

Can the White House Control the News

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Now that one of every four Americans gets the news online, a communications authority wonders if the White House is still able to control the news.

"The transformation of media has not only undermined the imperial institutions of the mainstream media; it has undermined the imperial Presidency," writes Ken Auletta, a media authority, in the January 25th The New Yorker.

Auletta reminds that six years ago there was no Facebook, no Twitter, no You-Tube and that many regional newspapers and TV stations were "highly profitable."

Today, he writes, Politico.com Web site has 79 editorial employees to satisfy the news hunger of its 3-million unique monthly visitors and Mike Allen, the online paper's chief White House correspondent "has become one of Washington's most influential journalists."

Auletta quotes Anita Dunn, Obama's former chief communications officer, as saying, "The ability for online to drive stories into the mainstream media is significant." Once a story gains traction, Dunn says, the Administration must respond quickly or "rumors become facts."

Obama has 69 press aides to respond to media questions, increasingly from cable news which is growing in influence. Auletta cites a Pew poll last July that found 40 percent of Americans get their national and international news from cable. He writes with the collapse of mass audiences for broadcast television "networks like Fox News and MSNBC have sought niche markets, in the process shedding all but the pretense of impartiality."

Cable "news" is giving political partisans what they want to hear. For each Democrat who watches Fox News, there are 18 Republicans; for every Republican who watches MSNBC, there are six Democrats.

"Fox News is thriving," Auletta reports. "Glenn Becks year-old show draws 2.3 million daily viewers, twice its predecessor's audience." Fox's broadcasts attract more nightly viewers than CNN, MSNBC, and CNBC combined, The New Yorker says.

Auletta tells of how the White House unsuccessfully tried diplomacy to soften Fox's harsh coverage of the Obama presidency. By last September, though, "The White House had given up on changing Fox" and Obama's aides began attacking it.

Apart from Fox, Auletta reports that no president in modern times has received anything comparable to the adulatory news coverage that characterized Obama's campaign and early months in office. Time magazine, he says, put Obama on its cover six times in the

space of eleven months, in part because “the Obama campaign handled the press adroitly.” And a Center for Media and Public Affairs report found that in Obama’s first 50 days in office he got more than three times the network news coverage of his predecessor.

Auletta makes the point that the emergence of new media is forcing a continuous news cycle, as Internet stories by the volume of their pick-up, push their way into the mass media. Reporters complain they hardly have breathing space to reflect on the meaning of a story but must react swiftly even to just get the headlines to their viewers and readers. “We’re all wire-service reporters now,” Chuck Todd of NBC is quoted as saying.

Todd does anywhere from eight to 16 standup interviews daily for NBC and MSNBC on a patch of White House grass, including feeds to “Today” on NBC and “Morning Joe” on MSNBC. And by nightfall, Todd may have written as many as ten tweets or Facebook postings and five blog entries. With all this sort of deadline busywork, reporters complain they don’t have a minute to do research, call experts, and to put breaking news into context.

While Auletta’s article, “Non-Stop News” concerns itself with new challenges facing the press and the presidency that are driven by new technology, it does not touch on the lack of coverage of critical issues such as the spreading wars of the Middle East. Nor was that the intent of the article. Yet that is the real media crisis today. Thus, Obama’s photogenic daughters are the subjects of saturation media coverage but the smoldering ruins of bombed-out buildings in Afghanistan and Pakistan are not. This lack challenges Auletta’s comment that the transformation of media “has undermined the imperial Presidency.” It has done no such thing.

If an imperial Presidency is defined as one in which an autocratic president can pretty much do as he pleases waging wars around the world, all that a more intensive media environment does is to provide him with heightened supporting coverage. Fox News may attack Obama for his management style but it does not dispute his basic imperialist direction, which is a continuation of the Bush-Cheney wars of aggression. Media dissent these days flickers only on the Internet. Thus the White House succeeds in controlling the news—especially as it derives so much help from the mainstream media.

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