New Media, Progressive Media?

One of the key narratives of late twentieth-century political history is the rise of the Right. That story often begins with Barry Goldwater's defeat in the presidential election in 1964 and the mobilization that it spawned; moves on to Richard Nixon and Ronald Reagan's ascendancy to the presidency; and then tacks to Newt Gingrich's reign as speaker of the house, when the Republican Party captured majorities in both houses of Congress for the first time since 1946. But on a parallel narrative track runs another story not of party leaders and electoral politics but of activists, intellectuals, policy analysts, and media, one that homes in on the creation of new conservative think tanks (like the Heritage Foundation) in the 1970s; the reinvigoration of dormant ones (like the U.S. Chamber of Commerce); and the creation of new media and new media personalities, from the new radio talk show hosts, like Rush Limbaugh, who would blaze the trail, to the ultimate creation of the Fox News Network to serve as the media arm of the movement and the Republican Party itself.

Even as late as the presidential campaign of 2004, Democrats were lamenting the dominance of right-wing, Republican, or conservative voices on the airwaves (just as Republicans have complained since the 1960s about liberal dominance), and fretting about their failure to counter the institutional strength of the Right. The game of emulation was afoot. The Center for American Progress (CAP) was established specifically to serve as a counterpart to the Heritage Foundation, the American

Constitution Society was formed as an answer to the Federalist Society, Air America sought to balance out the radio airwaves, and so on.

The net effect of this liberal countermobilization is unclear. Air America has now come and gone, though Progressive-identified hosts still capture solid ratings in some radio markets, and Rachel Maddow has gone on to host an hour-long nightly news, opinion, and analysis program on MSNBC. CAP has furnished staff for the Obama administration just as the Heritage Foundation and the Cato Institute have for Republican administrations since the Reagan era, albeit in much smaller numbers. And, of late, the Web, for both the Left and Right, enters into this arena with news tools for communication, fundraising, mobilization, and influence. But it seems to me that we need to keep distinct the effects of this broader, renewed institution building and activism of Democrats and the Left with the effects of new technologies, which are available, of course, to both the Left and Right and which have, it seems fair to say, had their own effect on politics, political campaigning, and political journalism. We might thus productively think about the Web in three ways: as a new means of distributing traditional journalism (i.e., the *New York Times* Web site); as the site for both the production and distribution of new kinds of journalism (from the reporting of TalkingPointsMemo.com, or TPM, and the agenda-setting rumor-mongering of Drudge, to the aggregation, linking, and commentary of the vast range of political blogs);

and, finally, as an interactive tool for "many-to-many" communication and mobilization (see MeetUp.com, Facebook, and the like).

Jessica Clark and Tracy Van Slyke say that their intent in *Beyond the Echo Chamber* is to "describe the transformation of the progressive media sphere from an atomized, isolated collection of struggling one-to-many outlets to a vibrant network spanning engaged citizens, multiplatform outlets, influential issue campaigns, and innovative reporting projects," and to do so by "focusing on media outlets that have, from 2004 to the present, identified as progressive and made a mark on the political conversation" (pp. 6, 4). They note further that they will undertake these tasks "not as historians but as investigators, in search of clues that reveal successful strategies for progressive media makers and projects," and, indeed, the book's cover identifies it as "A Strategy Guide" (p. 7). But the volume does not really succeed as either investigative journalism or as a how-to manual: it is, ultimately, too impressionistic in its purview, too reliant upon what sometimes seems like a haphazard selection of anecdotes, and too saddled with too much description without context so that it is never clear where their focus is, which organizations or actors are the principal drivers of the action, or even what the action is.

The book can seem like a narrative made entirely of turning points–here we have the launch of Daily Kos, Howard Dean's failed presidential campaign, *Fahrenheit 9/11* (2004), Stephen Colbert's White House Correspondents' Dinner speech, and the launch of YouTube and then the iPhone–with no connective tissue, no causal chain, no through-line that tells us how these events do (or do not) fit together, and little beyond mere assertion that these things mattered, and if they did matter, little insight into *how* they mattered. Often, mere action is allowed to stand in for achievement. They note, for example, ten examples of grassroots mobilization devoted to Net Neutrality complied by MoveOn.org; but those efforts have, so far, failed. So what, exactly, is the claim? Such questions arise with some frequency here. There is an abundance of interesting (if perhaps familiar) anecdotes and the occasional keen observation; in their own way, these discussions are unobjectionable enough, but are so vague and untethered from a story as to feel a bit weightless. There is much here that is interesting, but it is never clear what is important.

At the heart of this problem may be the structure of the book itself. That is, they claim that "the new, networked media environment allows progressive media to have more impact," a claim that serves as something of a lodestar (p. 48). But they never get at the hard part of that: More impact than *what*? Or than *when*? Few, I suspect, would disagree that new communications technologies have altered public discourse around and about politics, but to demonstrate the impact of specifically progressive actors and institutions would, it seems to me, require at minimum a comparative analysis with the effects of conservative media. And, except for their own version of a rise of the Right narrative early in the book, conservative media are nearly absent. When Clark and Van Slyke do claim that by the 2008 campaign the power of the Left-leaning blogosphere had outstripped the Right, they not only offer no evidence to support the claim, but also provide no metric by which we might evaluate it. Is it page hits alone? Fundraising capacity? Ability to influence policy debate? And if the latter, how do we get at evaluating real influence versus rhetorical pandering by elites and so on?

Some of this, I will concede, may be the posturing of a social scientist setting unfair standards of method and argumentation for authors who, to their credit, offer a disclaimer up front that they are not historians and, presumably, who would reject being called social scientists, too. But even journalists–perhaps *especially* journalists–can be fairly blamed for not offering a coherent narrative and gathering evidence to support an argument. And there should be an argument (beyond merely claiming that progressive media matter), I will insist, not merely an episodic and ad hoc collection of facts, assertions, and anecdotes.

But they also fail on their own terms to offer applicable lessons about how "progressive media" should, can, or could behave. Perhaps the best example of how my complaints about method matters is in chapter 6. In a discussion of Josh Marshall's TPM and his coverage of Trent Lott's praise of segregationist Strom Thurmond at Thurmond's one-hundredth birthday party, Clark and Van Slyke write: "TPM doggedly followed the story, although the mainstream media showed little interest. Lott was forced to step down from his position as Senate majority leader" (p. 104). It is precisely in the space between these two sentences where the story of TPM versus "legacy media" resides, and it is literally ignored. We are left with the insinuation that TPM caused Lott's resignation. But that needs to be demonstrated, in part because if it is in fact true, those surely are the lessons to be drawn and applied for future efforts at deposing political opponents. This example can stand in for many, and it is my chief frustration with the book.

The later discussion of TPM's role in President George W. Bush's administration's political firings of U.S. attorneys is among their few efforts to trace causation, but here they fail to identify what makes TPM's reporting any different from the investigative reporting that has been the hallmark of good muckraking for over a century; indeed, precisely because TPM (almost alone, perhaps) seems to have built a model of Web-based investigative reporting that blurs the usual (and often clichéd) distinctions between old and new media, these questions become all the more interesting and pressing. It is therefore that much more disappointing to see them largely ignored. They note that some nontrivial portion of TPM's reporting was made possible by the information provided by their readers, and that seems to be one of the potential differences in the practice of journalism made possible by easy communication and electronic fact gathering and sharing. But how much of the story was generated from "volunteer" reporters and how much from the fairly old-fashioned work being done by TPM reporters? Again, the crucial questions of whether new media is truly all that new and the evidence as to how it functions differently is, at best, elided over. All that said, this chapter on "crowd-sourcing" and "open-source muckraking" (the first phrase is already in the lexicon, and the second should be) is the best in the book; it offers a fair précis on a range of key issues surrounding emerging models of journalism, and could serve as a productive introduction to a broad range of students. The rest of the book, alas, will have little to offer an audience with even a passing familiarity with the issues at stake.

The first section of the book, "Laying the Ground-work," presumably setting the stage for an examination of the successes and failures of progressive media efforts from 2004 to 2008, offers three chapters nearly bereft of historical context, theory building, or claim making. Section 2 promises to lay out "Six Strategies for High-Impact Progressive Media" ("Build Network-Powered Media" [chap. 4], "Fight the Right" [chap. 5], "Embrace Twenty-First-Century Muckraking" [chap. 6], "Take It to the Hill" [chap. 7], "Assemble the Progressive Choir" [chap. 8], and "Move Beyond Pale, Male and Stale" [chap. 9]). But what this section really offers is a selection of case studies. That is not a bad thing, and as I have noted above, some of them are quite good. But rather than a primer on successful strategies, it is a collection of what are deemed progressive success stories, without enough analysis to show us that if they worked, why they worked. Section 3, whose sole chapter is entitled "What Next? " should be, by their own implication, the heart of the book–how do we apply the lessons of these past efforts to influence politics, how do we replicate successes, and how do we avoid failures? We instead get a mere nine pages of a general call to arms to "authentically connect," "stay vigilant even when no election is in sight," communicate, fight the Right's discourse, and so on (pp. 196, 196-197). In this conclusion they note that "we've done our best to identify the strategies that really worked" (p. 202). To be generous: *maybe*. But they have not done so in a way that helps us replicate those successes, to avoid failures, or to think strategically about how to identify and employ the strengths and weaknesses of still-emerging communication technologies.

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