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Is There a Difference Between Tina Fey and Katie Couric? Policing the Boundaries Between News and Entertainment

> The range of fiction extends all the way from complete hallucinations to the scientist's perfectly self-conscious use of a schematic model, or his decision that for his particular problem accuracy beyond a certain number of decimal places is not important. A work of fiction may have almost any degree of Fidelity, and so long as the degree of Fidelity can be taken into account, fiction is not misleading. In fact, human culture is very largely the selection, the rearrangement, the tracing of patterns upon, and the stylizing of, what William James called "the random irradiations and re-settlements of our ideas." The alternative to the use of fictions is direct exposure to the ebb and flow of sensation. That is not a real alternative . . .
>
> – Walter Lippmann, *Public Opinion*, 1922

> A federal judge yesterday sharply questioned an assertion by the Obama administration that former Vice President Richard B. Cheney's statements to a special prosecutor about the Valerie Plame case must be kept secret, partly so they do not become fodder for Cheney's political enemies or late-night commentary on "The Daily Show."
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> – R. Jeffrey Smith, *Washington Post*, June 19, 2009

The Strange Media Odyssey of Sarah Palin

On August 29, 2008, Republican presidential candidate John McCain announced that the little-known, first-term governor of Alaska, Sarah Palin, would be his running mate. The photogenic, former beauty queen's acceptance speech at the convention, her formal introduction to the nation, drew 37.2 million television viewers, only around 1 million less than for the acceptance speeches by Barack Obama and John McCain and

far more than any other speech at either convention (Hechtkopf 2008). Given the degree to which Palin's selection was a surprise and her lack of a record in national politics, there was great uncertainty in the media over how to tell her story. Initially, the media narrative followed along the lines suggested by decades of political communication research. Following their profession's definition of nonpartisanship and balance, journalists relied on "reliable sources" – primarily spokespersons for both parties – to define the range of opinions about Palin.

At first, this meant a generally positive treatment of the Republican vice presidential nominee. Although the narrative of Palin's rise to national prominence was cast in gendered terms, it tended to work to her advantage (in contrast with the more negative impact of gendered frames on the candidacy of Hillary Clinton). One study of the first two weeks of press coverage of the nominee found that "[she was] viewed through gendered lenses, but in ways that actually benefit[ed] her – toughness, good looks, mother[hood]" (Harp, Loke, and Bachmann 2009, 9). This generally positive coverage resulted not from any measured judgment or independent investigation by journalists, but rather from their strategy of simply reporting the two sides of the story, defined by the political parties. Barack Obama's campaign was initially reluctant to criticize the Alaskan governor, fearing it would draw attention away from their focus on McCain, create sympathy for the political newcomer, and lead to accusations of sexism (Lott 2008). Democratic reticence led to Republican advantage in shaping the narrative. Creating a kind of feedback loop, Palin's positive coverage enhanced her poll standings, which has been demonstrated to influence the ways in which journalists write about candidates: popular candidates receive favorable coverage, and those whose poll numbers are low or falling receive more negative coverage, even when it is the same candidate who first benefited from the positive coverage that comes with rising poll numbers (Patterson 1994).

Typical of this early coverage of Palin was Joe Klein's adoring cover story in the September 10, 2008, issue of *Time*:

> [Her] real message is: I'm just like you want to be, a brilliantly spectacular . . . average American. The Palins win elections and snowmobile races in a state that represents the last, lingering hint of that most basic Huckleberry Finn fantasy – lighting out for the territories. She quoted Westbrook Pegler, the F.D.R.-era conservative columnist, in her acceptance speech: "We grow good people in our small towns . . . " And then added, "I grew up with those people. They're the ones who do some of the hardest work in America, who grow our food and run our factories and fight our wars. They love their country in good

times and bad, and they're always proud of America."[1] (http://www.time.com/time/politics/article/0,8599,1840388,00.html)

Klein went on to question whether it would be possible for the Obama campaign to find a similarly populist vision of America with which to challenge the "primal" appeal of Palin. By September 7, when polling revealed Palin with a 58 percent favorability rating, Democratic supporters began to question the Obama campaign for not attacking the political newcomer more forcefully (Madden 2008).

Even if professional journalists completely controlled the agenda, such favorable coverage of Palin would not have continued. Almost certainly, Democrats would have devised more aggressive strategies to attack her, and their attacks would have come to define one of the two sides presented by the press. Reversing the feedback loop between popularity and journalistic coverage, more negative coverage would tend to lower Palin's popularity with the public, thus freeing the press to be more negative. Yet given the sensitivity of journalists to accusations of bias or partisanship in their treatment, there would have been limits to this trend. For example, on September 2, Fox News ran a story arguing that Palin's coverage was already more negative than that of Democratic vice presidential candidate Joe Biden (Lott 2008). Coverage of Palin's first extended interview with a journalist, conducted by ABC's Charlie Gibson, followed the pattern: it was praised by supporters and criticized by opponents, leading to coverage concluding that she had hurdled the, perhaps, low bar: "Despite . . . some . . . hiccups the Alaska governor passed her first major media test in the ABC Charles Gibson interview with a six out of ten" (Spillius 2008). Based on past campaigns and the conventional wisdom of scholars, journalists, and pundits, the overall outcome would have been increasing criticism of Palin, given both her vulnerability and the development of more effective critical strategies, but this would have been balanced by the defense of Republicans and the rules of professional journalism, which demand that journalists present two sides to the story.

As we all know, the coverage of Sarah Palin did not follow the pattern of many past campaigns, and most significant, her story was not defined by professional journalists. Competing with the reports of journalists was the work of a variety of late-night television performers, especially

[1] Klein's article is particularly noteworthy in its casual mention of Palin's using a quote from Westbrook Pegler. In a few weeks, use of such an obscure (dare we say "even learned") quote would have drawn much comment, given the questions that were raised about the governor's reading habits and intellectual curiosity.

Tina Fey, which thoroughly disrupted the emerging journalistic narrative of Sarah Palin. The former *Saturday Night Live* (*SNL*) regular returned to the show on September 13 to lampoon Palin, using an uncanny physical resemblance and spot-on accent to parody Palin's intellectual shortcomings as a candidate for high national office ("I can see Russia from my house"). Ten days later, an extended interview of Palin by *CBS Evening News* anchor Katie Couric aired over two nights. With Tina Fey's satirical performance helping prime audiences (including journalists), the Couric interview was widely viewed as a disaster for the Alaskan. Following the CBS interview, Fey returned to *SNL* and skewered Palin by liberally sprinkling her parody with actual quotes from the Couric and Gibson interviews. The ratings of *SNL* hit levels they had not seen for years as the show became a significant voice in shaping media and public understanding of the 2008 election. Unlike the rules employed by journalists, which limited their ability to independently comment on the governor's obvious lack of experience, preparation, and perhaps intellectual ability and curiosity, satirists like Fey (along with Jon Stewart, Stephen Colbert, and late-night comedians like Jay Leno and David Letterman) faced no such rules. Satirical and comedic portrayals of Palin became a central component of the way journalists themselves portrayed the Alaskan governor, thus freeing them to be more independent and critical in their portrayals of the Republican nominee. It soon became almost impossible to find extended discussions of Palin that did not reference the Tina Fey lampooning. Even Palin herself seemed to recognize the significance of *SNL* and appeared on the show opposite Fey (attracting the show's largest audience – 17 million viewers – in more than fourteen years). Looking back on her campaign in January 2009 (and searching for ways to blame the media for her failures), Palin made no distinction between *SNL* and *CBS Evening News*, accusing both Fey and Couric of taking advantage of her to further their own careers. In July 2009, in the wake of Palin's surprising decision to resign as governor, it was hard to find coverage that did not mention the impact of Tina Fey on Palin's political fortunes. A story in *The New York Times* is typical:

> If one of Ms. Palin's goals was to erase the perception of her as flighty – a perception encouraged by some McCain lieutenants in the rough aftermath of the failed campaign – it certainly could not have been helped to have staged an out-of-the-blue announcement that shocked even her closest aides and whose theatrics probably tempted Tina Fey and the "Saturday Night Live" production crew to abandon their vacations and head to the studio. (Nagourney 2009, A14)

Fey's influence was, of course, only a small example of dramatic changes in the way media now operate in American elections in particular and in American democracy more generally. By the 2008 campaign, it had become commonplace for candidates or potential candidates to make appearances and announcements on *The Daily Show* or *Late Night with David Letterman*. As well, the internet and social networking sites like Facebook and Twitter all became accepted components of the campaign. Hillary Clinton announced her candidacy on her webpage and appeared on both *Saturday Night Live* and *The Daily Show* in the week before the crucial Texas and Ohio primaries. Former U.S. Senator (and television and movie actor) Fred Thompson announced his run for the Republican nomination on *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno* while skipping a Republican candidate debate.[2] John McCain's last-minute cancellation of an appearance on David Letterman's show became a minor controversy, fueled by both journalists and comedians. Earlier, McCain tried to revive his then-flagging campaign for the GOP nomination with multiple appearances on *The Daily Show*, whereas Hillary Clinton used a sketch on *Saturday Night Live*, which poked fun at the press's infatuation with Barak Obama, as evidence for media coverage slanted to her opponent. A wide variety of videos – from "Obama Girl" to cell phone images from the campaign trail and clips of the latest *SNL* sketch or Jon Stewart quip – were viewed by millions of citizens on sites like YouTube and Facebook. On those sites, they might also encounter videos made by other citizens as well as by the campaigns themselves. It also seemed unsurprising that candidates from both parties were being interviewed on YouTube or that unregulated and controversial political advertising appearing on the internet would be routinely covered in the mainstream outlets. Bloggers altered the strategies employed by the two campaigns, as when, wishing to avoid direct attacks on Sarah Palin, the Democratic Party targeted negative messages to sympathetic bloggers, hoping the blogs would be picked up by mainstream journalists (as they often were) and enter public discourse without the direct fingerprints of the Obama campaign.[3]

[2] Thompson's campaign manager explained the choice by saying, "It makes a lot of sense" for Thompson to appear on Leno's show instead of at the GOP debate because the candidate would reach "everyday normal Americans who don't live in the 202 area code."

[3] One blogger, for example, reported, "On Tuesday [September 9, 2008] alone, more than two dozen e-mails about Palin from the [Democratic National Committee] or the Obama campaign landed in my in box, highlighting everything from her habit of taking a per

Changes in the relationship between media and politics are not, of course, limited to elections. Consider Sarah Palin's postelection activities. She regularly uses both her Facebook page (which has more than a million "supporters") and Twitter to opine on the issues of the day. These postings and tweets are then routinely circulated on blogs, cable-news talk shows, and occasionally newspapers and network news shows. She also engaged in a widely covered argument with David Letterman over his jokes about her daughter Bristol, and she battled with Levi Johnson (who fathered an out-of-wedlock child with Bristol and later appeared nude in *Playgirl*) over his involvement with his daughter and Palin's granddaughter.

Following the advice of Newt Gingrich for building a political career (write a book and then land a television show), in 2009, Palin published the best-selling *Going Rogue* and embarked on a heavily publicized book tour. Although there is nothing new about politicians writing books (or having them ghostwritten) and going on book tours, even these older forms of political communication have been transformed. In a perceptive article in the *New Yorker*, Sam Tanenhaus (2009, 84) compares the media environment leading to the circuslike atmosphere around Palin's book tour with that of Colin Powell's more serious-seeming book and tour in 1995:

> In 1995, cable news remained the bland civic pasture of CNN and C-SPAN; Fox News and MSNBC were not founded until the following year. Rush Limbaugh was a bumptious presence – an honorary member of the Republican caucus that he had helped exhort to victory in the 1994 elections. But other noisemakers had yet to catch up. Bill O'Reilly was between jobs, having left the tabloid gossip program "Inside Edition." Lou Dobbs was still a business specialist, and not yet the ringmaster of anti-immigration furor and the "birther" controversy. And no one had ever viewed a YouTube clip.

Taking the rest of Gingrich's advice, it was announced in January 2010 that Palin would join the "noisemakers," becoming a political analyst and occasional host of her own show on Fox News.

The story of Sarah Palin illustrates the central issue we address in this book: the precipitous decline in the power of journalists to control, for better or worse, the media narrative and an increase, again for better or worse, in the importance of other forms of communication, some new and some old, to influence and/or dictate media coverage of politics.

diem for sleeping in her own home to the flood of stories poking holes in her claim she stopped the 'Bridge to Nowhere' in Alaska" (Madden 2008).

There is little disagreement that the media environment has dramatically changed over the past two decades and that these changes have had significant implications for American democracy. Yet the way these changes have been generally understood – by scholars, journalists, political elites, and citizens – has obscured our ability to grasp fully their extraordinary potential for improving and/or degrading the operations of media and politics in the twenty-first century.

Most scholars and journalists, as well as many citizens, view these changes with alarm and emphasize two lines of argument. First, there has been a precipitous decline in the attention paid to traditional and reliable sources of political information, especially to professional journalists. This contributes to an increasingly polarized and coarse public discourse, too often based on little more than rumor and innuendo. Second, and related, is that changes in media have accelerated a blurring of the distinction between news and entertainment, which results in less attention being paid (by both producers and consumers of media) to "serious" coverage of the political world. Although there is something to each of these perspectives, we argue that they provide an exceptionally poor starting point for any full appreciation (or criticism) of the changes currently under way in the media environment.

Changing Sources of Political Information

A major source of anxiety about the changes in the media environment is the public's, especially young people's, turning away from traditional sources of political information. By the 2004 elections, the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press reported that 21 percent of eighteen- to twenty-nine-year-olds named *The Daily Show* and *Saturday Night Live* as their regular source of campaign news (up from 9 percent in 2000). Twenty-three percent in this group named one of the three nightly network news broadcasts as their source of campaign news (down from 39 percent in 2000) (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, 2004a). In the year between March 2007 and March 2008, the three network news broadcasts lost 21 percent (CBS), 13.5 percent (ABC), and 10.1 percent (NBC) of their eighteen- to thirty-four-year-old audience (Fitzgerald 2008). The figures for those who regularly seek out political information on the internet are similarly skewed by generation. So, for instance, in 2007, 26 percent of those between thirty and forty-nine years of age and 15 percent of those older than fifty years of age said that the internet is their main source of campaign news (Pew Research Center for

TABLE 1.1. *Internet's Broader Role in Campaign 2008*

Among the Young, TV Losing Ground to the Internet			
Get most election news from . . .*	**2004 %**	**2007 %**	**Change**
Television	75	60	−15
Newspapers	30	24	−6
Internet	21	46	25
Radio	10	10	0
Magazines	1	4	3
Other	4	6	2

Based on 18–29 year-olds.
*First or second mentions.
Source: "Social Networking and Online Videos Take Off, January 18, 2008 Pew Research Center for the People and the Press http://people-press.org/reports/display.php3?ReportID=384.

the People and the Press 2008a). In contrast, Table 1.1 lists the main sources for those between the ages of eighteen and twenty-nine in 2004 and 2007.

Such results are usually viewed as evidence that the lines between "news" and "entertainment" are blurring. Typically, this blurring is viewed with alarm, seen as a sometimes economic and sometimes cultural challenge to journalism's preeminent status as the nation's gatekeeper of the public interest. According to this view, news professionals are the appropriate determiners of what is politically relevant for citizens to know. Thus, survey evidence that one-third of Americans younger than thirty years old say they get their news primarily from late-night comedians such as David Letterman, or that 79 percent of this age group (and half of the adult population more generally) say that they sometimes or regularly get political information from comedy programs such as *The Daily Show* or nontraditional outlets such as MTV is cause for alarm (Tucher 1997). It is a further cause for alarm, from this perspective, that in 2009, Jon Stewart was named in an online poll conducted by *Time* as "the most trusted newscaster" in America, swamping the anchors of the three nightly network news broadcasts (*Time* 2009).

Yet it is far from clear that any lack of knowledge by young people can be blamed on their use of nontraditional sources of political information. Privileging professional journalism is further undermined by surveys finding that those who say that they rely primarily on nontraditional sources of political information (e.g., *The Daily Show*, Fox's *The O'Reilly Factor*) may be better informed than those who rely primarily on

traditional sources (e.g., newspapers or the nightly network news broadcasts). Consider the results of a 2004 Pew Research Center survey that asked four knowledge questions about current affairs (Pew Research Center for the People and the Press 2004b).[4] The survey then calculated the percentage of respondents who got all four questions correct according to their self-reported primary source of news and found the following ranking: *Daily Show*, 47 percent; *O'Reilly Factor*, 47 percent; talk radio, 45 percent; PBS's *NewsHour*, 46 percent; Sunday political talk shows, 44 percent; National Public Radio, 36 percent; daily newspaper, 34 percent; nightly network news, 33 percent.

If both journalists and late-night comedians are useful sources of political information, then why should we care whether comedians interject themselves into the political process or if people get their political news from late-night comedians rather than the evening news or the daily newspaper? We believe that we should care where and how citizens acquire political knowledge and that this is an important question with far-reaching implications for political communication. An adequate answer, however, is far from simple and must address explicitly the changing contours of the media environment rather than relying on unexamined, a priori distinctions between sources of political information. Too often, concerns over the changing sources of political information assume a clear distinction between news and entertainment, the former being the appropriate place for citizens to seek out factual political information. Moreover, this distinction also assumes that the news does a better job at informing citizens than entertainment outlets. Yet as we saw with the Sarah Palin story, professional journalists, because of the ways they approached their goal of being "fair and balanced," were much slower than (and in many ways dependent on) entertainment media (especially *SNL*, but also *The Daily Show* and *The Colbert Report*) to critically investigate the limitations of the Alaskan governor.

Certainly most journalists assume that the distinction between news and entertainment is clear and reasonable. Alex Jones (2009), a former journalist now at the Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at Harvard University, assumes this distinction when he

[4] The questions and the percentage of respondents answering correctly were as follows: 79 percent were able to recall that Martha Stewart had been found guilty in her recent trial; in an open-ended question, 71 percent volunteered that al-Qaeda and/or Osama bin Laden were behind the 9/11 attacks; 56 percent knew that the Republicans then maintained a majority in the House of Representatives; and 55 percent were able to correctly estimate the current number of U.S. military deaths in Iraq.

discusses the implications of the declining role of journalism in *Losing the News*. All newspapers, because they are the outlet for professional journalism, are considered desirable and worth saving, so he makes few distinctions between *USA Today* and the *New York Times* as useful sources of political information. Conversely, he considers all entertainment outlets as equally unsatisfactory, lumping together *The Daily Show*, *The O'Reilly Factor*, *The Tonight Show with Jay Leno*, and *Late Show with David Letterman*.

Political communications scholars have produced a large literature that either implicitly or explicitly assumes the validity of this information hierarchy, documenting the impact of the news and other clearly labeled political media (e.g., campaign advertising, political talk shows) on the political knowledge, beliefs, and behaviors of citizens. Much less systematic attention has been paid, however, to the political impact of other forms of media, a clear indication that these genres are not thought of as likely or appropriate carriers of politically relevant information. But what is the difference between news and entertainment, between Tina Fey on *Saturday Night Live* and Katie Couric on *CBS Evening News*?

The Inherent Arbitrariness of the News-versus-Entertainment Distinction

Despite the seeming naturalness of the distinction between news and entertainment media, it is remarkably difficult to identify the characteristics on which this distinction is based. In fact, it is difficult – we would argue impossible – to articulate a theoretically useful definition of this distinction. The opposite of "news" is not "entertainment," as the news is often diversionary or amusing (the definition of entertainment) and what is called "entertainment" is often neither of these things. One might instead use the terms *public affairs media* and *popular culture*, but these distinctions also collapse under the slightest scrutiny. Does the definition of public affairs media require that it be unpopular? Does the broadcasting of a presidential address shift from public affairs to popular culture because it is watched by too many people? And how does one classify the many magazine stories, novels, movies, websites, and television shows (in all their rapidly changing formats such as melodramas, docudramas, docusoaps, blogs, reality programs, and talk shows) that address issues of public concern? Clearly, the concept of popular culture does not provide a counterpoint to public affairs. To the contrary, the *public* in public affairs is meant to signal that the issues discussed are of importance to a