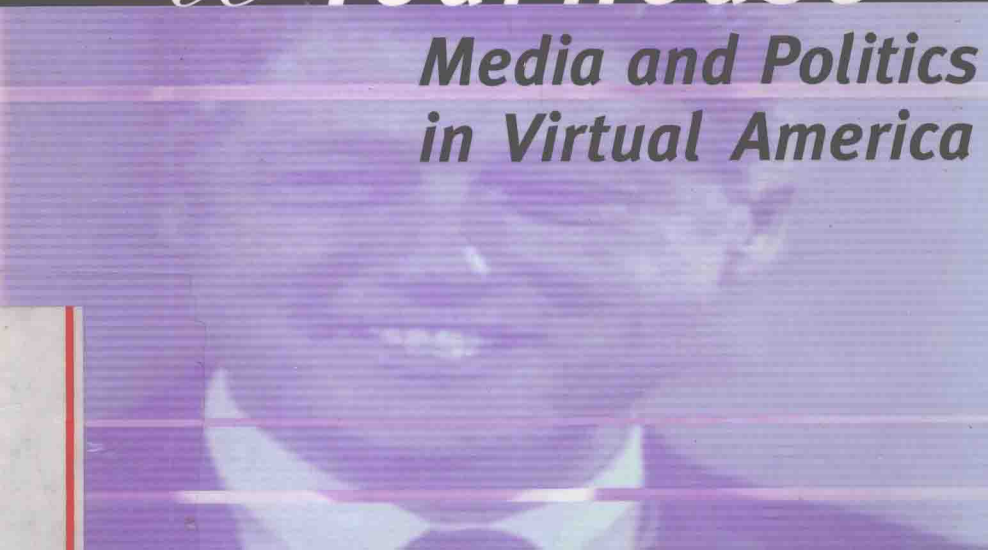


Edwin Diamond and Robert A. Silverman



White House
to Your House

Media and Politics
in Virtual America



e House to Your House:
ia and Politics in Virtual
America

Edwin Diamond and Robert A. Silverman

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To Adelina —E.D.

To Kara, my parents, and Joelle —R.S.

Preface

At one daft point in the mid-1990s, the authors of the number-one and number-two best-selling books in America were talk-show divas Rush Limbaugh and Howard Stern. The president of the United States marked an anniversary of his time in office by taking calls from listeners on CNN's *Larry King Live*, the same show on which H. Ross Perot announced his candidacy for president in 1992. And, in a climax of sorts, Newt Gingrich, the congressman from Cobb County, Georgia, as well as the didactic host of a satellite-TV college course, became the new Speaker of the House of Representatives, and through his use of photo opportunities, arguably the most powerful politician in America. Some call this democracy, the triumph of "plain-talking"—in Stern's case, dirty-talking—populism. Conservative comic, genital humorist, campaigner president, billionaire salesman, suburban Savonarola: these five men could not be more different. Yet they share a common ability to use the new-media formats that have become the electronic hearth around which millions of Americans now gather. Our political leaders have learned how to entertain (some of) us, and our entertainers know how to politicize (some others of) us.

In the 1996 Clinton-Dole campaign, there was a new gathering place: the linked computers of the Internet and the commercial online services, home to an estimated 20 million users (more as

new Web sites and access networks attract fresh converts). The initiated can log onto the NewtWatch site on the World Wide Web and read details of every aspect of the public life of Newt Gingrich: how much he earns, the full text of the three complaints filed against him in the spring of 1995 by the House Ethics Committee. More neutral data, including voting records going back to 1981, also are available at the site, which can be reached by navigating to <http://www.cais.com/newtwatch>. A Democratic Party loyalist sponsors the Newt site, but the online world also has empowered ordinary citizens. A year before the 1996 New Hampshire primary, a citizen activist posted a note to the Eastern section of the CompuServe Information Service Republican Forum, asking users to advise her on a guest list for a proposed Tupperware-style party at her home for Lamar Alexander, one of the early announced candidates. At Delphi's PolitiNet, in that same pre-primary period, a user from California posted a message warning New Hampshire voters about his state's governor, Pete Wilson. In 1992, C-SPAN turned its cameras on New Hampshire town meetings, bringing local-citizen voices to a national audience; in 1996, online media will bring national-citizen voices to local races. The hypermedia of chat rooms and bulletin boards is taking its place alongside the traditional media; Dan Rather and Tom Brokaw now vie with every online Tom and Dan for attention.

The shift from the old one-to-many communications model stirs talk of a brave new world of many-to-many communications. Politics, the enthusiasts say, can be made democratic, participatory, open, exuberant—in a word, enjoyable.

The triumph of politics-as-entertainment and entertainment-as-politics speeds the transformation of the national landscape. In the pages that follow we trace the emergence of a place that looks like a real democracy, and a real country, but is in fact a construct, like reality but not real. It is Virtual America.

Introduction: Pop Goes Politics

The president can “get isolated behind the walls of the White House,” Bill Clinton was explaining. “We’ve got to find a way to cut through the isolation.” Ted Koppel nodded. The ABC newsman understood. Indeed, Koppel and his *Nightline* staff were prepared to help the president connect with the citizenry—if he did so on ABC. Clinton had allowed Koppel and his camera crew to travel alongside the candidate during the last three days of the 1992 presidential campaign. The result, a stunning bit of cinema verité called “72 Hours to Victory: Behind the Scenes with Bill Clinton,” was broadcast on ABC in prime time on the first Thursday after the Tuesday election. Koppel and his producers were so pleased with their television coup that they began thinking of sequels to propose to the new president—“A Day in the Life of the Clinton Transition” . . . “A Day in the Life of Bill and Hillary in the White House” . . . “They’ll do what they think will help them,” Koppel, the realist, told us. “Remember, almost 60 percent of the electorate voted against him.”

All media transactions involve some sort of trade-off between newsmaker and news reporter. Clinton invited ABC News aboard his campaign plane in order to get a specific message across; in the case of “72 Hours to Victory,” the image sought was that of the indefatigable but serene campaigner, recorded with an eye on

posterity (and the six out of ten doubters). ABC went along for the ride to get one hour of compelling product, a competitive edge unavailable on any other channel. Each side, White House and press corps, uses, or tries to use, the other side. So what else is new? In the 1990s, however, the access adagio came with some fresh steps. The Clinton campaign was imaginatively choreographed, a performance suited to the stage of contemporary media; the White House years were less sure-footed. Most important of all, however, the stage itself changed, stirring fears as old as the Republic and as current as A.M. talk radio.

Our overall purpose is to analyze the performers and their stage in national campaigns as well as in the period between presidential elections, formally known as governance, but now also recognized as the permanent campaign. Accounts of the 1992 presidential election described it in generational, ideological, and economic terms: for example, the displacement of the World War II generation (Ronald Reagan, George Bush, James Baker) by a younger breed of leaders, or the triumph of activist politics over laissez-faire market forces. These factors obviously played a part in the campaign. Less clear, however, is the role of media and communications and the ways that the technologies of the wired nation were reshaping American public life.

In the 1990s, public officials and citizens, leaders and led, hosts and listeners, were instantly in touch with each other. The world was opening up on people's desktops, as home computers, television sets, and telephones rapidly converged into a single powerful multimedia tool. The audience no longer was passive; it began to interact, shaping the entertainment, educational, informational, and political materials that in the past flowed exclusively from producer to consumer. Talk radio, twenty-four-hour television, tabloid news, 1-800 numbers, and online computer services kept us all connected, as the AT & T advertisement reminded viewers. Sometimes that connection was exhilarating: a revealing moment in one of the candidates' televised debates, a memorable phrase at a town

meeting. Too often, though, the connections turned ugly, polarized, bitter. Character assassination became routine on talk shows; hate messages were posted on computer bulletin boards, electronic rumormongering bounced through the ether, from office fax to drive-time radio to the late-night news wrap-up; flat-out lies were delivered casually between commercial breaks. Modern technology has resuscitated a kind of Know-Nothing populism, shooting a jolt of electricity through the corpse. The creature now walks, and talks endlessly.¹

Worse, it sometimes dons the camouflage uniform of far-right private militias, who echo the riffs of the talk culture. Inevitably, the superheated rhetoric led to chillingly maniacal deeds. When a bomb explosion devastated a federal office building in Oklahoma City in the spring of 1995, killing 168 people, the president of the United States speculated that the constant yammer of the talk-show culture itself may have contributed to the paranoid fantasies of the perpetrators.

In memory, the 1992 presidential race has a kind of antique charm: the first talk-show campaign. As Clinton hinted to Koppel, the new administration planned on using the same technologies to reach out from his bully pulpit—selectively, of course, the way *Nightline* was tapped—and produce a talk-show government. The performance began, and the White House walls tumbled, but not in the way the president and his staff had envisioned.

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“Larry King Liberated Me”

1

Presidential campaigns have been moving indoors from stump speeches and ballpark rallies to living room TV sets during the past fifty years. In 1992, the primaries and general election took place mainly on soft-media formats, such as the call-in shows, the morning interview programs, and the candidates' joint prime-time appearances. The latter were more like the *Donahue* show than Oxford Rules debates. They were performances, and therein lay much of their popular appeal.

The hard-news TV shows, the prestige newspapers, and the news weeklies—the mainstream press made up of ABC, NBC, CBS, the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the *Los Angeles Times*, *Time*, *Newsweek* et al.—became consumers of the “products” created by the soft shows, along with the rest of us. When Ross Perot went on the new-media *Larry King Live* show to announce that he would become a candidate for president of the United States if “the people” wanted him, the old-line network news shows picked up and amplified the video materials from King's easy-listening format. In the candidates' second televised debate in Richmond, Virginia, on the evening of October 15, 1992, Clinton appeared to handle a question from a young woman in the auditorium better than Bush; that is, when Clinton projected a telegenic empathy and a mastery of video skills, the home audi-

ence responded favorably. Clinton's ratings shot up in the moments following the debate (according to the telephone polls conducted on behalf of news organizations). The next morning and over the next several days, the major newspapers and commentators awarded victory in the debate to Clinton. The news mainstream followed, where once it had led. In each case, the citizens who gave a "mandate" to Perot or declared Clinton's "victory" were the viewers gathered in front of their television sets.

The Perot candidacy, in fact, existed mainly on soft-format television; he did little traditional campaigning, keeping news conferences and stump speeches to an absolute minimum. But then Clinton also used soft formats, for example, appearing on a ninety-minute talk show with young voters on MTV, the music video channel. Viewers saw Clinton respond to questions put by hostess-anchor Tabitha Soren, twenty-four, and other twentysomethings in a studio audience assembled in Los Angeles. Soren's queries and those of the audience were thoughtful and well phrased. She *sounded* like a network newswoman, further blurring distinctions between hard news and entertainment formats and between citizen questioners and the journalist "professionals." This was just the beginning of the user-friendly revolution. Clinton, Perot, and, belatedly, George Bush, and their running mates, made thirty-nine separate appearances on *Larry King Live*, *CBS This Morning*, *Good Morning America*, *Today*, and the syndicated talk shows from September 1 to October 19. In 1984, and again in 1988, Phil Donahue tried to persuade various presidential candidates to appear on his program; they turned him down—it was not dignified enough. In the spring of 1992, by contrast, both Clinton and Jerry Brown, the former governor of California, sought out Donahue; he ended up inviting them to appear together on his show.

By the fall, even the traditionalist Bush had changed strategy, making a surprise appearance on NBC's *Today* show, when anchor Katie Couric was at the White House interviewing Mrs. Bush. Before that walk-on, Bush had expressed distaste at the idea of the

president of the United States appearing on “some weird talk show.” In the last week of the race, the increasingly desperate Bush finally granted MTV reporter Soren an interview; he looked about as comfortable with Soren as a father talking to his teenage daughter about safe sex. But perhaps the most startling iconography of the soft revolution was created when Clinton, wearing shades and carrying a saxophone, appeared on the late-night entertainment show featuring the African-American host, Arsenio Hall. While the appearance seemed like one more staged photo-op, it was actually information rich, making generational and racial points simultaneously. It also showed Clinton’s clever reading of the subtexts of late-night television: his campaign was demographically sophisticated enough to realize that, for the purposes of its candidate, the middle-brow Jay Leno program would be too square and the ironist David Letterman’s program too hip.

The 1992 campaign did not just go populist in its search for the audience-voter; it also consciously sought out interactive formats. The voters’ participation, as well as their dollars, were actively solicited. Jerry Brown worked the soft media while plugging his 1-800 fundraising number at every opportunity; for those who missed his TV appearances, there were the Brown bumper stickers—“Dare to Care: Brown 1-800-426-1112.” Brown folded his show, but not before some 280,000 callers had pledged \$6.5 million to his campaign. The call-in and pledge scheme had been lifted from the script of televangelists like the Reverend Jerry Falwell, who used the television pulpit to gather the faithful in the 1970s and 1980s. As if to affirm that Gutenberg still lived in the age of Larry King, Paul Tsongas passed out more than 140,000 copies of his eighty-five-page book, *A Call to Economic Arms*. Improbably, the underfinanced Tsongas managed to stay afloat—until the Clinton campaign appropriated both Brown’s 1-800-number idea and Tsongas’s offer of literature.

The Clinton people set up their toll-free number to do more than simply extend an electronic collection plate; it was also de-

signed to assuage callers' doubts about the "character issue." Neatly combining soft formats and interactive politics, Clinton used a sixty-second TV spot to advertise his fifteen-page "Clinton Plan." In addition, the Clinton staff mailed the booklet to every registered voter in New Hampshire. With their candidate's likely voter percentage stuck in the low thirties, the Bush campaign belatedly and tentatively made some interactive efforts; the Republican reelection committee, for example, began using a teleconferencing program to link party officials and workers.

The answer to how effective these techniques were depends on who is asked. The Clinton campaign credited the candidate's interactive television appearances with stopping his plunge in the New Hampshire polls in the days after Gennifer Flowers materialized with her tapes and lurid stories of a long-running affair with then-Governor Clinton. Candidate Clinton was on television five nights in a row in New Hampshire the week before the Tuesday primary. On Thursday, for example, the Clinton campaign bought thirty minutes of time on New Hampshire's biggest commercial station so its candidate could hold a "town-hall meeting" with undecided voters. The next night, Clinton took unscreened telephone calls for thirty minutes, also on commercial television. Throughout the campaign year, too, Clinton and Perot consistently tried to go "over the heads of the professionals"—the journalists from the mainstream media—to reach "the real people," as the formulaic patter put it.

In past years, the rhetorical modes of presidential campaigning had been defined by the candidates' thirty-second spots, by the point-counterpoint structure of formal news conferences, as well as by the framing techniques of newspaper news stories and the old-line networks' nightly television broadcasts. Control of the message was not strictly in the hands of the candidates: they had to share power with professional journalists. In 1992, the press-candidate balance shifted favorably, from the candidates' point of view. The new pop-media forms and the interactive techniques were

intended to allow the politicians' *unfiltered* messages to enter the hearts and minds of the American voters. "You know why I can stiff you on the press conferences?" Bill Clinton half-joked in remarks at the Radio and Television Correspondents Association dinner in March 1993, at the beginning of his second year in the White House. "Because Larry King has liberated me from you by giving me to the American people directly."

Partisans of this "liberation" pictured the public as an active participant in the electoral process. Not only was the audience/citizen receiving information, but individuals were able to respond (in some cases, immediately), contributing their own concerns to the electronic dialogue and bringing politics back to the people. Or so went the optimists' spin on the new media environment.

Political participation *was* up somewhat in 1992; more people voted as a percentage of those registered than in any presidential election since 1960. For one, an aging population meant that proportionately more Americans were eligible to vote. For another, economic concerns—worries about jobs, the federal deficit, America's perceived declining role, etc.—brought more voters to the polls. The pop campaign, with its interactive attractions, probably contributed to the higher turnout as well; by some estimates the new formats may have attracted as many as 1 million voters¹ Pop and interactive formats appear to represent the next development in politics, and in the audience's tastes. If they are the wave of the future, however, not everyone looks forward to being carried away.

Once upon a time long ago, before television, the leaders of the two political parties met in private and decided whom to put on the ticket; they ran the campaigns and made sure the faithful marched to the polls on election day. Then came television, and by the beginning in the 1960s, a new kind of politics. The power to tap this man as front-runner or that man as presidential timber deserving of the viewers' attention passed from the parties to Walter Cronkite and his counterparts at the other two major networks, to

the columnists and commentators of the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, the weekly magazines, and a few other representatives of Big Print. “The screening committee,” David Broder, the *Washington Post* columnist, once called these new power brokers (Broder himself holds a lifetime chair on the committee).

In 1992, while nobody but the audience was paying attention, the center of political power shifted again. When Bill Clinton and Jerry Brown faced each other head to head on *Donahue* after the briefest of introductions by the host, viewers watched one hour of pure talking heads. The Clinton-Brown dialogue ended, practically speaking, with both men having almost nothing left to say; they had covered “the issues” in a way that candidates are always urged to do. The *New York Times*, no fan of Donahue or the rest of the pop-media culture, was nearly speechless, too, arguing that voters got a truer picture of Clinton and Brown from Donahue than “from all the rest of television coverage combined.” Similarly, Jerry Brown’s repeated incantations of his 1-800 mantra produced snickers among the professionals; nevertheless, he demonstrated that a candidate could raise campaign money, create news, and achieve brand-name recognition without the traditional techniques of television advertising or much press coverage.

The media formats that shaped presidential races over the past thirty years have not exactly disappeared. The smart politician still wants exposure on CBS and in newspapers and magazines. But alongside the now-traditional structure, a new somewhat crazy house of mirrors has developed—the pop/interactive media. To his credit, President Clinton has been pragmatic about using the new structures to build support in his first three years in the White House. Over the past two decades, the number of people telling the public opinion pollsters that they are angry and alienated has steadily increased. From the Vietnam tragedy through the Watergate follies to the savings and loan bailout, Americans have been given good reason to hate the political culture. Clinton would have been foolish not to use as many means as possible to reach turned-