

Making Sense of Media and Politics

Five Principles in Political Communication

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1 Political Power and Power Over the Media

Power has made Reality its Bitch

—Mark Danner¹

Think about two political actors, each trying to get into the news. For now let's talk only about the traditional news media (the new media will come into play a bit later). Assume, for the sake of argument that both are from the same political party, both have similar political views, and both look equally good in front of the camera. But there's one small difference between them: one is the president of the United States and the other is a new congressman from North Dakota. Presidents have a huge number of journalists assigned to them and can appear in the news any time they want. The congressman, on the other hand, has to compete with a horde of other politicians and convince reporters that he has something newsworthy to say. The president never has any problem getting into the national news, while the new congressman will be lucky if he gets covered in the local news.

Other powerful people in the government, whether it be the U.S. secretary of state, the secretary of defense, or the Speaker of the House also have little trouble getting into the news. If we were to build a ladder of influence from the most powerful people in Washington to the least important, we would have a pretty accurate measure of their chance of getting into the national news. Here's a good illustration of how political power leads to power over the media. Anybody who is reading this book probably knows the name of the secretary of state. Now try to name the secretary of Veterans Affairs. Unless you have some reason to be concerned with veteran issues, chances are you have no idea.

The reason, of course, is that the secretary of Veterans Affairs is simply not considered newsworthy, unless (s)he gets in trouble. A good rule of thumb is that journalists run after the politically powerful and politically weak run after journalists. This brings us to the first of the five principles. *Political power can usually be translated into power over the news media.*

One reason journalists consider the powerful more newsworthy is that these are the people who are most likely to have an impact on the country and the world. The president, after all, can go to war. The chance that an individual

member of Congress can have a major impact on the political process is slim unless they are the deciding vote in an important piece of legislation. Even then, their fame is likely to be brief and they will quickly return to obscurity.

Here's another way to think of this idea. The relationship between journalists and political leaders can be considered a *competitive symbiosis*. It is a symbiotic relationship because each depends on the other in order to achieve their goals. Leaders want publicity and the journalists want interesting information they can turn into news. The reason the relationship is also competitive is that each wants to get the most from the other while "paying" as little as possible. Leaders want to get lots of publicity without having to reveal too much and reporters want to get the juiciest information without having to give a free ride to the politician. The more powerful leaders have the best information to "sell" and that's why journalists compete for the privilege of getting it, especially if they can get first crack at the story.

The fact that political power can be translated into power over the news media does not mean that the weaker political actors never get into the news. The news media have a preference for conflicts that is just as important as their preference for power. There is also an expectation that journalists will attempt to maintain a certain balance in news coverage. This means that even if they give a great deal of coverage to a presidential speech they will then allow the opposition to respond. Many talk shows also encourage a lively debate because that always makes the show more appealing.

Nevertheless, there is still something inherently elitist about these debates. Political movements and groups outside of the Washington Beltway are rarely invited to participate. So the journalists' notion of balance really means finding a balance between Republican and Democratic leaders. Political scientist Lance Bennett has done extremely important work on this issue and he argues that the best way to understand this is to think of this process as a form of "indexing."² The news media mostly focus on what these elites are saying and doing and they record it. If neither the government nor the opposition is talking about an issue, even an important issue, the news media will likewise, simply ignore it. Equally important, claims Bennett, this obsession with elites also severely limits the *range* of opinions that are talked about in the news media. Researcher Jonathan Mermin makes a similar point suggesting that the news media often seem to serve as "transcribers of official utterances."³

This reluctance of the press to express any independent opinion about issues can have serious consequences for public debates about issues. A useful example has to do with the public debate over the Iraq War. The major argument for going to war was the firm belief in Washington that Saddam Hussein had developed Weapons of Mass Destruction (WMD). Within a relatively short amount of time, it became clear that this was not the case, yet public support for the war remained surprisingly high.

Research on this topic suggests one of the reasons was the lack of much critical coverage in the press. In a book entitled *Why the Press Failed* Lance Bennett,

Regina Lawrence, and Steven Livingston attempted to explain this anomaly.⁴ One of the more important explanations was that the Democratic leadership in Congress and the Senate was extremely uncomfortable criticizing the president about the war until much later in the conflict. There were plenty of critics outside of Washington, but the media's overdependence on elite opinion apparently prevented them from providing the American public with an alternative perspective.

Mermin has a wonderful quote by TV journalist Jim Lehrer that provides a telling demonstration of this point with regard to the war in Iraq:

The word occupation ... was never mentioned in the run-up to the war. It was liberation. This was [talked about in Washington as] a war of liberation, not a war of occupation. So as a consequence, those of us in journalism never even looked at the issue of occupation.⁵

In other words, unless the political leadership is debating an issue, journalists are rarely able to bring other perspectives to the table. Some might argue that this is how representative democracy should work. These are after all the people who were elected to lead. True democracies however must have a genuinely independent press who present a wide range of viewpoints for us to consider.

Power Comes in Many Forms

The idea that power leads to media access is not limited to politicians. There are also individuals, organizations, and companies that are inherently newsworthy because, among other reasons, they have vast resources that also allow them to have a major impact on society. When Microsoft or Google speak about political issues that affect their industry, the news media listen. The same is true about political organizations and even protest movements. An organization the size of Greenpeace—which has offices in over forty countries—may not have the type of access afforded a major U.S. cabinet member, but they are much more likely to get reporters to their events than a small local group of environmentalists protesting against a factory accused of polluting their water.

The fact that power translates into access to the news media can also be applied to cities, states, and even countries. One is much more likely to hear news that comes from the richest and more populated states (e.g., New York, California) than from the poorer states (e.g., Arkansas). And people living in Europe are more likely to hear what is happening in the United States than anything happening in Africa. It is sad but true that Europeans are more likely to know what is happening with Paris Hilton, Britney Spears, and the late Michael Jackson than about political leaders in Nigeria. One of the most important rules of international news is that there is always a flood of information that flows from the haves to the have-nots and a mere trickle that runs in the opposite direction.

Not Just More Coverage But Usually More Positive

Does the fact that powerful elites get covered *more* mean that they get covered more positively? The answer, for the most part, is yes. There are basically two doors for getting into the news. The front door is reserved for VIPs: the people with political power. When these people enter, they are usually treated with respect. They are covered because of who they are as much as for what they are doing or saying. Here is a typical front door story from the *New York Times* that appeared in September 2009.

White House Scraps Bush's Approach to Missile Shield

WASHINGTON — President Obama scrapped his predecessor's proposed antiballistic missile shield in Eastern Europe on Thursday and ordered instead the development of a reconfigured system designed to shoot down short- and medium-range Iranian missiles. In one of the biggest national security reversals of his young presidency, Mr. Obama canceled former President George W. Bush's plan to station a radar facility in the Czech Republic and 10 ground-based interceptors in Poland. Instead, he plans to deploy smaller SM-3 interceptors by 2011, first aboard ships and later in Europe, possibly even in Poland or the Czech Republic. Mr. Obama said that the new system "will provide stronger, smarter and swifter defenses of American forces and America's allies" to meet a changing threat from Iran.⁶

In these types of stories political leaders are basically using the press as an electronic bulletin board. They announce what they are going to do and provide carefully prepared explanations about why they are doing it. Now this doesn't mean that every new organ will be equally accommodating. Thus the Fox News story for the same day covered the announcement much more negatively.⁷ Generally, however, unless there is major controversy about what is being said, heads of state are given much more latitude to pass their messages to the public. As noted, the opposition is usually given a chance to respond but being able to respond to an event is very different than being able to initiate it. One has to add to all this the ability to produce endless amounts of soft stories such as the media frenzy that accompanied the debate about which dog would be lucky enough to be adopted by the Obamas. Dominating the headlines is one of the important advantages that come with political power.

Those with power and resources have the added advantages of being able to hire "spin doctors" who are experts at promoting stories to the news media. While many pundits often exaggerate the influence of these advisors, the ability to place potential news stories in an attractive package does make a difference. Advisors are also experts at preparing stories in ways that make it easier to turn them into news stories. Reporters are always pressed for time. Public relations people make journalists' lives much easier because they provide easy access to information and events, deal with technical details such as lighting and camera angles, and even prepare news releases that need little editing before being turned into news.

Having a large staff and a bit of money also allows powerful political actors to hire a talented web team who are responsible for keeping journalists (and supporters) in the loop and preparing interesting videos for general distribution. This means that political power can also be translated into power over the new Internet-based media.

This doesn't mean that every journalist and news medium will provide positive coverage of such announcements. There are certain newspapers, television stations, and especially blogs that are either generally opposed to the president or certain policies. In addition, journalists often frame stories about the powerful with a certain degree of cynicism and reporters are also always on the lookout for scandals. Powerful leaders also fail, and the media are more than happy to talk about these shortcomings in great detail. Even with regard to negative stories, political power can be critical when it comes to damage control. Reporters who come down too hard on powerful leaders may find themselves at the back of the line for getting information. So journalists have no choice but to think very carefully before they go to war against their most important sources. A White House reporter that reveals a presidential scandal is like a magician who burns himself alive on stage. It's a wonderful trick, but you can only do it once.

The other way to get into the news is through the back door. This door is reserved for weaker political actors who only become newsworthy if they do something especially weird or deviant. The powerful can be pretty boring and still get into the news. But if you are not important you better be interesting.

One way weaker groups become interesting enough to get into the news is to take their clothes off. Naked protests have been carried out by groups ranging from People for the Ethical Treatment of Animals ("I'd rather go naked than wear fur") to firefighters demanding higher wages. Naked protesters are not only deviant enough to be considered news, they also provide great visuals. But like all groups that use exceptional actions to attract media attention, those who undress pay a heavy price in terms of legitimacy. Take, for example, the following two news stories about naked bicyclists. The first took place in Seattle in June 2004 and the second in Denver in June 2009 (it was probably not a total coincidence that both took place in June rather than February).

Naked Bicyclists Ride in Protest Over Environmental Abuse

A group of between 50 and 60 naked bicyclists took to the streets of Seattle on Saturday, and a few were seen in Olympia, police said. The event was a protest but it was not immediately clear whether it was linked to a radical environmentalist group known as the Earth Liberation Front. Protesters in Seattle said that they were protesting the use of cars, which increases pollution... The FBI on Friday warned law enforcement agencies across the country that radical environmentalists might be staging protests this weekend to show their support for a jailed arsonist. The FBI bulletin said the Earth Liberation Front reportedly was planning a "day of action and solidarity" that could include acts of eco-terrorism, according to Tor Bjornstad, a police commander in Olympia, one of the cities mentioned as a likely target.⁸

Boulder Police will be Scrutinizing Naked Bicyclists in Saturday Protest

The Boulder Police Department has a reminder for riders planning to participate Saturday in the World Naked Bike Ride: Indecent-exposure laws will be enforced. Participants not covering their genitals are subject to arrest and, if convicted under this statute, may be required to register as sexual offenders, the department said in a release Wednesday. The department said it also has reached out to organizers of the event to advise them about ways participants may avoid arrest. These include wearing undergarments that cover genitalia or otherwise obscuring those body parts from public view. Participants are strongly urged to be mindful of the requirements of the law.⁹

Both news stories put a special emphasis on what can be called the “Law and Order” frame. In the Seattle story the bicyclists were probably protesting against car pollution and were somehow turned into terrorists (which makes the story far more interesting). The Denver story—which was written before the protest—was initiated by the police and warned protesters that they might be registered as sex offenders. These two stories exemplify two major modes for covering these types of protests: they are covered as either weird, dangerous, or both.

The fact that journalists often focus on the issue of law and order provides important advantages to the authorities because this often fits the message they are promoting. In many conflicts the weaker side (let’s call them the challenger) is attempting to talk about some type of injustice while the more powerful side wants to stress the need for law and order. This is true about workers’ strikes, protests about issues such as discrimination and human rights, and even when a weaker country (say Iran) challenges a more powerful country (the U.S.). The challenger wants to talk about their demands while the news media are interested in the action. When workers shut down an airline, the major part of the story has to do with the masses of people stranded at airports; the workers’ demands for more money are neither interesting nor photogenic. The same is true when protesters use some form of disorder to attract media attention. Any damage they cause is far more newsworthy than the stories they tell about the dangers of (say) global warming. Whatever the personal sympathies of the reporters the old adage remains true: “if it bleeds it leads.”

Now to be fair, not every protest gets negative coverage. If, for example, a group can mobilize a very large demonstration for what is generally seen as a legitimate cause, journalists are much more likely to provide sympathetic coverage. In these cases it is the size of the protest that provides the necessary drama. But here, too, only the more powerful political movements can pull off an event of that magnitude and even they can’t do it too often. Any publicity they achieve is likely to be fleeting.

Another problem of getting in the news through the back door is that even if you’ve only put on a weird costume to get in, you’re not allowed to change clothes once you get inside. So there you are being filmed in a Polar Bear costume

to protest global warming. You want to talk about the environment and the reporters keep asking you about the costume (“How hot is it in there?”). If you decide you’ve had enough and step outside to change into a jacket and tie, you won’t be allowed back in the news room. Peering through the small, dirty window above the locked door in the back you find you’ve been replaced by naked jugglers protesting prayer in schools.

Is there a Side Door?

There is one strategy that weaker groups can sometime use to provide news people with drama without completely sacrificing legitimacy: *civil disobedience*. Take, for example, a sit-in that blocks an entrance to a factory accused of polluting the water in a particular city. This too is an act of disorder but being dragged off or beaten by police can turn the protesters into victims rather than aggressors. This tactic provides drama with a minimal amount of downside. The relative success of such tactics depends on three factors: the level of violence that the authorities use against the group, the extent to which people can identify with your cause, and the level of violence you use. If you decide to block a road in order to get a raise in salary, for example, you’ll probably be covered as a bunch of trouble makers. This is a reminder of how political context and breadth of support can make a major difference in news coverage.

One of the most successful examples of the civil disobedience strategy was used in the civil rights struggle in the 1960s. Martin Luther King had stressed to his followers and the public that the struggle for racial equality would be nonviolent. Even when the protesters were beaten with clubs they refused to respond in kind. An historic protest took place in Birmingham, Alabama, on May 4, 1963. The Police Commissioner Eugene “Bull” Conner decided to set attack dogs on the protesters leading to some terrible pictures of police brutality. One of the most famous pictures was published on the front page of the *New York Times* and showed a fifteen-year old boy being viciously attacked by German Shepherds.¹⁰

In an important book on the role of the press in the civil rights struggle, Gene Roberts and Hank Klibanoff described the impact the photos had on the political environment surrounding the struggle.

The police response and the images it produced had an instant impact in two places where it mattered most, Birmingham and Washington. In Birmingham Negro leaders who had been negotiating quietly with moderate whites and who had been reluctant to support [Martin Luther] King quickly fell in line behind him... The images had a far more important impact in Washington... That afternoon, [President John] Kennedy sent Burke Marshall of the Justice Department’s civil rights division to Birmingham.¹¹

The fact that the civil rights movement received so much sympathetic coverage was much more than a question of mere strategy. It was also a reflection of the fact that American public opinion about race issues was beginning to change.

This was a case where journalists—at least in the North—were making editorial *choices* to cover the story as a clear case of injustice. It tells us that, despite the close association between power and media access, there are cases in which the news media play a more independent role in political conflicts. We also learn that shocking visual images can have an important effect on the political process and that this was true even before the creation of the Internet and YouTube.

Cumulative Inequality

Another ramification of our first principle is the idea of *cumulative inequality*.¹² Not only does political power translate to power over the media, but the political actors who most need access to the news are the ones that find it the most difficult to obtain. As in many areas of life, when it comes to exposure in the news media, the rich generally get richer and the poor remain poor. Those with real political power certainly enjoy getting good publicity (who doesn't?) and it also helps them achieve their political goals. But because they *have* power, they are less *dependent* on the news media than others; they can get things done directly (say by passing a law or sending troops somewhere).

The powerless, on the other hand, have little chance of achieving anything without some public attention. It doesn't matter if it is a protest group trying to recruit members, a member of the political opposition who is trying to speak out against the government, a third party presidential candidate trying to get on the ballot, or a developing country launching a campaign to attract tourism. In each of these cases getting into the news is essential to their cause. But these are the actors who are the least likely to be invited to attend the party; the only way they can get in is if they hide inside the cake and jump out when least expected.

To illustrate this point let's think about two organizations who are pressuring the government concerning different pieces of legislation. One is Microsoft who is concerned about a new law that will limit its ability to include its software as part of every computer that is sold. The other is the Ostrich Liberation League (OLL) who is attempting to get a law passed that makes it illegal to sell ostrich meat, to ride ostriches, or to produce ostrich saddles or hats.

Microsoft has enormous resources that can allow it to work almost entirely behind the scenes using an army of lawyers, lobbyists, and maybe even a few politicians who have received campaign support. From Microsoft's perspective, the less the press writes about the issue the better. The OLL, on the other hand, has no chance at all of getting anywhere unless they attract media attention. But let's face it, Ostriches will never be considered big news. The only way the OLL will get into the news is by doing something outrageous knowing full well that they will be covered as a bunch of wacky eccentrics, to put it mildly.

It is important to emphasize that the level of power should be seen as a continuum rather than a dichotomy. While this discussion has referred to the powerful and the powerless, the truth is that there are political organizations, interest groups, and think tanks that fall somewhere in between these two extremes. The ability of these various actors to promote themselves to the media

without resorting to extreme tactics is directly related to their place on the power continuum.

In general however, the news media are major agents for maintaining and even intensifying the power gaps in society. The rules of access insure that the powerful are constantly seen as more important and in many cases more respectable than the weak. This in turn makes it easier for them to maintain or change their preferred policies. As discussed, these rules are not set in stone. There are times when the news media serve as advocates of the weak. This will become much clearer in Chapter 2.

What About the New Media?

Some readers probably think that everything said to this point is simply out of date. They would argue that in the age of cell phones with cameras, YouTube, and the Blogosphere political power becomes less important. Today, even the weakest groups can get their message out to everyone through the Internet and social networking platforms. All it takes is for one good political story to go viral and everyone—including the mainstream media—is paying attention.

The new technology does make a difference, sometimes even a huge difference. But in addition to the new opportunities that have become available because of the new media, there are also some important limitations. The new advantages and the limitations of this new technology can be understood by looking at the type of challenger that could most benefit from these changes: political movements.

Political Movements and the New Media

Most political movements are the classic "back door" challengers. Even the largest movements are usually not considered inherently newsworthy. They still must do something dramatic if they hope to get covered by the traditional media and, as said, this more often than not translates into negative coverage. The question that needs to be asked is how much the new communication technology changes the ability of these movements to become more powerful, to get their message out to supporters and the general public, and to bring about political change.

There are four major goals political movements attempt to achieve where the new Internet media could be useful. The first, and most obvious, is that it should help movements in their efforts to mobilize supporters to their cause. The second goal is to have their messages and news stories appear in the traditional media which will allow them to reach a much wider audience. Related to that amplification effect, the third goal is to have an influence on public opinion so the wider audience becomes more sympathetic with the movement. And ultimately, the fourth is to have an impact on politics. These four goals can be seen as four steep mountain whose peak is called political success. It turns out that not only

does it become increasingly difficult to pass each station, but one finds that the new technology becomes less and less helpful as one gets closer to the top.

The first station movements need to pass has to do with their ability to mobilize supporters and other resources in order to become more powerful. Here is where political movements receive their greatest boost from the new media technology. Here, the changes that have taken place with the advent of the new media are nothing short of revolutionary. The Internet and SMS technology provides movements with the potential to communicate instantly with millions of people around the world. Compare the cost and effectiveness of mailing leaflets to supporters as opposed to sending out emails that include both a video presentation and the opportunity to respond to what they've received. Think about the ability to remind people continually of a protest taking place, of being able to ask people to electronically sign a petition and pass it on to their friends, of allowing people to make a donation using a credit card while sitting in their pajamas in front of the computer, or of sending an inspiring speech by your leader to people living in thirty different countries. Now let's supercharge all of this by allowing every movement to put links on its web site that allows it to communicate and build coalitions with other similar movements around the country and the world. When you put all of these assets together you begin to understand the potential the new media represent for mobilizing people and groups for the cause.

The major thing to remember is that all of this revolutionary technology provides movements with the *potential* to exponentially increase their membership and resources. Whether it actually does depends, among many other things, on how much the movement's messages and leaders resonate with a large segment of the public. Here too it's a question of political context. There are tens of thousands of movements demanding our attention. The amount of time and attention any of us can or will devote to any one movement is still extremely limited. Thus, even if a movement has the best technology available it will remain small and obscure unless it appeals to a relatively large number of people who are willing to devote time and money to the cause. Even in the digital age, it is hard to get Americans excited about the preservation of historical sites in Albania.

Movement leaders also find that the fact that people are willing to sign an electronic petition about something does not mean they will either give money or come to a demonstration. In fact, because electronic participation is so easy it may give some people a sense that "they've done their part" and thus even lower the number of people who are willing to get out of their pajamas and do something active for the movement. Perhaps it is no coincidence that in May 2009 one of the oldest American social activists, Ralph Nader, made an extremely aggressive attack on Internet activism. He called the Internet "a huge waste of trivial time." He asked his audience of college students to consider what they were going to tell their grandchildren:

You know. The world is melting down. They're nine years old. They're sitting on your lap. They've just become aware of things that are wrong in the

world: starvation, poverty, whatever. And they ask you, what were you doing when all this was happening: Grandma? Grandpa? That you were too busy updating your profile on Facebook?¹³

A similar point was made by Evgeny Morozov who coined an extremely useful term for this: *slacktivism*.¹⁴ Slacktivism is a combination of the word slacker and activism. The idea is that there are quite a number of digital activities people can carry out that make them feel good about themselves but have absolutely no impact on either society or politics. One of the examples he gives is a Facebook group called "Saving the Children of Africa." Morozov points out that at first glance the organization looks very impressive because it has over 1.2 million members. At the time he wrote however, the organization had raised a paltry \$6,000 (about a half a penny a person). As he puts it: "The problem, however, is that the granularity of contemporary digital activism provides too many easy way-outs: too many people decide to donate a penny where they may otherwise want to donate a dollar."¹⁵

As we move up the mountain of political success, the air gets increasingly thin and the new technology becomes much less helpful. The reason can be summed up in one word: *competition*. Consider attempting to just get past the second station of trying to get favorable coverage of your group in the traditional media. Generating buzz on the Internet about your cause can certainly make a difference, but it is no substitute for generating an investigative report on *CBS Evening News* or *Sixty Minutes*. There are tens of thousands of politicians, organizations, movements, companies, and (let us not forget) celebrities all competing to make it into these news and current events programs. All of these competitors use Twitter and many of them can use the new technology to produce newsworthy events. But the traditional media still have only so much space and time to allocate, even if their web sites provide more space than in the past. Younger journalists probably spend more time actively searching political blogs and Internet sites but they too only have so much time and energy to look. And guess what? They will be especially interested in spending time trying to find stories about the politically powerful.

It also turns out that only a small fraction of major news stories come from the blogosphere. Researchers Jure Leskovec, Lars Backstrom, and Jon Kleinberg employed a powerful computer program to search the web over a fairly large period of time to study the rise and fall of the biggest news stories.¹⁶ They tracked an amazingly large 1.6 million mainstream media sites and blogs. The finding that is most relevant to this discussion was that a mere 3.5 percent of all major news cycles were initiated in the blogosphere and then moved to the other media. The vast majority of news stories ran in the opposite direction: the blogs and alternative news sites were following stories that first appeared in the traditional news media. This should tell you something important about how difficult it is for all political actors to use the new media as a means of breaking into the mainstream media. It should also tell you that traditional media remains the best tool for generating political waves about an issue.

The competition becomes even fiercer when an organization attempts to move beyond gaining news coverage and attempts to interest the broad public or to get policy makers to actually make changes. Starting with having an impact on public opinion, it is almost impossible for a small group to be heard above the crowd. There are, of course, people—you know who you are—who spend hours every day reading political blogs. But even they have no choice but to confine themselves to those issues that interest them. In that case, we are moving from the age of broadcasting to what many have called *narrowcasting*.

Getting the attention of political leaders and policy makers is even harder and needless to say they have their own agendas to promote. Here's a good example that comes from Amnesty International working in Britain. I interviewed one of the people involved in media relations, and he was talking about both the great advantages provided by the web and some limitations. As an example of some of the problems he faced, he talked about an electronic petition they had organized against an anti-terrorism law that allowed the police to lock up terrorist suspects for six weeks before they have to charge them with any offense. They organized a fairly successful campaign to get people to sign a petition on the Prime Minister's web site. The Amnesty spokesperson talked about his frustration.

We got a reasonable number of people to sign up. The failure was that there were so many populist issues that are being petitioned and we were maybe the 15th most popular. Some of the things that were more popular than us were ridiculous. One of them was whether to allow the Red Arrows [a display troop of the Royal Aircraft] to fly over London to mark the Olympics. The other had to do with demanding that a right-wing television presenter who had a show about cars became Home Secretary [one of the Ministers]. It was a joke and it received I think 5 times as many signatures as we did.¹⁷

Perhaps a metaphor would be helpful. Your organization has just purchased a megaphone so your leaders will be especially loud. The problem is that every group has a megaphone. To make things worse, those with political power not only have more megaphones, they also have sophisticated sound systems so their speeches are heard all over the country.

Despite all these limitations, there are two very different types of movements who seem to have benefited the most from the emergence of the Internet. The first are what are known as Transnational Advocacy Networks (TANs). Groups dealing with climate change, the dangers of globalization, nuclear proliferation, cruelty to animals, and human rights are all examples of movements who have far more power and influence now than in the past because of their ability to mobilize supporters and resources from around the world. Researchers, governments, and international companies have all begun to think about how these groups' increasing power is having an impact on the world. In fact researchers Sean Aday and Steve Livingston even go so far as to claim that in some cases the impact of these movements can be compared to that of countries.¹⁸

The second type of group that has seen a major change in their fortunes due to the Internet is terrorist organizations. The Internet provides these groups with a number of important advantages.¹⁹ Terrorist organizations can instantly exchange information—including technical information about weapons—from and to any place on the planet. They can also distribute inspirational material and videos to supporters and potential supporters. The videos can include inspiring speeches from their leaders, threats to carry out terrorist attacks, and actual footage from the attacks they have carried out. Because such videos are considered newsworthy many Western journalists end up showing them to the broader public and in doing so unintentionally help the terrorists spread fear.

The Internet can also be used by terrorists to coordinate tactics and strategy. One of the most important traits of the Internet is that individuals around the world can create *communities* that give them a sense of belonging. While this can, in most cases, be seen as a positive development there are some communities the world could live without. The reason why terrorist groups are especially likely to be empowered by the new media is because mobilization—especially international mobilization—is such a central element in their overall strategy. Unlike more conventional movements, they are not usually attempting to convince the broad public or Western leaders about the legitimacy of their cause. Their goals are to intimidate their opponents. Terrorist groups don't enter the news media through the back door they simply blow it open.

The Internet also provides terrorists with an extremely effective and anonymous method for doing strategic research before an attack. A good example of this new found power can be seen in the report about the planning of the 9/11 attack that was published by the National Commission on Terrorist Attacks Upon the United States.²⁰ The leaders of Al-Qaeda were able to use the Internet to find flight schools that might accept them and to find routes and flight paths of various airlines and of course to communicate with each other. In fact, learning how to use the Internet was an important part of their terrorist training.

So in some ways the new media have radically changed the relationship between political and media power. But due to the rules of political competition, these cases remain the exception rather than the rule. When it comes to the ability of movements and other challengers to organize and mobilize it is certainly a new age. On the other hand, the new technologies appears to be less revolutionary when it comes to getting a message to the broad public or bringing about real change. Equally important, the ability of political actors to successfully exploit the new media depends first and foremost on who they represent, their goals, and the political environment in which they are operating. The powerful, it turns out, still have the upper hand.

So if things are so great for the political powerful, why are they constantly whining about news coverage? It turns out that despite their many advantages even the most powerful lose control over news stories. This brings us to the next part of our story.

Questions for Thought and Discussion

1. Bearing in mind what was said about political power over the news media, record and watch the national or local news on television. How many stories involve powerful people or groups and how many items include weaker actors? What are the differences between the kinds of news stories that are constructed about powerful and less powerful political actors?
2. Think of a political group with which you identify. Based on what you learned in this chapter, think about the following questions: What are some of the activities the group could carry out in order to generate some positive publicity? What are the characteristics of the group that either increase or decrease its chances of getting this type of publicity? Is there anything the group has done that you consider a mistake because of the bad publicity it produced?

2 Political Control and Media Independence

It might seem at this point that those in power have it pretty easy. All they have to do is to send out some press releases and organize some photo opportunities and they have it made. Now while some presidents do enjoy a certain honeymoon during their first few months in office, the halo usually comes off pretty quickly. Think about the final days of the George W. Bush presidency. The news and entertainment media were ruthless in their attacks on Bush, especially when it came to the Iraq war and the horrible state of the economy. It was hard to find many people who would defend him. In fact, one of Senator John McCain's biggest problems in the 2008 elections was to convince people that as a Republican he was "not Bush."

The point to remember is that although political power always provides advantages, the news media sometimes go from being lap dogs to attack dogs. The second principle explains when this happens: *When the authorities lose control over the political environment, they also lose control over the news.*

To clarify, it is helpful to begin with an imaginary situation. The president has decided to declare war on Iran. Due to security concerns he has asked all the reporters who want to cover the story to stay in a secluded site, and their cell phones are confiscated as they enter the hall. The hall was rented by the president's staff, and when he announces that the war has begun he has also filled the room with cheering supporters. Every hour or so one of the president's spokespeople comes in to give the reporters a briefing, which includes some shocking aerial photographs that prove that Iran is building nuclear weapons (the truth is that it is hard to see anything in these types of pictures but the professional analysts are generous enough to tell the reporters what they're looking at). At the same time reporters are getting urgent messages from their editors demanding they send something before deadline. Journalists resent being manipulated in these types of situations, but given the circumstances they have little choice but to prepare a story based on what they've been told.

As the day moves on, however, things begin to change. It turns out that some of the reporters were able to smuggle their Blackberries into the hall. There are some disturbing reports being circulated on the web of an orphanage in Teheran being bombed and dozens of children being killed. The tragic videos from the wreckage were quickly uploaded onto YouTube. In addition reporters are getting