 1970s, only about half were covered in the 1990s. Whereas the nightly news once covered half of the votes on interest-group scorecards, in the 1990s they covered only one-third. Coverage of the Supreme Court, however, held steady, at about 40% of the cases considered most important.

Celebrity coverage has also increased. Network news has doubled the time devoted to *People's* most intriguing people of the year. This is not entirely a move away from politics, though. *People's* list includes political personalities, and political celebrities, such as John McCain or Colin Powell, get some of the attention no longer given to legislative insiders.

The big shifts in coverage, however, have been away from legislation and foreign reporting and into what is derisively known as 'soft news'. While there has been some increase in the coverage of celebrities, both political and non-political, most of the shift has been to the 'soft' categories of 'news you can use' – consumer-oriented information on health, business, and technology (Hamilton, 2004: 266–275).

The sexist connotations of 'hard' and 'soft' news reflect the Washington perspective of politicians and regulators (beltway oriented, mostly male) whose political interests were catered to before deregulation. Advertisers particularly value viewers aged 18–49, especially women. People in this category have a bigger impact on advertising rates because they are making new consumer decisions and spending more money. To the extent possible, then, the issues they care about are the ones that will be covered when shows are assembled. If there is more about health, gun control, education, and the environment in the news, and less about foreign affairs and legislative battles, that fact reflects the interests of the viewers considered most desirable by the sponsors.

Increased competition is perceived as 'bias'

Cable, by lowering the break-even size of a viewing audience, increases product differentiation and perceptions of bias. In other words, whenever the costs of communication drop and the number of papers, magazines, or channels increases, there will be complaints about bias.

Competition increases the perception that news is biased, because bias is inherent in product differentiation: the more precisely a news program can target a demographic group, the more likely it is that other groups will call it biased. Using Nielsen data on viewing by age and gender, as well as data on advertising rates and products advertised, Hamilton categorized news shows according to the viewers they targeted. Not surprisingly, the more a group differs ideologically from the ideology of a show's target audience, the more bias it perceives. Liberals say that shows aimed at conservatives are biased, and older viewers say the same about shows aimed at younger viewers.

Cable competition to existing networks is a particularly important development because inexpensive cable transmission creates opportunities for new niche markets. Like a newspaper, cable offers a portfolio of channels to suit different tastes. Smaller audiences can be profitable for channels dedicated solely to business, gardening, cooking, comedy, news, music, and sports. And the news shows on the channels targeted at narrow demographic niches are among the most controversial, such as the Comedy Channel's *Daily Show* and the Fox News Channel's *The O'Reilly Factor*.

In retrospect, with this insight we can see niche targeting and 'bias' going hand in hand in *The Boys on the Bus*. In 1972, at the height of controversy over the Vietnam War, Hunter S. Thompson covered the Nixon–McGovern campaign for *Rolling Stone*, a new magazine aimed at 18- to 29-year-olds, a demographic group that was antiwar and proudly disrespectful of political authority. Among reporters for mainstream publications, Thompson drew loathing from older ones and jealousy from younger ones because he could be more colorful and vitriolic about the candidates. During the primaries, for example, he wrote that Hubert Humphrey campaigned like a 'rat in heat' and that Edmund Muskie 'campaigned like a farmer with terminal cancer trying to borrow on next year's crop' (Crouse, 1973: 313–314).

Cultural protectionism

Are citizens being 'dumbed down' by soft news that 'distorts the public's perceptions'? (Patterson, 2000). We should note that every time the style, format, or variety of news changes, public intellectuals and scholars have blamed lower journalistic standards for the decline in political coverage, the decay of civil society, and the coarsening of political campaigns. Their criticisms amount to a kind of cultural protectionism, the rearguard action of outmoded gatekeepers protesting the rise of new mediators.

Elite disdain for soft news blinds us to the ways that hard news has talked down to many people who are now able to see government through different frames from those preferred by the elite. What makes the old standards of excellence so self-evident that alternatives are barely considered? It can be argued that political news is actually improving and that citizens are better informed; that we are wising up instead of dumbing down.

The wall between news and entertainment protected the gatekeeper status of some reporters and kept many citizens at arm's length. Some people are learning more from soft news than they ever did from hard news. Soft news has changed the agenda by reaching people with personal impact and drama. Personal impact and drama runs directly contrary to the credo behind hard news shows such as the *Lehrer News Hour* on PBS, the epitome of hard news in America. As Hamilton quotes Jim Lehrer from a 1992 interview:

Nothing should be noticed or absorbed except the information. Nothing else should be memorable. There is no such thing as a pretty slide, a zippy piece of music, a trendy shirt, a dynamic set, a tough question, or anything else, if

it deflects even a blink of attention from the information. Those few seconds while the viewer admires or retches over the gaudy green tie or the red-white-and-blue-flashing map of the drought belt can destroy the whole point of the exercise, the transmitting of information. (Hamilton, 2004: 171)

In historical context Lehrer's quote is cultural protectionism, a defense of news tailored for people who find personal connections, drama, and human interest a distraction from the facts.

Although the blurring of the line between news and entertainment has upset the mandarins of high culture and serious politics, Matthew Baum has shown just how much soft news actually contributes to public engagement (Baum, 2003). More people are able to follow small wars today than big wars in the past, thanks the programs they can understand. Even more dramatic is Baum's comparison of public attentiveness to the 1978 Camp David Accords between Israel and the PLO, the 1993 Oslo Accords between Israel and the PLO, and the 1995 Dayton Peace Accords between Bosnian Serbs, Muslims, and Croatians. Not surprisingly, given their historic significance, more network news stories appeared about Camp David (100) than about Oslo (86) or Dayton (73); still, Baum found that Americans were more engaged with Oslo and Dayton. When General Norman Schwarzkopf discussed Oslo with Regis Philbin and Kathie Lee Gifford, or when Chevy Chase presented Al Franken doing a monologue skewering the Dayton Accord, or when *E! News Daily* did a feature showing an Arab-American celebrity, Casey Kasem (a legendary disc jockey) attending the meetings in Oslo, people became more emotionally engaged with these stories than they had been in the past.

The new genres of programs – including tabloid shows such as *Hard Copy* or *Inside Edition* and entertainment shows such as *Entertainment Tonight* – provide important political information for viewers. They often cover a different set of issues from hard news programs, and when they do cover the same issues, they do so in other ways. Both differences are important.

Soft news emphasizes human impact and moral values, so the new audience for foreign affairs is an audience with different concerns and different ways of thinking about foreign affairs. When soft news covers a war, it focuses more on the human drama than on the geopolitical stakes, foreign relations, and diplomacy. A rescued hostage, a downed pilot, bereaved families, or a national guardsman resentful of the better-armed regular forces will get extensive coverage; congressional hearings, budget fights, and meetings with allies may go unmentioned.

In a nutshell, whether this kind of increasing engagement is good or bad depends upon how one feels about any particular war and weighs Dominos against Bodybags. If traditional news begins with the policy consequences of a war – Dominos – soft news emphasizes more the personal costs – Bodybags.

President Bush invoked good and evil when framing the choices in dealing with Iraq, which illustrates how soft news channels affect the ways presidents communicate their policies. The two dominant themes on soft news shows are human impact and

morality. Human impact means how an issue, such as the war in Iraq, affects the lives of specific Americans. Morality, in turn, simply means focusing on distinctions between right and wrong, good and evil. As most people believe they have an intuitive sense of the difference between right and wrong, they find it easy to deal with an issue in those terms. When a policy can be shown to have specific effects on specific people, even apolitical viewers perceive a connection.

In 2003 President Bush asked Oprah Winfrey, the host of a popular daytime television talk show, to be part of a delegation of American women traveling to Afghanistan to see the educational progress being made by Afghan women since the Taliban was driven from power. For many viewers, Oprah's name on the invitation would be sufficient to draw them to a story about Afghanistan.

Soft news can draw people to other political forums when the worlds connect – for better or worse. People who never 'got it' from nightly news are now getting it from soft news, and this change means that politicians who make soft news will sometimes get bigger hard news audiences. In January 1998, the Monica Lewinsky scandal was seldom mentioned on network news before President Clinton's State of the Union speech, although it was discussed incessantly on the soft news programs. The ratings for that speech were over 30% higher than for the previous or succeeding years, and the good news people heard that night – a budget surplus for the first time in years – gave Clinton a much bigger than usual boost in approval ratings. In the week before the speech, Baum notes, nightly network news ratings were up 6%, while soft news shows had rating increases as high as 70%! (Baum, 2003: 278–279).

Soft news doesn't bring people to politics by enlightening them; it does so by connecting their world to the human interest and drama in politics. Soft news ignores primaries and off-year elections and covers more crime and education and war than was the norm on hard news shows. Nor does it cover all scandals: a personal scandal such as the Monica Lewinsky affair was ideal for it, whereas Whitewater, a complex set of financial deals, was barely mentioned.

Soft news also presents different topics, not just different frames for the same topics. Baum shows that soft news is important for information about foreign crises but not for domestic information about primaries, Social Security, or legislation. It is particularly influential among the politically uninterested. As a result, people who are less politically engaged are comparatively more concerned with national crises than they are with other problems facing the country. And because these people are more often Democrats than Republicans, Republican presidents are more likely to gain increased popular support from crises.

There is good reason to believe that other issues covered mainly or solely by soft news programs are also politically relevant now for many citizens. Using more than 40 years of Gallup Polls, Maxwell McCombs and Jian-Hua Zhu identified the number of issues considered the 'most important issue facing the country' at any one time. They found that there has been a slow but steady increase in the number of issues that *at least* 10% of the population considers important. In other words, the number

of issues on the public agenda has increased. McCombs and Zhu found that America is moving away from a single-issue monopoly – where everyone is focused on the same issue – to a multiple-issue oligopoly, and the new issues include crime, morality, and social relations as well as a greater variety of economic issues (McCombs and Zhu 1995, 511–512).¹ These are the issues that, Baum shows, are more prominent in the new formats than on the traditional network programs and more important to the audiences viewing these shows (Baum, 2003: 127–129, 182–194).

Changing political communication strategies

The political agenda has broadened because politicians have adapted to the new media. If voters won't come to the politician, the politician will go to the voters.

When President Bush delivered his 2004 State of the Union address before Congress, he talked about the war on terrorism, the state of the economy, and traditional social values. He invited prominent Republicans and several ordinary people who have accomplished extraordinary or heroic deeds, a tradition begun by Ronald Reagan. The speech was preceded by weeks of White House leaks about the content of the speech, a tradition begun by President Clinton (Baum and Kernell, 1999: 110).

The State of the Union speech is traditionally given on the last Tuesday of January, which would have been 27 January. In 2004, the White House scheduled the speech for Tuesday, 20 January, the night after the Iowa primary, the first election of the year for the Democrats. Clearly, the intent was to overshadow the publicity given to the first Democratic winner, and to give the president a chance to rebut some Democratic arguments. The seating plan for the guests was hastily rearranged minutes before the speech, and several policy proposals the White House had previewed in leaks were dropped. For example, there was no mention of health care reform. And although six days earlier the president had given a major speech about putting a man on Mars, his 54-minute speech did not mention Mars; he did, though, find time to condemn steroid use by athletes.

Rescheduling the speech, shuffling the seating, floating and then dropping reference to the Mars project, and linking steroids to the State of the Union all illustrate ways that politicians react to changes in media. The proposed Mars exploration was scratched because it had not aroused public interest. Health care was dropped when the Democratic candidate Howard Dean, who had emphasized reform, finished third in the Iowa caucuses. Steroids, however, did connect with an important audience. In their sports-page stories about steroids, over 100 American newspapers mentioned the president's speech. The reaction was so positive among sportswriters and fans, in fact, that the White House later announced there would be a summit on steroid abuse in sports (which was later pre-empted by congressmen who wanted the publicity themselves). And the last-minute introduction of steroids into the planned speech explains the

¹ Based on a hypothesis in (Popkin, 1994), McCombs attributes this to the broadening effect of education. I now believe that the evidence suggests that the broadening is due more to the changes in media than to increased education.

shifting of prominent guests in the audience. Governor Arnold Schwarzenegger of California, an acknowledged steroid user, and a former Mr. Universe, was moved away from the president's wife so he would not be a (contradictory) part of the story.

In 1978, when Pope Paul VI died, President Carter sent his wife. In 2005, the official United States delegation to the funeral of John Paul II was led by President Bush and his wife, Laura, and included two former presidents, George H. W. Bush and Bill Clinton, as well as Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice. Never before has an American president attended a papal funeral. The increased prestige of this delegation matches the increased media attention given this pope. International coverage of his visits had given him a worldwide personal following no other pope has enjoyed and enhanced the visibility of the Church. When he died, Cardinals said it was important that the new pope also be able to play a public role like John Paul (Kirkpatrick, 2005; Woodward, 2005).

Challenging state-owned media

As media get cheaper, faster, and harder to control, state regulation of content becomes less effective, and existing state media are either adapting to competition or losing their audience. In countries like England and Japan, where government-controlled media such as the BBC or NHK now face commercial competition; or to countries like China and Saudi Arabia, where people can access emerging semi-commercial media, or satellite and Internet news, state media either adapt to popular interests or lose their audience.

Instead of financing their programs as private corporations do, by renting audiences to advertisers, state-owned media finance them by pleasing the politicians and the elites to whom the politicians respond. In these cases the more the government ministers care about a story, the more coverage it will fund. The British writer Steven Frears, who has written for both the BBC and Hollywood, described the difference as writing for the elite versus writing for the audience: 'When I was in television in the 70s, I was working with the best writers and actors in England. I was learning how to construct drama and tell stories. What we never learned about was audiences. If your peers said, "That was jolly good", you got another job. In American cinema, it's quite simple: if you don't deal with the audience, you don't have a chance' (Cooper, 2003).

Pleasing the elite instead of playing to the masses did not mean that the BBC was always providing more news coverage than American commercial networks. In 1938 when Anthony Eden resigned as foreign secretary to protest the appeasement of Hitler, the BBC decided not to broadcast the speech, which was important enough for CBS to broadcast live to America. One critic noted that 'In London, the proper people always know what would or would not please the proper people . . . News is not censored; it is merely omitted' (Marquis, 1984: 408–409). The BBC director, Sir John Reith, told Edward R. Murrow that the BBC policy was to 'Give people what they should have.' To which Murrow replied, 'We are not so daring, Sir John. We give the people what they like' (Marquis, 1984: 401).

When there are public channels and no private channels, people get the content that the advertisers want them to have, but the need to maintain expectations and credibility means that even state-funded news must take account of the competing sources of information. No matter how determined a government is to control content, it becomes harder to do so when new media become more accessible. When Britons learned that CBS had broadcast Eden's speech to America, CBS was flooded with calls from people wanting to hear the speech (Marquis, 1984: 409).

During the Stalinist era, when the Communist Party could control access to all media within Russia, the party newspaper gave only the official line. In countries where some free media was also available, the party newspaper had to acknowledge and discuss alternate lines, including even Trotsky's (Leonhard, 1958).² As millions of Russian citizens with shortwave radios began listening to international reporting on the BBC and the Voice of America, the Soviet leadership had to give its spin to the stories – and give it quickly. Back in 1956, when 700,000 Russian troops invaded Hungary, *Pravda* had noted on the back page, 'all was quiet in Budapest'. At that time only about one in ten Russian families had access to shortwave radios that could receive foreign news broadcasts. Just four years later, when half of Russian families had them, the Kremlin instructed TASS, the Soviet news agency, to transmit stories to radio stations without waiting for newspapers to print the party line (Pool, 1973: 481–482).

Today Aljazeera is unsettling Arab governments much as the BBC and the Voice of America once provoked communist regimes. CNN's success during the first Gulf War prompted a number of Arab countries to start their own satellite stations, most notably Orbit, a joint venture between Saudi Arabia and the BBC. The Saudis quickly shut down the station when it ran an offensive documentary, and the newly installed Qatari ruler hired many of the employees to start Aljazeera. Independent of Saudi control and featuring political debate, Aljazeera became the dominant channel throughout the region. It has been denounced as a 'Zionist conspiracy' for interviewing Israeli politicians on air; and Iraq (under Sadaam Hussein), Libya, Kuwait, and Saudi Arabia all threatened to withdraw their ambassadors from Qatar if it were not shut down (*Economist*, 2005; Sardar, 2001).

Antagonistic governments can prevent local businesses from advertising on Aljazeera, but as long as the Emir of Qatar is willing to fund the station, governments will be under pressure to change their media policies. President Bashir al-Assad ordered Syrian media to shift to balanced reporting and 'respect the intelligence of the audience'. Egypt banned all work by columnist Muhammad Hassanayn Haykal after he wrote that Gamal Mubarak wanted to succeed his father as president. Haykal then signed a contract with Aljazeera and devoted his first show to the attempt to silence him (Sardar, 2001;

² During World War II when Wolfgang Leonhard and other prized young communists were organizing party archives, they first learned of ferment within the international communist movement when they began to catalogue copies of *The Daily Worker*, which gave American party faithful the rebuttal to Trotsky's charges.

Lynch, 2004b). Saudi Arabia countered by financing a moderate alternative to Aljazeera, Al Arabiya, whose director promised they would not ‘make problems for Arab countries’. Abu Dhabi, Hezbollah, and Egypt also started new channels. In every Arab country surveyed by Zogby International in 2004 – Lebanon, Jordan, Morocco, Saudi Arabia, and the United Arab Emirates – Aljazeera was the most-watched news channel and Al Arabiya was a very distant second. Just as party-controlled papers in the US a century ago could not compete with independent, partisan papers, government-controlled television that promises not to make problems cannot provide a credible alternative to independent media. Between 44% and 62% of respondents said Aljazeera was the news channel they watched most, while an average of 8% watched Al Arabiya (Lynch, 2004a).

It is not only in totalitarian and authoritarian countries that new media appear threatening – culturally or politically – to governments and elites. When millions of British teenagers bought inexpensive transistor radios, entrepreneurs set up unlicensed ‘pirate’ radio stations in the English Channel and broadcasts records by groups such as the Beatles and the Rolling Stones, who were scarcely ever heard – if at all – on the BBC. The offshore stations, Radio Caroline and Radio London, infuriated Conservatives and Labour alike. The Tories worried about obscenity, both parties worried about possible adverts for ‘pep pills’, and Labour was ideologically opposed to segmenting the public space to sell consumer goods.

Two weeks after the pirate stations went on the air, a Gallup Poll found that one out of three potential listeners had tuned in to the station. When the BBC commissioned surveys and in-depth studies of what they called ‘addicts’ to Pirate radio, they found that the core of the audience were young, working-class men and women who owned transistors and never had been oriented towards BBC programming (Chapman, 1992: 44–48). The BBC eventually had to acknowledge the actual tastes of youth, instead of the music the BBC Governors deemed suitable. The same scenario was played out in the Netherlands and at one point, 150,000 people marched there in 1973 to support the offshore Radio Veronica (Chapman, 1992: 33–59; Harris, 1977).

Crowd-seekers and gatekeepers

Politicians are crowd-seekers who naturally seek alliances with crowd makers. Every time new channels or modes of communication create new audiences, politicians try to develop new alliances. And when they do, the people whose status is based on the old channels and the old audiences try to disparage the new communications and keep control of the interface between politicians and the public.

Editors, producers, or censors – who decide what the news should be – are gatekeepers. Gatekeepers do not like to see people get news that did not pass through their gate; and they do not like any politician to reach the people without going through their turnstile, either. Like priests trying to maintain a monopoly on Bible reading, autocrats trying to prevent ‘confusion’, and wartime leaders classifying documents for reasons of ‘national security’, they have always fought to protect the value of their

product by eliminating, diminishing, and disparaging other forms of news – always, of course, in the name of the public good.

In 1992, immediately after he had secured the Democratic nomination for President, Bill Clinton departed from tradition when he began making the rounds of television programs. In addition to regular news shows, he appeared on the late-night *Arsenio Hall Show* wearing sunglasses and playing the saxophone, and on an MTV ‘Rock the Vote’ program he answered questions from the youthful host and an audience of 18- to 25-year-olds.

Commentators said these appearances were acts of desperation. News analysts suggested that appearing on these talk shows was Clinton’s way of avoiding hard questions from professional journalists, and therefore unpresidential. They were particularly caustic about his late-night Arsenio Hall appearance. The *New York Times* columnist Tom Wicker thought the appearance was exactly what a man considered to have been a swinger didn’t need: ‘This is undignified. . . The association with jazz music, the dark shades and the Arsenio Hall Show, I don’t think that is an asset.’ David Gergen, a MacNeil-Lehrer commentator and *US News and World Report* editor-at-large, was even more critical: ‘The difference in the gap between Arsenio Hall and talking to someone like [British Prime Minister] John Major, to me, is so dramatic, it suggests that he doesn’t have a handle on what it takes to be President.’³

What it takes to be president is communication with voters, not communication with journalists. Bill Clinton went on these shows to reach voters who don’t watch the network news and Sunday morning political interviews. Not surprisingly, journalists who considered themselves the rightful mediators between politicians and the public were peeved by this challenge to their stature.

The Founding Fathers believed that it was their prerogative to decide what and when to report to the citizenry. James Madison believed that an uninformed public was a key to the survival of democracy: without ongoing access to information about government, there could be no factional alliances to contravene the common good (John, 1995: 29). Madison did not believe there should be a congressional record; better that legislators should tell the public what they needed to know when they returned home from Congress. He also assumed that there would be only face-to-face accountability between representatives and voters in America. That is, when a representative returned home from the distant capital, he would give an account of his actions to the voters and this would be their basis for judging him. He did not expect that before long the postal system and newspapers would make it possible for citizens to monitor his activities while Congress was meeting. After his travels through America in the 1830s, Alexis de Tocqueville wrote that he had expected small town and rural Americans to be as politically ignorant as French peasants. Instead, he found that the

³ Wicker’s comments appeared on the ABC News Program, The Brinkley Report, and Gergen’s on The MacNeil-Lehrer News Hour. The texts of their remarks appeared in *THE HOTLINE*, June 8, 1992.

postal system was a 'great link between minds', penetrating into the wilderness and 'bringing enlightenment to palace and hovel alike' (John, 1995: 3).

When Bagehot said, 'We must not let in daylight upon the magic' because 'when you poke about something you cannot reverence it', he was referring to the monarchy. But in any democracy, political elites will seek the benefits to be found when the possibilities for oversight are limited and voters defer to their judgment.

John Adams distrusted Tom Paine, saying he wrote in the language of 'emigrants and brutes'. Paine's pamphlet *Common Sense* was a critical document in the American Revolution; 150,000 copies were printed in the first six months alone and possibly as many as 500,000 overall, one copy for every five persons in the colonies. Paine's arguments stripped the monarchy of biblical authority, transformed the language of debate, and first made the argument that the triad of monarch, lords, and parliament was not a perfect system of government. Yet Adams feared the effect that 'so popular a pamphlet might have among the people' and despised Paine for being 'too democratical' and using biblical reasoning and common vernacular language to explain the issues to ordinary people (Foner, 1976: 79–83; Bailyn, 1967).

It was predictable that by writing in the vernacular, Paine, like Luther, would provoke outrage as well as adulation; he was overthrowing patterns of deference and empowering citizens to think for themselves. Rulers use an official language that implicitly insults people by implying that their speech is inadequate for political discussion. Richard Anderson studied the changes in political communications after 1989 in Russia and noted that ordinary people understood that the verbal style of a politician had political implications. In their view, politicians using the official language were denigrating the competence of people who were using ordinary language (Anderson, 1997). Karl Deutsch noted a similar denigration of the competence of ordinary people in Indonesia in the 1950s. Indonesian leaders used phrases such as 'the Indonesian people should do this', while American politicians were using phrases that acknowledged the sovereignty of voters and flattered their judgment such as 'people tell me', 'some people in my district feel', or 'other members of Congress seem to think' (Deutsch, 1956: 146).

Breaching boundaries

The history of new media is an unbroken string of boundaries breached and standards challenged. When reporters started to report congressional speeches, legislators first tried to stop them, and when that failed, they developed the official congressional record containing the corrected remarks they had meant to give. President John Quincy Adams thought 'hired reporters' (he compared them to spies) had no right to impinge on the right of the leaders to decide what and when to report to the citizenry (Schudson, 1978: 74). In eighteenth-century England, when it was a criminal offense to report on parliamentary proceedings, Samuel Johnson got around the law by writing 'Debates of the Senate of Magna Lilliputia', in which barely disguised parliamentary speeches were put in the mouths of satirical replicas of British leaders.

The Associated Press further disrupted political business as usual when it developed nonpartisan standards for news to be shared by many papers. Politicians resented this. They believed a partisan press had the duty to ‘publish their speeches, defend their policies, and promote their candidacies’. John C. Calhoun, for example, said he distrusted nonpartisan reporting because it simply hid the political intent of the reporter or his paper. When the AP began to report speeches given to citizen constituents, not just speeches in Washington, politicians even tried to block such coverage as an assault on privileged communications. Henry Clay expressed outrage at the very idea that a reporter writing for ‘unknown papers’ could ‘presume to report what [he] had said to his own constituents with first obtaining his consent’ (Ritchie, 1991: 32).

When radio stations began to broadcast news, newspaper owners tried to block them, arguing that the newspaper was the only *proper* place for such information. When publishers tried to prevent stations from using the Associated Press wire service, radio broadcasters developed alternate news sources. Newspapers stopped printing radio program listings only to restore them after readers began canceling their subscriptions. They called for an investigation of the legality of advertising over a wavelength granted by federal franchise. And they warned that hearing news without the context provided in a newspaper would confuse the public. An editorial in *Editor and Publisher* warned of the propaganda potential of radio, arguing that radio could do only a superficial job of reporting that would create ‘confused, incomplete public thought and intensified ignorance on public matters’ (Lott, 1970: 278).

Matt Drudge is reviled as the epitome of a coarser, seamier politics that has forced print media to rush rumors and one-source stories into print to avoid being scooped, as Drudge scooped Newsweek while it was waiting to verify the Monica Lewinsky story (Kalb, 1998, 2001; Kovach and Rosenstiel, 1999). Yet *The Drudge Report* also sends more persons to the *Washington Post* web site than any other page on the web (Downie and Kaiser, 2002: 206).

While the Fox News Channel was the easy explanation for the rise of the new right in the 1990s, it was actually C-SPAN that changed the balance of power within the Republican party. Starting in 1984, when only one in ten households even had access to C-SPAN, Newt Gingrich began using ‘special orders’ at the close of each House session, a time when any representative could take the microphone, speaking to a nearly-empty chamber and a lone C-SPAN camera. While established politicians scoffed at C-SPAN’s miniscule ratings, yet were willing to ‘go around the planet’ to speak before five thousand people, Gingrich figured that there were always at least a quarter of a million tuned to C-SPAN. He gathered like-minded radical backbenchers to ‘jump the queue’, going over the heads of the Republican leadership to build their own constituency – and their own fundraising base – within the party (Viguerie and Franke, 2004: 213–217; Clift and Brazaitis, 1996).

Today it is fashionable in America to bemoan the decline of a style of network news delivery that was considered irreverent and brash when it first appeared. When

he retired after decades in network news, David Brinkley reminisced about his work on the pioneering NBC show, the Huntley-Brinkley Newshour:

We had all grown up, and the critics had all grown up, with news broadcasters who pretended or thought they were the voice of doom. I mean they were very heavy and very oppressive, and they delivered the news as if they were delivering the world's obituaries and we did not. We both talked as we had always talked, as we are talking right now, not really stuffy and it went over very well because it was new and nobody had done it before and they thought it was really something tremendous.⁴

Political gatekeepers

Just as media gatekeepers decide which stories are presented to an audience, there are gatekeepers in politics who decide which politicians are presented to their organizations or to the crowds they can gather. Local politicians and party organizations, for example, want to control access to voters and limit the power of outside candidates to address voters directly. Changes in media always offer advantages to the politician who can exploit them. Presidents and Prime Ministers have exploited State of the Union speeches, convention acceptance speeches, fireside chats, press conferences, town meetings, and Rose Garden strategies to enhance presidential communication.

During the general election of 1834, the Conservative Prime Minister of England, Sir Robert Peel, issued a letter to the electors in his Borough of Tamworth applying general party principles to the specific issues of the day. Distributed throughout England in the press, the Tamworth letter ushered in an era of partisan voting. Suddenly, MPs accustomed to winning elections locally by dispensing pork and patronage were forced to defend – or attack – the Tamworth tactic. Peel had been averse to popular ‘interference’ in government, but his innovation changed the structure of politics, giving more power to the party leaders and less to individual MPs. It marked the birth of modern party voting, both in parliament and among the electorate. ‘Now politics would relate more directly to questions of policy; now policy would revolve around great questions of principle; now principle could be considered by the political nation. Electioneering might continue in the form of the old system but without its substance, or, rather, without its lack of substance’ (Phillips and Wetherell, 1995: 434).

Peel's Tamworth Manifesto is a classic example of how new communication patterns change politics. The Reform Act of 1832 was intended simply to enlarge the electorate; but after Tamworth, it also began to alter the relations between voters and parties and to increase the importance of national issues at the expense of local considerations. ‘Voters began generally to respond to party cues taken directly from

⁴ NPR Morning Edition, 12 June 2003; excerpt from 1995 Interview of David Brinkley by NPR's Bob Edwards.

debates and events in Westminster. Local affairs, even those of long standing, gave way to national issues' (Phillips and Wetherell, 1995: 434).

In the United States, changes in newspaper ownership and circulation made it possible for Theodore Roosevelt to strengthen the position of the president relative to party bosses, who had never wanted their party's president to have an independent political base. Their preferred division of labor was clear: presidents signed bills and spoke to Congress, and bosses controlled voters and donors. They did not want an autonomous president any more than English backbenchers wanted a policy platform. The Republican Party bosses made Teddy Roosevelt vice president in 1900 to get him out of New York and weaken his influence in the state. And indeed, as vice president he was harmless – until the assassination of William McKinley in 1901. Then, as president, knowing that the party bosses did not intend to nominate him for a full term, Roosevelt took advantage of the emerging nonpartisan press to enhance his power at their expense. He was the first president to communicate directly with the people on a regular basis. His charisma drew enormous crowds wherever he went to speak, and all his speeches and policy pronouncements were covered widely in the press.

When the newspapers were controlled by the party leaders or were dependent on their subsidies, no mere president could circumvent the local bosses and reach the party faithful directly. With nonpartisan papers, however, TR could do just that. Old Guard Republicans tried to defend their monopoly on access to party voters by arguing that TR's policy speeches debased the presidency, because going directly to the voters while campaigning was an 'undignified spectacle'. A president 'was supposed to put himself in the hands of professionals' (Morris, 2001: 319).

While party bosses called it undignified, congressmen charged that Roosevelt was usurping the power of Congress by speaking to 'their' voters. The *New York Times* had noted a few years earlier: 'Congress, so far as the President is concerned, is the people, and to it his appeals of one sort and another will be addressed' (Gamm and Smith, 1998: 97).⁵

Voters and reporters liked Teddy Roosevelt's approach. TR made great copy and a politically independent press learned that the president was good for sales. He was also good for the careers of reporters following him, because they could talk with him and gain prestige compared to their editors back home. Roosevelt became so popular that he could not be denied the nomination in 1904. The party bosses dared not alienate the popular base he had built up.

If Theodore Roosevelt changed the balance of power by using independent newspapers to position himself in the popular mind, his cousin Franklin D., a generation later, used radio to reach out directly to the literate and non-literate alike, first with his formal radio addresses and then with his fireside chats. Both were dramatic changes in the nature of presidential communication. In the 1890s, when presidential candidates

⁵ The *New York Times* was reacting – with astonishment – to a suggestion by the *Times* of London that President McKinley appeal directly to the voters to win support for a treaty.

began making acceptance speeches after receiving the nomination, their speeches were tailored for a national newspaper audience, not for the live audience in the convention hall. In the 1930s, FDR began tailoring his speeches for radio, dramatically shortening them and restoring some of the rhetorical flourishes of a live speech (Ellis, 1998: 121). His fireside chats, in contrast, were designed as informal conversations between a president and a family, not as oratory to assembled millions. He was addressing citizens of the nation directly, not just permitting the broadcast of a speech before a group (Marquis, 1984: 398). This was an innovation of form akin to Michel de Montaigne's development of the essay, which would be read by many people 'who were not gathered together in one place but were scattered in separate dwellings and who, as solitary individuals with divergent interests, were more receptive to intimate interchanges than to broad-gauged rhetorical effects' (Eisenstein, 1979: 230–231).

One president's undignified abrogation of hallowed norms – such as Teddy Roosevelt speaking directly to the people – can become a later president's sacred duty. When President Richard Nixon campaigned for reelection in 1972, he spent little time campaigning in public. He employed what became known as a Rose Garden strategy, staying in his office and stepping outside into the Rose Garden to make announcements after meetings with legislators or foreign leaders. Ironically, when Nixon abandoned the campaign trail and returned to the more dignified approach of an earlier era, some reporters denounced it as an obstacle to the performance of their duty – providing the public with the information essential for a democracy (Crouse, 1973: 107–108).

Conclusion

Changing the media changes the organization of politics as well as the content of news. When Edmund Burke gave his famous speech, the three hundred miles between Parliament and Bristol meant that it would take many days for people in Bristol to learn about Parliamentary debates. Since then every new communication innovation – telegraph, radio, television, internet – has diminished hindrance of distance to monitoring government directly. And every innovation in communications has created new ways of distributing the information and widening the number of people who share in the information that was once limited to insiders.

This battle over transparency and the communication of inside information is a continuous struggle, not a single battle decided by a Magna Carta, a Bill of Rights, the abolition of censorship, or the right to report news about government. There is always a boundary between inside information and public information. It was only in the 1980s that the American Congress allowed reporters and public to observe many committee meetings and in recent years both President Clinton – healthcare – and President Bush – energy – fought successfully to keep secret the names of participants and the nature of the discussions on critical task forces.

New media are new opportunities. Since politicians are crowd-seekers and changing media create new audiences, they adapt their strategies as media change. When Newt Gingrich challenged his party's elders on C-SPAN, when Bill Clinton

played the saxophone on the *Arsenio Hall Show*, and when President Bush discussed steroid abuse in his 2004 State of the Union Address, they were adapting to new media opportunities just as opportunistic politicians before them introduced political manifestos, newspaper interviews, fireside chats, convention acceptance speeches, and State of the Union addresses in response to earlier changes in media.

When new media raise new issues, engage new groups, and give voice to different speakers, they provoke attempts at cultural and political protectionism by established political gatekeepers. When Aljazeera broadcast actual political debate throughout the Middle East, when Tom Paine attacked the divine right of kings in language common people could understand, and when Martin Luther printed his 95 theses instead of just nailing them to one door, they were all breaching boundaries and inviting a wider public to join in a debate. In the process of coping with the breaches, they reshaped politics and political organization.

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