

“The Media and the Political Season Ahead”

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Let me tell you a secret. When it comes to things they like to write and talk about, reporters tend to love politics and inside baseball, and they are less inclined to relish the often dreary but necessary budget and fiscal stories.

One of the tried and true paths to rewarding work in journalism has been first to master the basic government story after wading through next year's local, state or federal budget, and then move on to the glamorous subject matter, to write about the excitement of politics.

I tell you this because this year we have an unusual alignment of the media cosmos. We began the year with the politics of government accounting becoming suddenly so compelling that they elevated themselves to where they actually provide us with some parameters for the next general election.

There is another parallel basic media story line that serves as a setup for the coming political season. The challenge for the press is always, are we going to have inanities in our political discourse or real discussion? The press too often reflects the shrill noise and finds itself reacting to some political consultant's script. Since today is Kentucky Derby day, a parallel seems apt. Sometimes, just the horse race of who's in the lead at any moment takes over the reporting narrative.

Campaign cycle after campaign cycle has seen news organizations making resolutions to take charge of this process, and to foster more serious issue-oriented discussion. And yet, the reality has been that the press is easily manipulated and distracted into covering trivialities. In the 1988 political campaign, when George Bush complained about Boston Harbor or we had Michael Dukakis caricatured as soft on defense in a tank ride TV ad. Gov. Dukakis, who by the way has been a lecturer in a distinguished series sponsored by this center, seemed to be marginalized even though a serious thinker. Certainly any campaign has accountability for how it's received by the electorate, but the media are important conveyers of perception.

We the people and we the press seem to keep hoping that every election cycle will be different, but the promise and the hope are already being tested early on this time as we look ahead to 2012. And the debate is complicated by the way media themselves have changed today.

This important run-up year to the forthcoming election year 2012 – already is unique in one respect. It isn't only about changes in media, although all the Tweets and Facebook entries seem to be getting more attention than ever. What seems most dramatic this year is that the choices between serious policy debate and political grandstanding were before us early on and in dramatic ways in the day's news. Consider that glamorous topic – the federal debt and whether to change fundamentally how Medicare works. The press this time has had the opportunity to cover both as political theater: serious policy issues and the usual grandstanding. For example, ABC's "The Note" reported in recent weeks that while Donald Trump stole the show with a highly publicized visit to New Hampshire, Paul Ryan of the House budget committee was doing some dazzling footwork of his own with a series of high profile power point presentations on the federal budget at town halls in his district.¹

The Note reported, "According to a dispatch from the Associated Press, Ryan drew standing-room-only crowds at four meetings in one week and that two events 'drew so many people that police turned away dozens of supporters and reporters, citing capacity issues.'² All this to hear about the budget.

The account took note of detractors at Ryan's events in Wisconsin as well as similar meetings held by Republican Reps. Dan Webster and Allen West in Florida, but there were also vocal defenders of the GOP plan. Ryan, emboldened by a new cadre of freshly minted Tea Party members of Congress, was drawing a line in the sand on such issues as Medicare, long considered the "third rail" in American politics, difficult and politically risky to take on.

Writing in the New York Times, the columnist David Brooks said, "Ryan has moved us off Unreality Island, (with capital letters). He is forcing Americans to confront the implications of their choices. With a few straightforward changes, his budget could be transformed into a politically plausible center-right package that would produce a fiscally sustainable welfare state while addressing the country's structural economic problems."³

¹ "Donald Trump Stole The Show But Paul Ryan Is Defining Contours Of 2012 Race," Michael Falcone and Amy Walter, The Note, ABC News, April 28, 2011.

² Ibid.

³ "The Ryan Journey," David Brooks, New York Times, April 7, 2011.

This sounds a lot like real change. All this of course had political implications. A president who had seen through his own national health care package was being confronted by Republicans in Congress who wanted to make hard choices now. This perhaps was to put him in a difficult spot in the year before an election. And so the press got the substance story it always says it wants very early on. This year, because the size of federal government itself has become a campaign issue with which to attack a Democratic president, the political discussion got front loaded.

Suddenly the pendulum swing of American politics stopped at a place where president and Congress were forced to look at the hard choices that must be made. “This is no longer about the budget deficit,” said Senator [Richard J. Durbin](#) of Illinois, the No. 2 Senate Democrat. “It’s about bumper stickers.”⁴ But however political its makeup was, the budget debate in the early part of the year set the stage for 2012. The early political season has brought us a much larger conversation about the role of government: what’s worth paying and even sacrificing for.

This last week, the potential for a serious realignment of Medicare was unclear. The Washington Post detected some movement of the Republican leadership away from Ryan’s plan to restructure the retirement plan.⁵ Stay tuned and we should hope that the press does a good job making sense of this story about the debt, entitlements, and our grandchildren’s futures.

But lest we think we are in only for a high-minded policy wonk campaign for the reporters to cover, we had the advent of Donald Trump, aka “The Donald” who has cut the ribbon in the race for media trivialities. Trump seized early and often upon the so-called “birther” question over President Obama’s origins and was given interview after interview opportunity by the press to highlight a question that really already had been decided.

With press attention in mind, Obama finally relented in releasing a document that he hoped would finally put to rest the controversy. As Michael Shear in the New York Times wrote, the situation had the president succumbing to the dramatic setting of a White House briefing room address. He spoke, Shear wrote, “...to address, head on, a subject that had been deemed irrelevant by

⁴ “No Accord in Budget Talks as Policy Fights Hamper Deal,” Carl Hulse, New York Times, April 7, 2011.

⁵ “GOP leaders divided on prospects for Medicare deal with Democrats,” Philip Rucker, Paul Kane and Lori Montgomery, Washington Post, May 5, 2011.

everyone in his orbit for years, even as it stoked conservative efforts to undermine his legitimacy as president.”⁶

This gave Trump a kind of victory, because he had forced the president to even address the issue. And in the moment was a window on how changing platforms in the press have the power to alter perceptions and responses in current election cycles. The White House, Shear pointed out, had detected that it is one thing for false speculation to percolate in “the nether regions of the Internet. It is another when a candidate like Mr. Trump has the ability through manipulation of media to catapult such an issue into mainstream political discussions.”⁷

My colleague Dan Kennedy, one of our leading media critics, had this to say. “...I will offer this: No white president would have been pressured into this. And my gut tells me Obama shouldn’t have done it, as it makes him look like he’s been bullied by sociopaths.

Although I don’t hold out much hope, I do think this is a splendid occasion for executives at mainstream news organizations to think about the consequences of “covering the controversy” as opposed to calling out people like Donald Trump as the lying jackasses that they are.”⁸

So it is for the press. Its attention is drawn here and there. And it often is lured into silly season. The birther flap also is emblematic of the sideshow that the Internet and changing media outlets have opened up for politics. And it presents the press with real choices in political season about how and whether to cover an agenda put forth by candidates eager to grab the spotlight.

Clearly we have turned some corner where the incessant chatter of the Internet raises non issues to those that must be addressed in stately and august settings. “There are no more arbiters of truth,” former White House press secretary Robert Gibbs was quoted as saying in Politico. “So whatever you can prove factually, somebody else can find something else and point to it with enough ferocity to get people to believe it. We’ve crossed some Rubicon into the unknown.”⁹

⁶ “With Document, Obama Seeks to End ‘Birther’ Issue,” Michael D. Shear, New York Times, April 27, 2011.

⁷ Ibid.

⁸ “Bullied by sociopaths,” Dan Kennedy, Media Nation, April 27, 2011.

⁹ “A new era of innuendo,” Jonathan Martin and John F. Harris, Politico, April 28, 2011.

Politico said, “It’s hard to imagine Bill Clinton coming out to the White House briefing room to present evidence showing why people who thought he helped plot the murder of aide Vincent Foster— never mind official rulings of suicide — were wrong. George W. Bush, likewise, was never tempted to take to the Rose Garden to deny allegations from voices on the liberal fringe who believed that he knew about the Sept. 11 attacks ahead of time and chose to let them happen.”¹⁰

We should remember that we have always had shenanigans in our political life, whether it is “tear down your sign and put up my sign” or Karl Rove spreading a false whisper campaign in South Carolina in 2000 to the effect that John McCain had fathered an illegitimate black child. Remember that Watergate was basically one episode in a coordinated a string of “dirty tricks” employed by the Nixon campaign under the direction of one of Orange County’s own, Donald Segretti, as a way of discrediting the opposition.

But today there are essentially two key differences in play for the media from the 70s and 80s. The first is the specialization of media made manifest by the political slants both left and right of cable television. The second is the sheer diversity of options with blogs and other online sources of information, and the dilution of traditional news authority.

On the first point, today we have a phenomenon described by the former LA Times editor John Carroll as “pseudo-journalism.”¹¹ This is newscasters and sets that look like straightforward news programs, but actually are geared to reinforce the political inclinations of targeted audiences.

The Tea Party is much in the news and we have talked earlier about their influence in the budget debate and potential role in the coming political campaign. But we should remember that the Tea Party in its early activities got a mighty assist from Fox News, which aired advance stories on Tea Party demonstrations as if it were a hired van riding the streets blaring announcements.

In 2009, On the network, the host Megyn Kelly declared, "it's tea party time, from sea to shining sea." ¹²A short while later, "anti-tax tea parties" rose to the top of the network's Hot List. Newsday in taking note of these developments,

¹⁰ Ibid.

¹¹ ‘The Wolf in Reporter’s Clothing: The Rise of Pseudo-Journalism in America,’ John S. Carroll, editor, Los Angeles Times, 2004 Ruhl Lecture at the University of Oregon School of Journalism and Communication, May 6, 2004.

¹² Quoted in “Tea Time,” Michael Calderone, Politico, April 15, 2009.

pointed out that Fox News reporter Griff Jenkins -- who earlier wore colonial garb as he traced the history of the tea party movement -- reported on a tea party protest..."¹³

So too, we later with Trump got the press suggesting that the birther story was unimportant at the same time it consumed space and airtime by giving it the attention to say this. One of the reasons you have to admire how clever Fox News's Bill O'Reilly is that he manages to give things like the birther story important attention even as he suggests it is unimportant.

While we wait for the next birth certificate to surface, let me say a word about all the chatter on the demise of the press and what this might mean about its place in the new political season unfolding before us.

The Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism releases an annual "State of the News Media report. This generally glum review actually has a brighter cast this year. The report finds that that about 30 percent of newsroom jobs have been lost since 2000, but that means 70 percent remain. It's also true that traditional so-called "legacy media" the traditional news organizations still come up with most of what's available as news for consumers.

However, the 2011 report notes: "...each technological advance has added a new layer of complexity—and a new set of players—in connecting that content to consumers and advertisers.

"In the digital space, the organizations that produce the news increasingly rely on independent networks to sell their ads. They depend on aggregators (such as Google) and social networks (such as Facebook) to bring them a substantial portion of their audience. And now, as news consumption becomes more mobile, news companies must follow the rules of device makers (such as Apple) and software developers (Google again) to deliver their content. Each new platform often requires a new software program. And the new players take a share of the revenue and in many cases also control the audience data."¹⁴

And so what we have is a kind of further fragmentation of the kind that I mentioned earlier in talking about how the cable TV shows play to niche political audiences. That means that the authority of mainstream media necessarily is diluted and filtered. This opens the door for more of the kind of

¹³ Ibid.

¹⁴ "Overview," State of the News Media, 2011, Tom Rosenstiel and Amy Mitchell, Pew Research Center's Project for Excellence in Journalism.

diminishment of authoritative political journalism that is done with a premise that this is what we had in the days of Walter Cronkite. The response of the White House to the birther questions is an example of how internet chatter can frame and shape the seriousness with which major institutions like the presidency respond.

Some good things are happening as the media dilute and change. Boston.com recently brought back a leading political reporter Glen Johnson to take advantage of the multimedia platforms of the website to go well beyond what traditional newspaper reporting has been. The Globe said, he would “oversee the expansion and redesign of the site’s political coverage leading into the 2012 presidential race and beyond, with a blog, videos, aggregated content, the smart display of original Globe stories, and any other creative ideas we can come up with.”¹⁵ So here we see how political editors are thinking about ways of doing new and exciting things in the new environment.

Also there is some smart early reporting. The Christian Science Monitor asks in a recent story: *Tea party: Libertarian revolt or religious right in disguise?*

The article by Jon Brand says that, “after the Tea Party helped stake Texas Republicans to huge majorities in the state Legislature last fall, the Republicans had a curious response. They did not immediately take on the state’s \$27 billion deficit; instead they considered a series of bills straight from the religious right’s playbook – antiabortion legislation foremost among them.

“Even now, as the Legislature tackles the budget deficit, social issues are near the surface. A member of the Tea Party caucus proposed a budget amendment that calls for funding ‘family and traditional values centers’ at some universities.”¹⁶

So here we have the press trying early on to place the political gains of the Tea Party in some historical context – to see whether this is the same group as the religious conservatives in a new banner, or what. The Pew Forum, perhaps the best website on religion and politics for trends and deeper thinking, has been pondering this question as it prepares for the coming political year.

And now a word about that age-old point of the tension between the public and the press, the notion of media bias. Are the political reporters and their editors cheerleading? Most reporters for major news organizations work hard to avoid

¹⁵ “Boston.com boosts its political coverage,” Dan Kennedy, Media Nation, Jan. 12, 2011.

¹⁶ “Tea party: Libertarian revolt or religious right in disguise?” Jon Brand, Christian Science Monitor, April 21, 2011.

being positioned as in cahoots with the political campaigns. They travel often with campaigns, are fed all sorts of information by them, generally do a very creditable job of trying to report things as they see them.

I like it when the press does such things as truth in advertising watches, when the products of millions spent on political advertising are actually analyzed for truth in statements by reporters. We know that reporters worked long and hard not only to find out what might be the truth of Republican Arnold Schwarzenegger's alleged groping of females at health clubs, but also to get at the accusations that troopers in Arkansas were facilitating the alleged dalliances of former governor Bill Clinton, a Democrat.

And yet there are minor lapses that make one see the need for care. I have no special affinity for former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, but I wanted to read more closely when the lead paragraph of a Boston Globe story on April 30 described Romney's defense of the Massachusetts health care law as "tepid."¹⁷ This is an important question because Romney has had to defend his stewardship of a health plan for Massachusetts at the same time he has criticized the federal plan under Obama. Here is the power of an adjective in a political story. A "tepid" defense of a state plan backed by Romney would suggest he was equivocal and in retreat.

Nothing I could find in the story as it jumped to an inside page suggested that there was anything particularly lukewarm about Romney's support for what a state did while he was its governor. He said some innovations had worked; others might be done differently, but that the problems that prompted the state overhaul of the health care system were so overwhelming that something had to be done. It looked like a standard defense to me; that is, this is what was done in an experiment, and it amounts to a work in progress. And then as often happens, the headline writers see a word like that and put a headline on the inside continuation of the story that says, "Romney gives lukewarm defense of health law". It made Romney look like a waffler. In fact, the story, after providing Romney's defense, went on to talk about the former neighboring state's governor's strong standing in the New Hampshire polls, which I thought was the real news, buried many paragraphs down.

Whatever we think of the current challenges for press in the political season, one cardinal rule will always be, Expect the unexpected. Who would have thought two weeks ago that President Obama, roundly skewered for his handling of global matters by all manner of Republican potential challengers

¹⁷ "Romney stands by Bay State health law," Matt Viser, Boston Globe, April 30, 2011.

and pundits, would be in for this kind of assessment. After Osama Bin Laden was killed by Navy seals in a daring raid on a compound in Pakistan, Trump issued a statement to ABC News calling off the hounds, at least temporarily. He advised Americans: "We should spend the next several days not debating party politics, but in remembrance of those who lost their lives on 9/11 and those currently fighting for our freedom. God Bless America!"¹⁸

Fox's, Sean Hannity, said Obama's leadership of the mission was "gutsy" and "the right thing to do."¹⁹

The New York Times noted, 'As fleeting as it might prove to be, the positive tone stood in blunt contrast to the narrative Republicans have been working to build in the opening stages of the 2012 presidential campaign.

'The argument that most potential Republican candidates have been making — that Mr. Obama is an indecisive leader, incapable of handling rapidly evolving events around the world — suddenly became more complicated.'²⁰

One Republican political operative on NPR the other morning was advising candidates in the early Republican debate season to open with hearty congratulations to the President, and then change the subject quickly – very quickly – to jobs and the economy. Who would have known that we would have had such a monumental event splash into the early part of a political campaign. The press in the final analysis will always be in the "making sense of surprises" business. This is what makes the adventure important.

And so it is in political season. Yes, there really has been a presidential debate just this week in South Carolina attended by five candidates, and sponsored in part by the local Republican party and – guess who – Fox News.

We really don't know what's around the corner, for the candidates and for the press. But almost two years before voters either reelect President Obama or select someone else, we have had high-minded budget debates over the future of Medicare, the musings and curious media charm of Donald Trump the

¹⁸ 'Donald Trump Congratulates Obama On Osama Bin Laden Killing, Asks For End To 'Party Politics' Debate For 'Next Several Days' " Michael Falcone, The Note, ABC News, May 2, 2011.

¹⁹ "Hannity sincerely praises the White House: 'It was the right thing to do'", Jeff Poor, The Daily Caller, Yahoo! News, May 2, 2011.

²⁰ "Obama Finds Praise, Even From Republicans," Jeff Zeleny and Jim Rutenberg, New York Times, May 2, 2011.

outsider, and a surprise development in a decade-old story about the threat and importance of terrorism.

This volatility and unpredictability is what makes covering politics a challenge, and what makes it fun. Who knows what memorable moments lie ahead and how it will all come out. What we can hope for and insist on is a vigilant press.

On with the show.