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TV Politics: Seeing More than We Want, Knowing Less than We Need

Cover Page Footnote

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JOSHUA MEYROWITZ

*TV Politics: Seeing More than We Want,
Knowing Less than We Need*

How is it that the public and the press have come to have so little faith in, and to feel so little in awe of, our national leaders and the political process in general? Why do we citizens feel that we know too much about politicians' personal lives – their families, their failings, their affairs, even what type of underwear they prefer – while, at the same time, we sense we are being told too little about significant social issues?

This essay offers two different answers to these questions. Neither answer, however, involves the typical approach of looking at the backgrounds and experiences of individual politicians or at their rhetorical and other strategies. In neither answer do I suggest that we simply no longer have any great leaders.

Instead, I argue first that in an era of “television politics,” politicians have lost a great deal of control over the traditional “staging” of the role of “great leader.” And second, I suggest that the centrality of television in today's politics has encouraged powerful elites to try to exercise even greater control over what types of politicians become visible to the public in the first place.

To develop the first answer, I focus on the ways in which television is different from other modes of communication and on how those differences interact with the role of “great leader.” In developing my second answer, I offer a case study to suggest that candidates who are not tied to powerful and wealthy elites have a difficult time gaining national media attention.

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Our ``Crisis in Leadership''

There has been a great deal of concern in the United States over the last thirty years with our ``crisis in leadership." President Lyndon Johnson abdicated his office. Richard Nixon resigned the presidency in disgrace. Gerald Ford's automatic succession to the presidency was later rejected by the electorate. Jimmy Carter's re-election bid ended in a landslide loss to Ronald Reagan. George Bush ended his one-term presidency seemingly out of touch with the people and challenged from within his own party. President Bill Clinton struggled through his first term with the public's perception that he is indecisive and untruthful. He went on to win reelection, but largely, it seemed, because the public was even less enthusiastic about his major opponent, Bob Dole.

Even Ronald Reagan, who served two full terms and is often considered our most popular recent president, was never fully able to escape the image of being an ``amiable dunce." Long before the Iran-Contra scandal tarnished Reagan's image further, polls suggested that while he was a ``likable person," many of the people who voted for him disagreed with his policies and did not rate him highly in ability or intelligence.

In short, we seem to be having difficulty finding leaders who have charisma and style and who are also competent, intelligent, and trustworthy. During the 1980 presidential election, *Newsweek* analyzed recent political polls and concluded that: ``Perhaps the most telling political finding of all is the high degree of disenchantment voters feel about most of the major candidates." If anything, the situation was even worse a dozen years later, when a *New York Times*/CBS poll indicated that more than 40% of those surveyed wished that other candidates had entered the race. In addition, the faith that there *are* other potentially better candidates is also eroding. The *New York Times* wrote in 1992 that while George Bush had no ``blueprints for the future" of the United States, he also had little competition among the major presidential contenders or in Congress. Similarly, during the 1996 campaign, *Time* magazine referred to President Clinton as ``the least worst candidate" and the *New York Times* described him as ``winning the Battle of the Lesser Evils."

Every horse race has its winner, of course, and no matter how

uninspiring a field of candidates emerges, people will always have their favorites. In this sense, the typical analyses of which candidate won an election and why, as well as the news media's obsession with minor shifts in poll percentage points, only obscure the more fundamental issue of the *overall decline in the image of leaders in general*.

Television Demystifies

I suggest that the widespread use of television has a great deal to do with the decline in the prestige of leaders. Television has encouraged the perception that we know our leaders "personally." This change diminishes the apparent mediating roles of political parties and journalists. Although this change sounds positive in the abstract, and may in fact be part of a beneficial and democratizing long-term trend, its most visible consequence at this time is an increasingly negative view of politicians on the part of the public and the press.

To be perceived as a "great leader," one cannot simply *be* great, one must *behave* like a great person. *Leadership, is not simply something an individual "has." It is something that exists in specific interactions and rituals in specific social situations.* Television has reduced the number of settings of greatness in our country.

Since every individual is, in some ways at least, "ordinary," the performance of the role of "greatness" depends on distance and mystery. The need for a carefully staged and controlled performance is made clear in many "training manuals" for high-status positions. Balthasar Gracian, the seventeenth-century rector of the Jesuit College, for example, advised priests to "Mix a little mystery with everything" because mystery "arouses veneration." Machiavelli offered similar advice and suggested that princes should carefully stage-manage their public appearances and emphasize certain personal traits while concealing others.

Before the widespread use of electronic media, the towns and cities of the country served as backstage areas of rehearsal and mystification for national political figures. The legendary oratory of politicians such as three-time presidential candidate William Jennings Bryan and the treasured images of many of our other political heroes were made possible by their ability to practice and modify their public

performances. Early mistakes could be limited to small forums, minor changes could be tested, and speeches and presentations could be honed to perfection. By the time Bryan delivered his powerful "cross of gold" speech to win the nomination for President at the 1896 Democratic convention, for example, he had practiced the speech many times in different parts of the country.

A few well-turned phrases could once be used by politicians to thrill many different audiences on many different days. Bryan, for example, was very fond of his closing line in the 1896 speech ("You shall not press down upon the brow of labor this crown of thorns, you shall not crucify mankind upon a cross of gold") — so fond, in fact, that he had used it many times in other speeches and debates. In his memoirs, Bryan noted his early realization of the line's "fitness for the conclusion of a climax," and after using it in smaller arenas, he "laid it away for a proper occasion."

Bryan's strategy now sounds charmingly old-fashioned. Today, through radio and television, wherever a national politician speaks, he or she addresses people all over the country. Major speeches, therefore, cannot be tested in advance. Because major speeches can be presented only once, they tend to be relatively coarse and undramatic. And inspiring lines — grist for the sound-bite mill — are either expended quickly or become relatively weak clichés.

National politicians could once tailor their talks to those physically present and buttress their central platforms with slightly different promises to different audiences. Today, because politicians address so many different types of people simultaneously via radio and television, they have greater difficulty speaking in specifics. If they make different promises when speaking in the midwest than when speaking in New York City, they appear cynical and manipulative to the mediated audiences. Yet if they make the same speeches everywhere, they seem bland and unimaginative, as well as ignorant of local issues and concerns.

With audiences in the millions, any slip of the tongue or ill-conceived phrase (such as Ross Perot's referring to a black audience as "you people" during the 1992 campaign, or Bill Clinton's infamous "but I didn't inhale") or even an ill-advised gesture (such as George Bush glancing at his watch during a debate) is amplified in significance because millions of people have witnessed it. So wise politicians tend

to be very cautious – and thus rather boring – as they try to stick to a script devised with the help of their media advisors.

Many Americans are still hoping for the emergence of an old-style, dynamic “great leader.” Yet electronic media, particularly the highly exposing medium of television, are making it almost impossible for such leadership to manifest itself. There is no lack of potential leaders, but there is an overabundance of personal information about them.

The speaker's platform once lifted politicians up and away from average citizens, both literally and symbolically. In newspaper quotes and reports, the politician – as flesh and bones person – was completely absent. And on radio, politicians were disembodied voices. But the television camera now lowers politicians to the level of the common citizen and brings them close for our inspection. In recent years, we have seen our presidents sweat, stammer, and stumble – all in living color.

To be carried off smoothly, today's political performances requires what I have called a new “middle region” style: behavior that lacks the extreme formality of what sociologist Erving Goffman would call traditional “front region” or onstage behavior, but also lacks the extreme informality of what Goffman refers to as “back region” or backstage behavior.

Wise politicians try to make the most of the new political stage by matching their visible behaviors to the new, informal stage. They attempt to expose selected, positive aspects of their backstage lives in order to ingratiate themselves with the public: they appear on talk shows as “ordinary people”; they push their families and feelings into the public arena; they field questions from children and average citizens; they admit some of their doubts and mistakes and marital problems; if they can, they play an instrument or sing with the band. They “share” with us.

Some politicians clearly succeed in the new public arena better than others. Yet there is a big difference between *coping* with the new situation and truly *controlling* it. Regardless of how well individual politicians adjust to the new exposure, the overall image of leaders has changed in the process. The new political performance remains a performance, but its style is markedly changed. And for both better and worse, the aura surrounding our leaders is diminished.

Presidential images were once much better protected. Before

television coverage of press conferences, newspapers were not even allowed to quote a president without his explicit permission. As late as the start of the Eisenhower administration in the 1950s, the *New York Times* and other publications had to paraphrase the President's answers to questions. In earlier administrations, journalists had to submit their questions in advance and were forbidden to mention which questions the President refused to answer. Presidential advisors frequently corrected presidents' answers during meetings with the press, and such assistance went unreported.

In the face of a "crisis," our presidents once had many hours, sometimes even weeks or months, to consult with advisors and to formulate policy statements to be printed in newspapers. But now, standing before the nation, a president is often expected to have all relevant information in his head — without notes and without consultation with advisors. A president must often start a sentence before the end of the sentence is fully formed in his mind. Even a five-second pause for thought can seriously damage a leader's credibility. I believe that the apparent inarticulateness of all our recent presidents may be related more to the immediacy of television than to a decline in our leaders' mental or leadership abilities.

Television also differs from print in its basic form of information. In *words*, the titles "President," "Governor," "Senator" still call forth respect. But the close-up TV *pictures* of the persons filling those offices are rarely as impressive. We cannot help but notice the sweat on the brow, the nervous twitch, the bags under the eyes, or the excess makeup.

Television not only reduces our awe of politicians, it increases politicians' self-doubt and lowers self-esteem. A speaker's nervousness and mistakes usually are politely ignored by live audiences and therefore soon forgotten by the speaker as well. But with videotape, politicians have permanent records of themselves misspeaking or anxiously licking their lips.

For all these reasons, television may be a prime cause of the complaints of indecisive leadership that we have heard since the mid-1960s.

In the 1950s, many people were upset that a genuine hero, Dwight Eisenhower, felt the need to hire a Hollywood actor to help him with his television appearances. But we have become much more

sophisticated – and more cynical. We now know that one cannot simply *be* the President, but that one has to *perform* the role of “President.” By 1980, it did not seem strange that a skilled actor had become President, with advisors to help him with the substantive aspects of his role.

Ironically, the new communication arena not only demands more control on the part of politicians, it also makes the *attempts* at control more visible. Again, the net effect is demystifying. Many citizens lived through twelve years of Franklin Roosevelt's presidency without being aware that his legs were crippled and that he often needed help to stand. But we are now constantly exposed to the ways in which our presidents and presidential candidates attempt to manipulate their images to create certain impressions and effects.

The result is that we no longer experience political performances as naive audiences. We have the perspective of stage hands who are aware of the constructed nature of the drama. Television provides what I call “sidestage” views of public figures. We watch politicians move from backstage to onstage to backstage. We see politicians address crowds of well-wishers, then greet their families “in private.” We join candidates as they speak with their advisors, and we sit behind them as they watch conventions on television. We see candidates address many different types of audiences in many different settings. Certainly, we prefer a good show to a bad show, but we are not fully taken in even by a great performance, because we are so aware of it being merely a “performance.” Instead, we are at best willingly entertained, charmed, courted, and seduced. Ironically, all the recent discussions of how we are being manipulated by politicians and their image makers may merely signify how visible and exposed the machinations now are.

The trend in media development over the last century has been toward increasing intimacy and revelation. From the portrait to the photograph to the movie to radio to the video close-up, media have been providing a closer, more replicative, more immediate image of our leaders. This trend has led to a blurring of the criteria used to evaluate private and public behaviors.

Private interactions have always been dominated by concrete appearance, gestures, and vocalization. The key questions in the personal realm is: “What is the person *like*?” But the public sphere

was once tied closely to the abstractions of language. The key question of the public realm once was: "What has the person said, written, and accomplished?"

We do not normally reject a potential lover or friend based on a poor résumé, and before television, voters had little opportunity to react negatively to national candidates because they were unpleasant to watch from a few feet away. But television has increasingly fostered the use of "dating criteria" over "résumé criteria" in the public sphere.

Television closeups simulate an interpersonal distance of about two feet. Even in real life, that is a distance of seduction or threat, not of rational discussion. When we are on a first date, for example, our impression of its success or failure relies relatively little on what our companion *says*. The words, "What a nice meal" or "Thank you for a very pleasant time" don't tell us much. So we search for other cues: How often does she look at me? How close to me is he standing? Does she seem nervous? Does he look bored? Similarly, television's sensuality makes language seem secondary.

Language certainly continues to play a role in television, but it is often overshadowed by the nonverbal. It is difficult to imagine someone reading a newspaper transcript of a speech by a politician he or she has never seen, and saying: "Well, I disagree with that argument, that statement is false, and this sentence makes no sense at all. . . . But you know something, I really *like* the guy!" Such a response would seem crazy. Yet this is the manner in which many viewers respond to politicians on television news. Therefore, even though we are clearly not oblivious to the words spoken on TV, we tend to react to them in an intimate context. Vice President Al Gore, for example, is an articulate speaker, but more attention has been paid to how "stiff" he appears on television than to anything he has ever said. Indeed, so much attention has been paid to Gore's stiffness, that he himself often feels obligated to joke about it in his speeches and talk show appearances.

Polls indicate that many citizens are now willing to vote for a national candidate with whom they disagree on the issues because they "personally like" the candidate. (About a third of Ronald Reagan's votes in the 1980 election, for example, came from such "supporters.") The reverse is also true: citizens hesitate to vote for a candidate whose positions are similar to their own if they do not

“like” the candidate “as a person.” Such reactions grow out of the sense, fostered by television, that we have met and “know” our leaders personally.

So we seem to be evaluating potential presidents today by drawing partly on the type of criteria people use in choosing a sports teammate: it doesn't have to be someone who necessarily agrees with us on “the issues of the day” or someone we look up to as brilliant or heroic or as a moral giant, as long as we can tolerate spending time with them on a regular basis. Or put differently, presidential campaigns are now courtships to win a four-year close relationship with the public.

The new political context of television is both personalizing and demystifying. The results can be confusing – and uncomfortable – for both politician and viewer. When Richard Nixon died, for example, ABC chose to air, among other clips, Nixon's painfully awkward attempts to respond to a question by Barbara Walters that he was a cold and unemotional man.

On the one hand, there is something reassuring about these new, humanized images of our leaders. There is a measure of safety in them as well: as politicians appear more like ordinary people, we may be less likely to follow them blindly into an unnecessary war or other folly. But something is also lost. Although style and image play an important part in social relationships, they are severely limited as forms of public discourse. Extensive use of words is necessary if one wants to present linear arguments, suggest complex if-then relationships, and state propositions that can be proven true or false. One cannot explain social policy with a smile and wink. Observations of our leaders' good and bad hair days may be amusing, but they do little to improve the future of our republic.

Television also undermines traditional forms of political authority by giving us the sense that we directly witness events. Most of our information about other countries, for example, once came through the President and State Department, often after careful planning about how to present the information to the public. This allowed the government to appear to be in control of events and always to have a ready response. “Official sources” still shape many of the verbal narratives in news, but in many instances today, we experience events at the same moment as our leaders. The dramatic images of People Power in the Philippines, Chinese students protesting in Tiananmen

Square, the fall of the Berlin Wall, the war in Bosnia, massacres in Africa, and so on have been watched by the President, the Secretary of State, and millions of other Americans at the same moment. The same is true for many events within our own country. The immediacy of television often makes leaders appear to be "standing on the sidelines" rather than taking charge or reacting quickly.

As our leaders have lost much control over the flow of information — both about themselves and political events — they have mostly given up trying to behave like the imperial leaders of the past. We now have politicians who strive to act more like the person next door, just as our real neighbors seem more worldly and demand to have a greater say in national and international affairs.

What is clear is that the current drive toward intimacy with our leaders involves a fundamental paradox. In pursuing our desire to be "close" to great people or to confirm their greatness through closer scrutiny, we often destroy their ability to function as great people. Much human activity is common to all individuals. If high-status persons cannot segregate such behavior from their onstage high-status performances, then they appear to be more like everyone else. By providing greater access to, and awareness of, backstage behavior, television tends to undermine traditional abstractions of status.

"Greatness" manifests itself in the onstage performance and, by definition, in its isolation from backstage behaviors. Yet when we say that we want to see what authorities are "really like," we generally mean we want to see what they are *least* like, that is, both how they behave least often in the role they hope to perform for us, and also the least they can be in social terms. In intimate spheres, people are often much alike: they eat, they eliminate, they get tired, they sleep, they make love, they lose their tempers, they groom, they indulge in whims and self-involvements.

There is, therefore, an inherent "vanishing truth" paradox in the use of television to give us a close-up view of our politicians and other authorities. When we see our leaders in varieties of situations and locations, when we observe them as they respond to spontaneous interviews or as they grow weary from a day of work or campaigning, we do not simply learn more about them. By searching behind the fronts of performers, we also diminish the roles that can be performed and perceived. Few of our past "great leaders" would fare very well if

they lived in our current media environment.

On television, our politicians feel driven to be intimate with us, but then they wake up to discover that we don't respect them in the morning. We have seen too much of them to remain enchanted by them. One reason the public is no longer in awe of politicians, therefore, is that television has made it difficult for political leaders to perform traditional roles of ``greatness."

Limited Knowledge

But there is another fundamental reason for disenchantment, and this one is much less visible. Rather than focusing on our seeing too much, the second reason highlights how little we still know. We are told too little about significant issues, and we are barred from learning about candidates and potential candidates who might be willing to talk about those issues.

The personal, intimate views of politicians on TV alter the structure and logic of the political process. The party's function as a mediator between candidate and voter, for example, is dramatically undermined by media that give us an increasing sense that we have ``met" and ``know" our leaders personally. Newspaper endorsements have also lost much of their influence. Why should we leave it to others to tell us what to think about candidates when we can judge them for ourselves? But the major parties and the press are still very powerful in telling the public who the ``major" candidates are in the first place. We are asked by both the parties and our news media to forget about the possibility of *other* candidates.

Ross Perot brought this issue to the public's attention during the 1996 campaign, which led Larry King to include him and then other candidates in his CNN television program after the debates. Ambassador Alan Keyes's exclusion from a debate (after his inclusion in earlier forums) also brought some attention to this issue.

But the public remains generally unaware of how serious the situation is, and how even experienced candidates of the two major parties are systematically excluded from news coverage and ballot access. To make this point, I'll focus in the rest of this essay on a case study about a particular presidential candidate during the 1992 campaign who had difficulty getting any national press attention. The

real question that emerges from this case study, however, is not who is running in a particular year and not getting coverage, but how many other candidates have not even bothered to run at all because of the predictable pattern of media exclusion.

On August 22, 1991 Larry Agran launched his campaign for the presidency from his home town of Irvine, in Orange County, California. Agran's announcement speech offered a detailed plan for a "New American Security" that put "human need at home ahead of military overkill abroad." That same day, the Orange County edition of the *Los Angeles Times* carried a 1200-word story on the announcement on the first page of Section B, with part of the headline reading: "He May Not Win, but He Vows to Make Voice of Liberalism Heard." Several follow-up articles appeared in the Orange County edition the next day, including one titled "Why Agran Could Be a Primary Figure." But the main edition of the *Los Angeles Times*, which is distributed nationally, was less encouraging. It carried only one brief, 300-word story on the announcement, referring to Democrat Agran's quest as "the longest-shot candidacy of all" within a party that had only a long shot chance of winning the White House in the first place. The story ran on page 46, the obituary page.

Thus, the general pattern that would repeat itself throughout the campaign was established early: respectful coverage in the *local* media (which have relatively little national political impact), contrasted with marginalized *national* coverage that suggested that the Agran campaign was "dead on arrival."

In September 1991, Larry Agran was one of only two declared U.S. presidential candidates at the Sioux City Democratic Party Unity Dinner. This was to be the first Democratic party event of the presidential campaign season, and Agran, the other declared candidate (former Senator Paul Tsongas), and several potential candidates spoke there to an audience of 500 Democrats. A fleeting image that appeared on Cable News Network showed Agran being greeted by Paul Tsongas, Senator Tom Harkin, and Governor Bill Clinton. But when the same encounter appeared in an Associated Press photo published by the "last newspaper of record," the *New York Times*, Agran was nowhere to be seen. Paul Tsongas and Tom Harkin are seen speaking and gesturing to some unseen person beyond the right margin of the photograph. This is a good visual metaphor for Agran's

campaign experience and the experience of most other so-called ``minor" candidates.

Over the early weeks and months of the presidential campaign, as other well-known politicians declared their candidacies, the national press spent a considerable amount of time on them. The national media also speculated at length about the hypothetical entries of two prominent *non*-candidates — the Rev. Jesse Jackson and New York Governor Mario Cuomo. But the real and ongoing Agran campaign received little or no attention. In the rare instances *when* his name *did* appear, he was described as a ``dark horse," a ``fringe candidate," ``the longest of longshots," or ``an obscure contender" (without any acknowledgment by journalists that the paucity of their own coverage of Agran might be contributing to his ``obscurity").

Agran was barred from most of the televised debates on the basis of criteria that shifted as he tried to meet them. When he *was* allowed to participate in forums with the so-called ``major" candidates, he was often left out of news reports of the events or was asked by press photographers to move aside. If he was scheduled to speak last, the press usually left before his speech, and was not there to hear or report on what he said or on the audience reaction. Agran would hold press conferences, and few if any journalists would attend, and fewer still news reports would appear. With Catch-22 logic, Agran was told by news media executives that he had not earned the right to media exposure, because, among other things, he had not received enough media exposure.

To be fair to those making such news judgments, thirty-six candidates entered the Democratic race in New Hampshire. Further, much of Agran's dark-horse status derived from his unconventional credentials as a presidential contender. Although he is a Harvard Law School graduate and published author who has devoted twenty years to public service, he has never held statewide or national office. He served for twelve years as an elected official in Irvine, California, America's largest master-planned city. Most national journalists I spoke with dismissed him based on his having held only local office. Of course, there is nothing in the U.S. Constitution that bars a local official from running for the presidency. Further, the national media's conceptions of what makes for a viable candidate are arbitrary and changeable. For example, until recently the major media would have

dismissed anyone who was "only" a Congressman (who represents a local district rather than a state) or was "only" a *former* Senator or Governor. In 1992, Agran's status as a former mayor did not meet the unstated criteria held by most national journalists. As journalist Roger Mudd put it at the start of a rare TV interview with Agran: "It does stretch credulity to think that a Jewish ex-mayor of a small suburban California town can make it."

Agran's supporters, of course, took a different view. They pointed out that, as Irvine's first directly elected mayor, Agran received national acclaim (including significant media attention) for the numerous progressive programs he had initiated, including elderly housing, childcare, mass transportation, one of the nation's first curbside recycling programs, preservation of undeveloped land, and hazardous waste regulations. They noted that, as Executive Director of the Center for Innovative Diplomacy (a foreign policy think tank), Agran played a unique role as a "global mayor," who pursued issues of international trade, arms reduction, and human rights, and earned his city a United Nations award for his pioneering legislation to eliminate ozone-depleting compounds — all from an unlikely base in deeply conservative Orange County. (Orange County had given Reagan and Bush one of their largest voting margins in the country.) Agran's supporters described him as the most articulate presidential contender with the boldest and most specific blueprint for shifting cold war military spending to *post*-cold war domestic needs. Agran, they argued, had much more governing experience than Pat Buchanan and Ross Perot put together, and more foreign policy experience than Bill Clinton had at that time. They also claimed that the public's reaction to many of Agran's appearances was so positive that his ideas deserved to be heard — and allowed to influence the platforms of the "major" candidates — even if Agran himself had little chance of winning the nomination. And they argued that, regardless of anything else, since Agran's campaign had achieved access to about forty primary and caucus ballots, the public deserved to be told something about him so as to be able to make an informed choice in the voting booth. (Ironically, Agran would have been on many more than 40 ballots had not the other states required "significant press attention" as one of the criteria of ballot inclusion.)

Of course, it is no surprise that Agran's supporters saw more in

him than did most national journalists. What is surprising, however, is the extent to which Agran's campaign received encouragement from the coverage of the *local* New Hampshire press reporting on the first-in-the-nation primary, as well as from at least two nationally-known columnists, Colman McCarthy and Sydney Schanberg. In New Hampshire, there were dozens of newspaper articles, editorials, columns, and letters to the editor, which described Agran's exclusion and/or supported his right to be heard in national debates. Sample headlines ran: "Larry Agran Deserves a Place in Democratic Primary Debates"; "He's Out with the in-Crowd"; "Unlock the Process"; and "At Least Give Agran a Chance to Lose." Beyond New Hampshire, McCarthy and Schanberg both wrote columns challenging Agran's designation as a "minor candidate" and endorsing his right to be heard and seen through debates and national news coverage.

Yet most of the rest of the mainstream national press rejected Agran before a single vote was cast or any voter poll was taken. The national press placed him in the same category with candidates who merely paid \$1,000 to be put on one ballot, in New Hampshire, and had little else in the way of background, experience, or campaign. Those candidates with whom Agran was functionally grouped included a recovering alcoholic and drug addict and the bicycle-riding candidate who proposed having sheep and goats tend to the front lawn of the White House.

My purpose here is not to emphasize Larry Agran or to endorse him for President, but rather to analyze the coverage and non-coverage of the Agran campaign for what it tells us about U.S. presidential campaign coverage in general. Agran's unusual status — as "less than a 'major' candidate" but "more than a 'fringe' candidate" — helps to make some of the implicit journalistic decisions about campaign coverage more visible. Agran's anomalous status as a candidate makes his campaign experiences a good lens through which to see aspects of political campaign coverage that normally remain invisible.

To his dismay, Agran found that for him one of the rules of the campaign was: "To get press coverage, you must be disruptive." When he was barred by the Chairman of the State Democratic Party from a televised Health Care Forum with presidential candidates in Nashua, New Hampshire, for example, the normally soft-spoken Agran stood up in the audience and demanded by what criteria he was

being excluded. Responding to a signal from a state party official, security police began to remove Agran from the hall, but the crowd's shouts of "Freedom of speech!" and "Let us vote!" embarrassed the men at the dais into inviting him to join them. (Another largely uncovered candidate, the New Alliance Party's Lenora Fulani, who was running in the New Hampshire primary as a Democrat, also took this opportunity to join the other candidates.) Agran's confrontation with party officials and his subsequent inclusion in the health forum was his first widely reported "campaign event" – but little mention was made of his innovative proposals for health care reform.

To prevent this sort of public call for inclusion from occurring again (the State party chair called it "intimidation"), the next state Democratic party debate was moved to a high-security TV studio – with no audience permitted. Agran stood outside, among a crowd of four hundred people, who braved zero-degree temperatures to protest the exclusion of their candidates from the debates. (Most of the protesters were supporters of Lenora Fulani, but several other "fringe" candidates were also represented.) As reported in the local New Hampshire press, the protest offered many dramatic moments, with the "major" candidates forced to pass "picket lines for democracy" as protestors shouted "Scab! Scab! Scab!" Yet perhaps because there was no violence and the event inside the studio was not interrupted, the protest received almost no attention in the national media.

Agran and his staff believed that at some point local press attention would build into national exposure. But several reporters and editors at national newspapers and magazines that I spoke with admitted that the longer one has not covered a candidate, the harder it becomes to do so. "The obvious question in such situations," said Alvin Sanoff, a senior editor at *U.S. News & World Report*, "is 'Where have you been that you just discovered this person?'" He also noted that "it's always safer to stay with the pack and be wrong, than to risk going out on a limb and covering someone who then turns out to not be that important."

When local press coverage and protests had no impact on his national media profile, Agran's campaign staff became convinced that his status as a "fringe" candidate could be erased if he tied or passed one or more of the "major" candidates in the polls. They were wrong.

When Agran made his first measurable showing in a University of New Hampshire/WMUR-TV poll taken from January 6 to 11, the Associated Press story on the poll grouped Agran's results into a total score for "minor candidates and write-ins," without mentioning his name. (In my local paper, the headline conveyed the story's focus: "Clinton Still Making Great Strides in Primary Polls.") When a January 22 poll, conducted by the American Research Group (ARG), showed Agran tied with former California Governor Jerry Brown and Iowa Senator Tom Harkin, the polling group's press release suggested three headlines, including "Agran Appears in Democratic Race." But the AP buried Agran's result in a single sentence two-thirds of the way through a story focusing on Clinton as the front-runner. (In New Hampshire's *Union Leader* the headline read: "Polls Show Clinton Ahead of President and the Democrats.") When a follow-up ARG poll showed Agran doubling his support and moving ahead of Brown, the AP again focused on Clinton, but this time on the *drop* in his rating. (In the *New York Times*, the headline read: "Clinton Rating Falls in Poll."). Agran's tally was reported much further down in the story (*after* Brown's lower score), and it was incorrectly referred to as Agran's "first measurable showing in the poll." When the next ARG poll showed Agran still between Brown and Harkin, ABC's *World News Sunday*—perhaps to avoid the complexity of explaining the identity of a candidate they had not been covering—simply dropped Agran's tally from the *middle* of the reported poll results! Harkin's score was followed directly by Brown's. This was crude and outrageous, of course, and other major news organizations found a subtler way to avoid the "problem" of skipping over a higher score to report a lower one: they reported only on the top three names.

During the campaign Bill Clinton and his staff complained bitterly about the aggressive press coverage Clinton received. But when seen in a larger perspective, a different story emerges: the intensity of the focus on Clinton, whether positive or negative in tone, generally worked to his benefit—by keeping the spotlight on him, by allowing him to claim that he had weathered brutal press coverage to become the "comeback kid," and, most important, by obscuring the existence of credible alternatives.

Agran, however, refused to disappear. His unusual appearance with four of the so-called "major candidates" at the U.S. Conference

of Mayors in January led to the first significant mention of his campaign in the *New York Times*, which in effect declared him the winner of the debate. The *Times* reported: "After hearing pitches from the Democratic Presidential contenders on how they would revive America's cities, dozens of mayors meeting here today seemed to agree on one thing: the single candidate who truly understands urban needs is Larry Agran." Agran was mentioned in passing in several other newspaper reports on the conference. Yet the Associated Press, ABC radio news, and the All News Channel, along with the other television reports I saw on the forum, did not even mention that Agran was there.

Similarly, when Agran participated with the "major" candidates in the Global Warming Leadership Forum in February, conference organizer Carole Florman told me that the audience was "very enthusiastic about Larry Agran and less than enthusiastic about Bill Clinton and Bob Kerrey." Yet *all* the major national news organizations covering the event — ABC News, CBS News (through a local affiliate), and the AP — omitted all mention of Agran from their reports.

Agran's tying or passing well-known candidates in several polls and outperforming them at two forums — *all within a ten-day period* — could have been seen as a "major story" by the national news media. But that story was never constructed and told.

As the pattern of exclusion from national coverage built, there seemed to be nothing that Agran could do to register with the national media. Press language even excluded evidence of his and other "minor" candidates' existence. A TV news program would report: "Four out of the five Democratic presidential candidates were in Manchester, New Hampshire today," as if there were no other candidates. Or, a report would say: "Bill Clinton spoke in Nashua, New Hampshire today. The rest of the candidates were in other states" — while Agran was very much *in* New Hampshire and actively campaigning.

We see this same pattern in the reporting of the February 23 South Dakota debate, which had long been scheduled to include Agran. Agran gained an additional boost on the eve of the debate with an endorsement for the presidency by the local *Lakota Times* (a Native American paper). Yet when reporting on the eve of the unusual debate with a *sixth* candidate, Larry Agran, *NBC Nightly News*

reported ``All *five* Democrats are in South Dakota for a debate" (emphasis added).

Agran's strong performance in the South Dakota debate (especially his effective attacks on Jerry Brown for being only a very recent convert with respect to campaign finance reform) led to the most simultaneous national attention he had received at any point during his campaign. Agran's participation was featured late that night on some TV news programs (the debates took place after the evening news programs had aired), including CNN Headline News. The next day's *Los Angeles Times* called him ``the showstopper of the evening," and the *Boston Globe* wrote ``One of the surprises of the debate was the solid performance turned in by Larry Agran." The same *Globe* reporter filed an article exclusively on Agran's performance at the debate titled ``Larry Agran: 'Winner' in Debate with Little Chance for the Big Prize." The *Washington Post* and the *New York Times* also reported on his participation. But by the day after the debate, his presence at the forum began to fade from national television. Of the nine reports on the debate on the network morning news shows, only three mentioned his participation. By that evening, he was gone. *NBC Nightly News*, which had mentioned only five participants the night before, did not correct the number of participants and showed video only of Clinton speaking briefly, following by a clip of Harkin and Tsongas clashing at the debate. ABC's *World News Tonight* featured the same clash between Harkin and Tsongas. The *CBS Evening News* mentioned the South Dakota primary, but had no report on the debate.

By the end of March 1992, Douglass Wilder, Tom Harkin, Bob Kerrey, and Paul Tsongas had all suspended their campaigns. But the narrowed Democratic field did not generate any increased attention to Agran. After being ignored by the press for so long, there seemed to be nothing Agran could do to register with the national media. Even when Agran garnered more voter signatures to be placed on the New York ballot than Jerry Brown, only Brown was allowed to participate in New York City debates with Bill Clinton.

At the start of one debate at Lehman College in the Bronx on the topic of urban problems – Agran's specialty – the hapless candidate stood up and said ``I respectfully ask to be included in this forum." Agran was quickly tackled to the floor by plain clothes police, dragged

down a flight of stairs head first, handcuffed, thrown into a police paddy wagon until the debate was over, and then kept in custody at a Bronx jail for four hours. He was booked on charges of disorderly conduct, trespassing, and resisting arrest. Agran's New York City campaign manager, who had been sitting next to Agran, was also arrested. The TV cameras did not even turn away from the debate stage to focus on any of this drama.

Agran's arrest received some coverage in New York, including a brief mention in the *New York Times* (in the context of how the extensive security at the debate had somehow not prevented this disturbance). And Agran's home-state paper, the *Los Angeles Times*, condemned the arrest in an editorial, saying that "something's weird when the former mayor of perhaps the most orderly city in the country is busted for disorderly conduct in the most disorderly city in America." But beyond that, there was largely silence. (The *New York Post* could claim to have "covered it," in both senses of the word, reporting: "Two men were arrested inside the Lehman College auditorium when they started heckling the candidates, according to police.")

One criterion for coverage that journalists cited when I spoke to them early in the campaign was federal matching funds. Agran, they told me, would be unable to qualify. But when Agran, without any significant press coverage, did eventually qualify for federal matching funds in mid-May – only the tenth candidate from all parties to do so – there was virtually no press mention of this, and no change in the attention level he received. (The *Washington Post*, for example, dutifully reported on the "official" news of the gaining of federal funds, but the paper described him as a "winless candidate" who had to be in New York during the Democratic Convention for another reason: to face charges from a recent arrest.)

Agran did not win his party's nomination. But he did receive a few delegate votes at the convention. They were listed on the TV screens as votes for "Other."

Agran's trial for requesting inclusion in the Bronx, New York debate was delayed several times, and he remained under threat of imprisonment for ten months. All charges were finally dismissed on January 19, 1993. (But after New York City successfully appealed the expiration of their time to appeal, Agran was dragged into court again

in 1996. Once more, a judge ruled in his favor. Agran countersued, but he was barred by the judge in that trial from including any of the details of his campaign experience, described here, and a jury found ruled against him.) In spite of Agran's efforts to draw press attention to his legal woes and their implications for an open political system, neither the prolonged court proceedings nor the dismissals received any significant news coverage.

By some measures at least, Agran's seventeen months of struggling to be heard were filled with many "newsworthy events." Yet the national news media mostly ignored him. A computer search through the Nexis system, for example, reveals that Agran's name did not appear even once in the campaign stories of the major news magazines, *Time*, *Newsweek*, and *U.S. News and World Report*. Between August 1, 1991 and December 7, 1992, Agran was mentioned in 567 stories listed by Nexis (many of these were redundant references in similar stories in different editions of the same newspaper or different versions of the same wire release, or non-campaign stories from the Orange County edition of the *Los Angeles Times*). In contrast, during the same period, the number of citations for some of the other candidates were: 4,527 for Wilder, 7,025 for Kerrey, 7,615 for Harkin, 9,266 for Buchanan, 11,476 for Tsongas, and 14,288 for Brown. The search for Clinton citations was halted at 82,229.

During and after the campaign, I spoke with a number of national journalists at the *Los Angeles Times*, *Washington Post*, the *Boston Globe*, *Time*, *Newsweek*, *U.S. News & World Report*, NBC News, *Nightline*, and other places. They all expressed little surprise over the press treatment that Agran received, and they offered similar explanations for it. Tom Rosenstiel, for example, who at the time wrote on media and politics for the *Los Angeles Times*, suggested that there are several reasons. For one thing, political reporters tend to cover those candidates who their sources, the party professionals, tell them are the "major candidates." Reporters ask them: What are you hearing? Who is lining up endorsements? Who is doing fundraisers for whom? "This year, especially," said Rosenstiel, "the last thing the Democratic leaders want is to have attention paid to someone like Larry Agran, which would reinforce the impression that they are

putting forward a 'field of unknowns.' "

Secondly, said Rosenstiel, it is difficult and expensive and confusing for the media to have to contend with a lot of candidates. "Journalists don't sit around in newsrooms asking 'Whom else should we cover?' The big question is 'Whom can we *stop* covering?" An election, said Rosenstiel, "is not a matter of who is the smartest, the most articulate, or who has the best ideas. . . . What it really comes down to is who can win the most votes." Ultimately, Rosenstiel noted, "if we think someone is not likely to win, then we don't think of them as someone to devote much time to."

Journalists also look to each other to see who is being taken as a "serious" candidate. Bill Wheatley of NBC News, which excluded Agran from its televised debate, told me that press coverage was "certainly one of the factors." He continued: "A number of independent news organizations had made that judgment to exclude Agran. It's not a conspiracy. One needs to pay attention to one's colleagues' decisions." Yet while Wheatley saw press decisions as "independent," he admitted that "journalistic consensus in part reflects consensus of party professionals who have some experience knowing who is electable."

Similarly, Alvin Sanoff, Senior Editor at *U.S. News and World Report*, told me: "Journalists all talk to the same people, the same readers of tea leaves. We have similar kinds of input from similar sources. It takes a leap of faith to say, 'we're missing the story.' . . . We all read and talk to each other. We speak to similar experts and gurus and poll takers. We're influenced by the same influences."

New York Times reporter Betsy Kolbert told me that reporters there felt queasy about what she referred to as "the Agran call," that is, the implicit, collective decision not to cover his campaign. This news judgment, however, had nothing to do with what the reporters thought the *public's* reaction to Agran would be. "The public would have loved him," Kolbert told me, "he was so different." But once Agran was excluded from "the consensus," there was little he could do to register with the national media.

The Origins of National Journalistic Logic

Without national coverage, of course, a presidential campaign is

doomed, regardless of local coverage and local public reaction. I have no space here to analyze all the factors that I believe contributed to the national journalistic consensus to exclude Agran (contrasted with the relatively respectful local press coverage that he received). But I will briefly list ten of them.

1. *Limited resources for gathering news within each organization* (made worse in 1992 by a bad economy) and limited news space/time (made worse during this campaign by the decline in ad revenues) led to a logical attempt to narrow the field of candidates.

2. National journalists' *reliance on "official sources"* for definitions of what and who are "news," for a general "informed perspective," for "objective reporting," and for feedback on their reporting, led the national media to define "major" candidates in relation to what party officials believed – and wanted the press to report – rather than in relation to the potential response to candidates on the part of the public.

3. The significant *influence of centralized news organizations* allowed a relatively small number of decision-makers to shape the general patterns of coverage for over 200 million citizens. Decisions made at the *New York Times* and the *Washington Post* affected the reporting of every other national news organization. Similarly, network TV decisions affected local TV coverage, and the national Associated Press, for example, guided the local AP coverage.

4. National journalists' *herd instincts* ("pack journalism") led journalists to move into even greater synchrony with each other in terms of who was and was not covered, as well as the general style of coverage. Since this synchrony was not the result of an explicit conspiracy, it was viewed as "the one correct way to cover the campaign," as evidenced by the seemingly independent judgment of many different journalists.

5. *Conventional definitions of "objectivity"* restricted coverage to the "major" candidates. Since authoritative sources (and other news media) were not identifying Agran as a "major" candidate, for

example, journalists perceived the idea of giving his campaign significant coverage as a form of non-objective *promotion* of his candidacy.

6. Journalists' *desire to hide the arbitrariness of news judgments* and the potential impact of such judgments on the outcome of campaigns ("We don't make the news, we just report it") led them to stick with their initial decisions not to give much coverage to Agran — regardless of what happened later. (To my mind, this also explains why journalists felt they had to cover no-party candidate Ross Perot as soon as he hinted that he might enter the race. Since billionaire Perot had the money to buy direct access to the public through the media, *not* covering him would make the public aware of the media as "censors." In contrast, true third-party candidates, such as Lenora Fulani of the New Alliance Party and Libertarian Andre Marrou, were virtually ignored by the news media and were excluded from the nationally-televised debates.) The journalists I interviewed were very hesitant to share with the public the reasoning they used in deciding how to cover candidates as well as which candidates *not* to cover.

7. Journalists' *desire for "prestige assignments"* led them to focus on "the stars." Covering the candidates most likely to reach the highest levels of power lays the groundwork for journalists to have good "access to authoritative sources," a wise career strategy. (From the very beginning, the Clinton campaign was seen as the premiere assignment, which led to both more positive and more negative coverage of Clinton as the campaign proceeded.)

8. The *primacy of television in the campaign* lent weight to criteria that made sense to commercial TV network executives, such as keeping the debates short (so as not to lose too much commercial time), and limiting the debates to celebrity candidates being interviewed by celebrity journalists (in order to enhance network prestige and maximize ratings and viewer flow-through to subsequent commercial programs).

9. Journalists' *patronizing attitudes about the public's intelligence and attention span* made them concerned about keeping the

``campaign story" and possible outcomes as simple as possible.

10. *Non-campaign season news conventions* limit the range of voices that are viewed as legitimate during campaigns. (The highly selective range of typical news narratives fosters the perception that only candidates who discuss domestic and foreign policy within those narrative frames are ``reasonable" and ``serious" and ``moderate" enough to be elected. One typical narrative within the U.S. press with regard to foreign aid, for example, involves the debate over ``how much the U.S. should spend to promote democracy in other countries." There is little questioning of whether that is indeed what the money is intended to do. Thus, Agran's plan to end all foreign *military* aid because it has typically gone to support dictators, and his suggestion to offer foreign ``*people* aid" instead, did not fit easily into a familiar mainstream press narrative and made him seem radical, non-serious, and fringy.)

All these factors conspired to keep Agran in the shadows of national coverage. (Most of these factors are linked to issues of power in Washington and New York, and they therefore had less influence on the reporting of the local press. So while we often think of the local press as inferior to the national media, one could make the opposite case according to these criteria.)

In short, these influences and others shape a national journalistic logic that fosters a relatively closed frame for campaign reporting that is only slightly sensitive to high degrees of public dissatisfaction with the ``system" and with ``major" candidates.

Conclusion

Television exposure certainly demystifies those politicians we see frequently. But the sense that we see so much — even too much — is deceptive. The exposure of visible politicians distracts us from realizing how little we really know about crucial social issues and other potential leaders.

The 1992 U.S. presidential election stood out for the unprecedented level of voter dissatisfaction with politics as usual. Polls showed disenchantment with both parties and with all the so-called

``major" candidates. Voters expressed the wish that other candidates had entered the race. The press dutifully reported on these polls (and on some of the lies and the shortcomings of each of the major candidates.) But a truly responsive democratic press would go further. It would widen the spotlight beyond the centerstage that is the subject of public discontent. The 1992 election was also the first to follow the revolutions in Eastern Europe that swept traditional leadership aside and brought to power those who had once inhabited the political margins, even jail cells. The U.S. press generally applauded these changes and saw them as movements toward ``our way of life." Yet there is little indication that the U.S. press is willing to expand U.S. democracy by widening its coverage.

My approach here is distinct from that of James Fallows, who has argued that a cynical press is ruining public discourse. Although I think Fallows' bold and important work is correct in describing how the press typically reports on campaigns, I think he is off the mark on two issues. First, I see the press behavior as a *reaction* to the intimate, demystifying setting of TV, not creating this demystification. (Large segments of the public were disgusted with LBJ and Nixon, while the press was still very respectful to them.) Second, as the Agran case study suggests, the press, with all its *surface* cynicism, still remains too much in awe of the powerful to expand the spotlight of media politics to include a broader range of ideas and candidates. Even as the press is currently condemning politicians for engaging in questionable campaign fundraising practices, the press is failing to examine its own practice of largely ignoring candidates who do not have large campaign ``war chests." Candidates who are not backed by the wealthy and the powerful are rarely evaluated by the major media on the basis of their stands on the issues. Instead they are viewed as ``spoilers" of the aspirations of the so-called ``major" candidates.

NBC's Bill Wheatley is partly right. There is no conspiracy. No conspiracy is necessary to reach general consistency of thought and action if journalists come to the situation with similar training, follow similar routines, interact with the same sources and with each other, and monitor each other's judgments. Through typical national press routines, incestuous and intersubjective judgments among a cluster of elite decision-makers (party officials, news executives, and debate organizers) take on the aura of objective reality.

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Press judgments are based on an internal logic that makes journalistic practices seem reasonable and safe for democracy. Yet this case study suggests that current national journalistic practice serves as a form of political censorship that may not be in the public interest. A presidential candidate who was shot or tortured by another country's secret police, would become a cause célèbre. But Agran and other candidates, though physically unharmed, have been much more effectively silenced. They have been dubbed "not newsworthy." And each decision not to cover them is used as another justification to push them further into the dark hole of non-news. There they and their plans for the country join many other throwaway citizens and many other throwaway ideas.