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THE MEDIA EQUATION

A Campaign Not Filtered by the Press

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The members of the news media are arriving at the Democratic convention here, cameras and notebooks ready, to do their part in these historic proceedings. They know who the candidate is, they know who his running mate will be and, if they've been paying attention, they know that his campaign thinks of the media as decorations, no more or less important than the balloons and confetti that will dapple the Pepsi Center.

Conventions have been a tug-of-war between the media and the party establishment for years. Beginning with Michael Deaver's tightly controlled cinematic unveiling of Ronald Reagan, modern campaigns have sought to manage the press by controlling the images. When properly deployed and stage-managed, the message can overwhelm the medium.

The presidential campaign of Barack Obama has all but christened a new era by seizing the medium itself. The network pageantry has been replaced by the network effect — a huge pipe directly to his supporters, no intermediation involved. The press, it seems, just gets in the way.

It's been a while in coming. The Bush campaigns of 2000 and 2004 made huge strides in building databases of supporters, and Howard Dean demonstrated that digitally enabled like-minds can accomplish practical wonders.

But the Obama campaign has used the Web to kick up a huge surge in youth voting and to reinforce its message through e-mail blasts, social networking, YouTube videos and streamed content all unmolested by the dreaded M.S.M. (that would be the mainstream media).

Early in the campaign, the media were accused of falling a little too hard for Senator Obama. He hasn't returned the favor. The campaign, with its tight-lipped, disciplined inner circle and a leader who is called "No Drama Obama" by those who work with him, is not in the habit of scoring points with reporters by dropping little press-ready bon-bons their way.

Among other things, they are aware of how little stories can swell in the viral vortex of the Web, so the leaks are few and far between. And the campaign has shown little interest in the time-honored practice of screening ads for the press before putting them on television or the Web in an effort to get an unpaid bounce and kick up coverage.

After networks and cable stations spent millions toward turning the Pepsi Center into a state-of-the-art television studio, the campaign had a by-the-way moment and announced that Senator Obama would announce at Invesco Field at Mile High, a long walk and millions of dollars more in spending from the original site. The symbolism is tough to miss: out of that carefully constructed studio-on-steroids and into the open air, with 70,000 screaming people all getting their own seat at the table.

Most acutely, the campaign's decision to text-message the biggest piece of news of the summer season — the announcement of the running mate — ran counter to all conventional wisdom. First, it wasn't made to the press but directly to supporters. Then the message was scheduled for the wee hours of Saturday morning, precisely the moment where politicians try to hide revelations from becoming part of the news cycle. (There's a reason that John Edwards chose to admit an affair late on a Friday night.)

The decision left news anchors checking their cellphones instead of their teleprompters during broadcasts, worried that they might miss the big news.

But some news organizations managed to interrupt the séance between the campaign and its supporters by finding out that Senator Joseph Biden would be the

nominee and jumping the announcement by a few hours, after midnight on the East Coast. As soon as Senator Obama began calling the non-nominees, names began leaking out, and The New York Times, MSNBC and others ran stories saying that all signs pointed to Mr. Biden. It was a small victory, but one that served as a reminder that the press will not abide any old script the campaign puts out.

John King of CNN was first to confirm the news. "You knew that there was treasure buried out there and it was just a matter of going and finding it," Mr. King said in the press area at the Pepsi Center. "They want to make the rules one way, and we say, 'No, if there is a piece of information, it is our job to go and get it.' "

Then again, he said, "You could look at the strategy and say it did not work out, but in the end, they energized their campaign, added many thousands of names to their database and got huge mileage out of it."

There are dangers here. By becoming a ubiquitous presence in the digital lives of its supporters, the Obama campaign could become like that friend who I.M.'s a little too often. And while there may be something validating in getting a piece of information at the same time as Wolf Blitzer, a few people who heard an audible notification in the middle of the night probably woke up wondering if their ailing aunt had died.

Where does that leave the press? In spite of the clutter and the changing informational dynamics, there are plenty of reporters here who will find a way to deliver valuable information to their readers and viewers beyond what the campaign chooses as its daily message. There is too much talent and journalistic aggression in the hothouse of this convention for news not to occur.

It is just that it will be harder than ever to find truly new information or to be heard above the increasingly democratized din. Rather than consuming messages that are pushed out and often dearly paid for, potential voters can begin expressing their affiliation early on, creating both a social network around candidacies and an environment where people message their friends for opinions on the latest doings, rather than turning to pundits and traditional media outlets.

The children's crusade of early Obama supporters will soon occupy the sweet spot of electoral politics and bring a new set of expectations to being courted and served.

"I think they are consciously working to eliminate the middleman," said Joan Walsh, editor in chief of Salon, who hosted a warm-up party on Saturday night. "They are smarter about technology than most campaigns and in the process, they also manage to flatter their netroots friends and the new media folk who lined up behind him. It works on a lot of levels."

There are implications going beyond November. If we stipulate that the modern American presidency is a permanent campaign, there is little reason to expect that if Senator Obama becomes president that the political arm of his administration would simply lock away all those millions of names they had gathered on a disk drive. A highly wired administration could go direct with both its base and its database in times of crisis or need.

But on the weekend before everyone gets down to business, that all seemed very far away. Credentialed guests at the gratis media party jointly hosted by The Rocky Mountain News and The Denver Post whooped it up on rides, gorged on junk food and lined up at game booths where they got as many chances as it took to win. It's probably the last time in the coming week that the odds will be in their favor.

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