

NON-STOP NEWS

With cable, the Web, and tweets, can the President—or the press—still control the story?

BY KEN AULETTA

On September 9, 2009, the day that President Obama was to make a televised speech in support of national health insurance before a joint session of Congress, he flew to New York in the morning to speak at a memorial service for Walter Cronkite. Although Obama had no personal connection to Cronkite—he was a nineteen-year-old sophomore at Occidental College when, in 1981, Cronkite signed off as the anchor of the “CBS Evening News”—he sat through the entire two-and-a-half-hour service, at Lincoln Center. As the closing speaker, the President used his platform to deliver a kind of sermon to the many hundreds of journalists who were in the hall. He was there to tell the gathered tribe that their work was, in no small measure, a frenzied and trivial pursuit.

Obama said that Cronkite, who was the face of CBS’s primary newscast for nineteen years, had been regarded as “the most trusted man” in America. “But here’s the thing,” he said. “That title wasn’t bestowed on him by a network. We weren’t told to believe it by some advertising campaign. It was earned. It was earned by year after year and decade after decade of painstaking effort; a commitment to fundamental values; his belief that the American people were hungry for the truth, unvarnished and unaccompanied by theatre or spectacle.” Cronkite’s standard, Obama said, was “a little bit harder to find today,” when journalism lapses into “instant commentary and celebrity gossip and the softer stories that Walter disdained. . . . ‘What happened today?’ is replaced with ‘Who won today?’ The public debate cheapens.”

Never mind that so much of what Cronkite did was read bulletins and segues off a teleprompter. The image of his avuncular rectitude and his journalistic integrity remains, as the image of Edward R. Murrow reporting from the Blitz did for an earlier generation. And never mind that, in many ways, the press

of an earlier time could be more pusillanimous than today’s. Obama’s analysis, heartfelt though it may have been, was meant to serve a purpose. The President is on a mission, his chief speechwriter, Jon Favreau, told me, “not just to change politics in Washington but to change the culture of Washington, and the media is part of it.”

During the 2008 elections, Obama was the object of near-veneration, possessed of a persona and a campaign that were irresistibly compelling to all but his rivals and the right-wing press. *Time*, for example, saw fit to put Obama on its cover six times in eleven months. What complaints the Obama campaign had about coverage it generally kept to itself. But now that the President has rolled out his ambitious initiatives—in health care, economic rescue plans, Afghanistan, and education—he bristles at the way he is treated in the media. This is hardly new. Abraham Lincoln commonly dismissed press criticism as “noise” and “gas” generated by ignorance and editorial self-importance. Marlin Fitzwater, the White House press secretary under Ronald Reagan and George H. W. Bush, compared the media to “an unwanted appendage, like a cocklebur that attaches to your pants leg.” This time, though, the battle between the President and the press is different. There is a third party involved—the Internet—and no one can control a story for long.

This difference, of course, is a result of the technological transformation of the media and the way that transformation has influenced how the press goes about its work. Just six years ago, when George W. Bush was finishing his first term, there was no Facebook, no Twitter, no YouTube; dozens of regional newspapers and TV stations were highly profitable and seemed, at least to themselves, inviolable. Between 2006 and 2008, daily online news use jumped by a third, which meant that one-quarter of Americans were get-

ting the news online. As media outlets multiply and it becomes easier to disseminate information on the Web and on cable, the news cycle is getting shorter—to the point that there is no pause, only the constancy of the Web and the endless argument of cable. This creates pressure to entertain or perish, which has fed the press’s dominant bias: not pro-liberal or pro-conservative but pro-conflict. The historian Michael Beschloss recalls that after President John F. Kennedy spoke to the nation about the Cuban missile crisis, in October, 1962, “the networks immediately went back to their normal programming.” Today, he says, “pundits comment immediately on Presidential speeches, and cable news dissects the speech for hours. A President doesn’t have the unchallenged voice he once had.” The transformation of media has not only undermined the imperial institutions of the mainstream media; it has undermined the imperial Presidency.

As criticism of the President has escalated, the Administration has at times seemed affronted by the impertinence and the haste of coverage. “This White House does expect a fairly deferential press,” Jonathan Weisman, the *Wall Street Journal*’s White House correspondent, said. “They are fairly thinskinny. Of course, all White Houses are. But in the Bush White House there was an expectation that they would not get a positive press. I suspect that the positive press Obama got in the campaign shaped his perceptions.”

Looking back on the 2008 election, Jake Tapper, ABC’s senior White House correspondent, said, “I’ve never seen anyone get a more glowing press than this President.” During the campaign, Hillary Clinton and John McCain both complained that the press favored Obama; that sense of imbalance was a matter of bitter resentment. The Pew Research Center’s Project for Excellence in Jour-

STEVE BROOKNER

nalism, a nonpartisan media-research group, concurred; tracking campaign coverage, it found that McCain was the subject of negative stories twice as frequently as Obama. (The study says that the press was influenced by Obama's commanding lead in the polls—the kind of “Who won today?” journalism he now decries.) George Stephanopoulos, ABC's senior political correspondent and Bill Clinton's former communications director, said that the press was swept up in Obama's narrative: “The first African-American President. Deep Bush fatigue. It's youth. It's the financial crisis. Two wars. There are lots of strands to this story. And the challenges are so great it's almost analogous to 9/11. It may not make you pull your punches, but you're aware of the stakes.”

The Obama campaign handled the press adroitly. Commenting on the South Carolina primary, which Obama won by twenty-eight points, Bill Clinton said, “Jesse Jackson won South Carolina twice, in '84 and '88, and he ran a good campaign. And Senator Obama ran a good campaign here.” Rather than accuse Clinton of race-baiting—as many did—Obama's representatives responded by suggesting, more subtly, that he and the Hillary Clinton campaign were practic-

ing “old politics.” “Right away, we spun the lopsided margin as a repudiation of the kind of attack politics they had engaged in,” David Plouffe, Obama's campaign manager, writes in his book “The Audacity to Win.” “Voters appeared to recoil from both their negative tactics and the media obsession with race. Bill Clinton's Jesse Jackson comment, though not a factor in the vote, only served to add fuel to that narrative. We could not have dreamed up a better scenario.”

Obama's campaign also had a superior grasp of new media. By October of 2008, its Internet arm had compiled an e-mail list of thirteen million supporters—“about twenty per cent of the total number of votes we would need to win,” Plouffe said. Dan Pfeiffer, the White House communications director, says that Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube allowed the campaign to “go around the filter” of the press—an obsession of the campaign that continues in the Obama White House. In the Clinton era, aides also talked about “going around” the White House press; what they meant was getting an easy hour on “Larry King” or a soft interview with local newspapers, rather than submitting to a session with “60 Minutes” or the *New York Times*. The Obama campaign, with its success

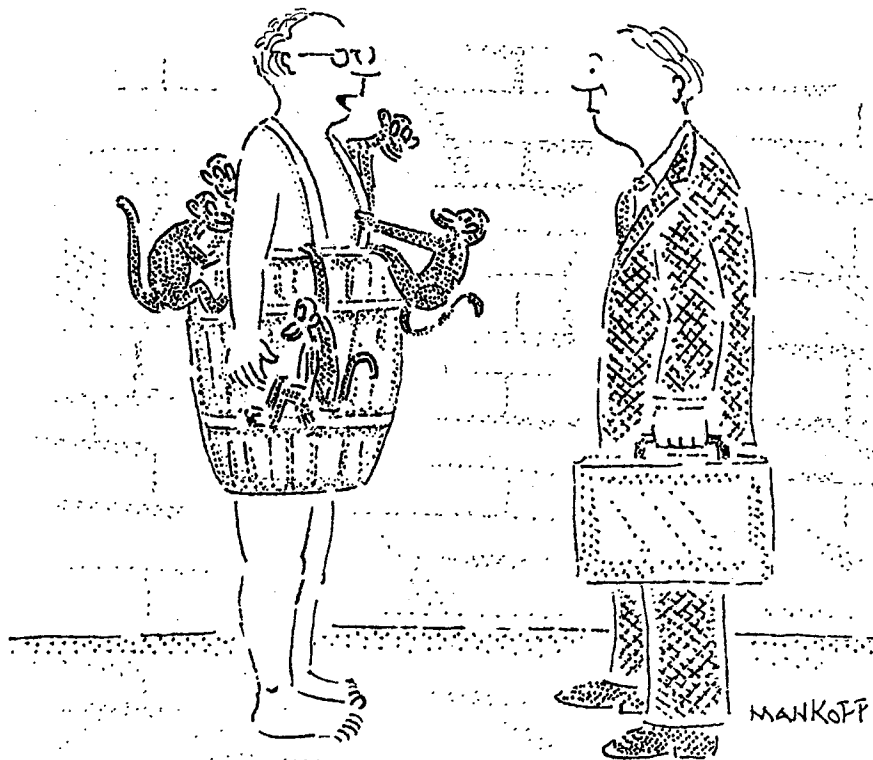
online, and with its mastery of a history-making narrative, was impatient with old media. One campaign reporter recalls a 2008 exchange in which Pfeiffer mockingly speculated that the Washington press corps might be rendered obsolete through the use of Presidential messages posted directly on Internet sites like YouTube. “It was basically taunting,” the reporter says.

The greatest threat to the campaign came in March, 2008, in the scandal surrounding Obama's relationship with the Reverend Jeremiah Wright. The staff, Plouffe writes, was “morose” when Wright's sermons started to air, and David Axelrod, the chief strategist, told him, “Honestly, I don't know if we can survive this.” In an address at the National Constitution Center, in Philadelphia, Obama spoke to the public, but also to the press: “We can tackle race only as spectacle—as we did in the O.J. trial—or in the wake of tragedy, as we did in the aftermath of Katrina, or as fodder for the nightly news. . . . But, if we do, I can tell you that in the next election we'll be talking about some other distraction. And then another one.”

The campaign righted itself, and the questions about Obama's relationship with Wright began to abate. At the same time, the Clinton and McCain campaigns backed off, concerned about charges of race-baiting. “Everybody believed that the campaign could make focussed arguments about what the association said about Barack Obama, but everybody also believed that the issue would metastasize and go to a very ugly place nobody was comfortable with,” Steve Schmidt, the McCain campaign's senior adviser, recalls.

Republicans were distressed. Ari Fleischer, the former press secretary to George W. Bush, said, of Obama, that “the mainstream media overwhelmingly gave him a total pass when he changed the subject from Reverend Wright . . . to race in America.” The speech was watched by millions of people on YouTube, which meant that for the moment, at least, the campaign had succeeded in circumventing the filter of the press.

In the end, Howard Wolfson, who was Hillary Clinton's chief spokesman, says, Obama won because he “had a very clean and simple narrative. His message was: hope and change. . . . It did all the things



“Hey, I'm unemployed, but I'm having fun with it.”

you want a narrative to do. It was authentic to who he was. It spoke to voters in a meaningful and profound way. And it provided a subtle contrast to his opponents.”

Between August of 2008 and March of 2009, the Obamas appeared on the cover of *People* five times. CBS and ABC aired specials on the new President and his family. In June, NBC’s Brian Williams hosted two hourlong broadcasts on the First Family, including talk about the family dog and footage of the President munching on M&Ms. A Center for Media and Public Affairs report found that in Obama’s first fifty days in office he received more than three times the coverage on network news that his predecessor had. Americans had a seemingly endless desire to know more about the First Family: Michelle Obama’s work-out plan; the comings and goings of the Obamas’ adorable daughters. “It’s like a fire hose every day,” NBC’s chief White House correspondent, Chuck Todd, says. “The demands of cable are ten times more. The interest in this Administration is through the roof.” A popular Web site like the Huffington Post not only posts Obama news and feature stories from the *Times* and other newspapers, all repurposed with snappier, more left-leaning headlines; it also posts slide shows provided by White House photographers, to give readers their fix of inside-the-White House images.

Andrew Kohut, Pew’s polling chief, notes that the media’s focus had “much to do with how different he is as President. His race. His temperament. He’s a new kind of President, and the press is fascinated by the new.” Even within the Beltway, operatives cheered for the election of the first African-American President. Mark McKinnon, who served as a media adviser to President George W. Bush and to John McCain during the primaries, refused to work against Obama after he won the nomination. “It’s like rooting for a teen-ager to win the U.S. Open,” he said. (Melanie Oudin, a seventeen-year-old from Georgia, was in the U.S. Open quarter-finals at the time.) A Pew study found that in Obama’s first hundred days in office stories about him that were “clearly positive in tone” outnumbered those about Bush in his first hundred days by a ratio of nearly two to one.

The rapturous reception may have

obscured Obama’s somewhat frosty relationship with reporters throughout his public career. David Mendell, a former reporter for the Chicago *Tribune* who has covered Obama since he was a young legislator in Springfield, has written that Obama was neither “chummy” nor popular with state-capital reporters. “What the public has yet to see clearly,” Mendell wrote in his biography of Obama, “is his hidden side: his imperious, mercurial, self-righteous and sometimes prickly nature.”

In the 2004 keynote speech at the Democratic National Convention, in Boston, Obama denounced “pundits,” who “like to slice and dice our country into red states and blue states,” who simplify and are addicted to conflict. Plouffe writes in his book that Obama found most coverage of the race “banal” and “trivial,” and says that he, Axelrod, and Robert Gibbs, the press secretary, often described the press as “jackals.”

When Obama was running for the Senate in Illinois in 2004, his two main opponents in both parties were destroyed by the release of their respective divorce records; Obama won the primary easily and ended up running in the general election against Alan Keyes, a Republican carpetbagger who came to Illinois to talk about abortion and not much more. And even though Obama was headed toward a forty-three-point victory and was enjoying an explosion of national publicity after his Convention speech, he bristled whenever the local press wrote anything harsh about him. Axelrod, who was Obama’s media consultant and consigliere in that race, as he was in 2008, wrote a memo on November 28, 2006, while Obama was deciding whether to run for President or stay in the Senate. In the memo, which was revealed by Dan Balz and Haynes Johnson in their book, “The Battle for America 2008,” Axelrod warned of the disturbing questions that journalists would ask: “This is more than an unpleasant inconvenience. It goes to your unwillingness and ability to put up with something you have never experienced on a sustained basis: criticism. At the risk of triggering the very reaction that concerns me, I don’t know if you are Mohammed Ali or Floyd Patterson when it comes to taking a punch. You care far too much what is written and said about you.”

In the White House, Obama has tried

in various ways to get reporters to pull their punches. This began with the suggestion that his Administration would not share its predecessor’s outright antagonism toward the press. Bush looked upon reporters as a special interest, his chief of staff, Andrew Card, told me in 2003: “They don’t represent the public any more than other people do. I don’t believe you have a check-and-balance function.” Bush boasted that he did not read newspapers or pay attention to television news. By contrast, Obama, according to Gibbs, is “a voracious consumer” of news.

Starting in the campaign, Obama promised to oversee the most transparent White House in history. He said that he would ban lobbyists from moving in and out of his government, release the logs of all White House visitors, and even invite C-SPAN to record health-care-reform negotiations. Aside from the C-SPAN pledge, he has done that. But being the most transparent White House in history doesn’t mean that the media is given the unfettered access it was led to expect. On July 21st, the *Times* ran a profile of Valerie Jarrett, a special adviser to Obama, in which tensions between Jarrett and Rahm Emanuel, the chief of staff, were made public. Obama, who prizes harmony and team play, was unhappy. “We were told that Obama was upset and had made clear that he wanted no more staff profiles,” Peter Baker, a White House correspondent for the *Times*, said. Anita Dunn, who was Obama’s director of communications until last month, and who remains a trusted adviser, explained, “For us, transparency has never meant that we put our internal decision-making on display. We didn’t during the campaign. We try not to here. Transparency is what the decision is, and why it was made. The process by which it was arrived at is not central.”

The Administration will let journalists in when it has a positive story to sell; after the lengthy decision-making process on Afghanistan, it allowed reporters from the *Times*, the *Washington Post*, and the *Los Angeles Times* to be briefed by officials on the discussions in the Situation Room. In early December, all three papers carried behind-the-scenes stories on the process; in all of them, Obama emerged as a deliberative and tough-minded manager.

The White House pays particular at-

tention to the *Times*, which Gibbs believes “has the ability to drive the news.” According to Martha Joynt Kumar, a Towson University political scientist who has monitored relations between Presidents and the press for four decades, nearly twenty per cent of the print interviews that Obama has granted have been with the *Times*. He has assiduously courted the paper’s astute conservative columnist David Brooks, and to good effect; Brooks effused in *The New Republic* over their discussions of Edmund Burke, and has said of the President, “I think he’s more talented than anyone in my lifetime.”

Obama has hosted lunches and dinners for TV anchors and columnists; on January 12th last year, he attended a dinner at George Will’s home for conservative commentators. He has also held off-the-record sessions with liberal columnists and even historians. “He has seemingly been as energetic in keeping in touch with national media figures as any President over the last sixty years,” Beschloss, who attended one such meeting, said. “Did George W. Bush do that? Clinton did not do it so much.”

The press office has an adjunct in Rahm Emanuel, who is unusually active in the media. “He sees it as a political strategy,” Peter Baker says. “He’s as relentless in working reporters as he is in working congressmen. He cajoles, lobbies, berates, and trades information, because he understands it’s better to work with the media than to shut us out.”

By and large, though, this Administration’s press office has been distinguished less by its transparency than by its discipline. Leaks are few and usually deliberate; unlike in the fractious Clinton White House, Administration insiders tend to maintain a cautious agreement. George Stephanopoulos says of Obama, “You can cover a story and talk to four or five high-level officials on the same story. They’ll all return your phone calls”—which was often not true in the Bush years. “They’ll all be perfectly cordial, for the most part. There might be a slight difference in tone, but the message is always the same.” Michael McCurry, who was Clinton’s press secretary from 1995 to 1998, said that he held a press “gaggle” in his office most mornings to allow reporters to plan times to ask the President questions while he was in action. Gibbs conducts many fewer

EARTHQUAKE

such great stretches of dreamscape
such lines of all too familiar lines

staved in

caved in so the filthy wake resounds with the notion
of the pair of us? What of the pair of us?

Pretty much the tale of the family surviving disaster:

“In the ancient serpent stink of our blood we got clear
of the valley; the village loosed stone lions roaring at our heels.”

Sleep, troubled sleep, the troubled waking of the heart

yours on top of mine chipped dishes stacked in the pitching sink
of noontides.

What then of words? Grinding them together to summon up the void
as night insects grind their crazed wing cases?

Caught caught caught unequivocally caught
caught caught caught

head over heels into the abyss

for no good reason

except for the sudden faint steadfastness

of our own true names, our own amazing names

that had hitherto been consigned to a realm of forgetfulness

itself quite tumbledown.

—Aimé Césaire
(1913–2008)

(Translated, from the French, by Paul Muldoon.)

such meetings. “They successfully cut off the impromptu access the media had before,” McCurry said.

Like other American workers, journalists these days are crunched, working harder with less support and holding tight to their jobs. Eight to sixteen times a day, Chuck Todd, of NBC, hustles from his cubicle in the White House basement to a patch of grass nicknamed Pebble Beach, where he conducts standup interviews for NBC and MSNBC. His day begins at dawn, when he scans the press and writes the opening page of NBC’s blog “First Read,” then throws on a jacket to appear on the “Today” show or on “Morning Joe,” on MSNBC. Before the day ends, he has also written eight to ten tweets or Facebook postings and three to five blog entries. This month, Todd began co-hosting a new, one-hour MSNBC newscast, “The Daily Rundown.” With less time for interviews than he might have had a decade ago, he is compelled, he says, to “do more reporting on my BlackBerry,” sending quick questions to Administration sources.

Peter Baker says that a reporter cover-

ing his beat ten years ago had “the luxury of writing for the next day’s newspaper. He had at least a few hours to call people, to access information, to provide context. Today, as much as you want to do that, by the time your deadline comes around you’ve already filed for the Web”—often more than once. In between times, you’ve filed for radio, and appeared on TV, and maybe done a podcast or a blog. “When do you have time to call experts? When do you have time to sort through data and information and do your own research? Even with a well-staffed news organization, we are hostages to the non-stop, never-ending file-it-now, get-on-the-Web, get-on-the-radio, get-on-TV media environment.”

Everything is rushed. Anita Dunn says, “When journalists call you to discuss a story, it’s not because they’re interested in having a discussion. They’re interested in a response. And the need to file five times a day encourages this.” Instead of seeking context or disputing a claim, reporters often simply get two opposing quotes and file a he said/she said story. David Axelrod, who for years was a reporter for the *Chicago Tribune*, says, “There are some

really good journalists there, really superb ones. But the volume of material they have to produce just doesn't leave a whole lot of time for reflection."

Because of the economic upheaval in the newspaper and magazine industries, Washington bureaus have suffered severe budget cuts; many have been eliminated. There are fewer reporters at the White House. Newspaper chains like Cox News and Media General are gone, as are many regional papers. *Time* and *Newsweek* reporters are usually absent, and the Hearst Newspapers' desk is occupied three days a week by Kumar.

The Pew Project found that, in the first two months of the Obama and Clinton Presidencies, Obama was the dominant figure in far fewer print news stories than Clinton. "One major reason for the difference is that the space in newspapers even among the country's biggest has gotten so much smaller," the authors of the study wrote. With fewer ads and fewer pages to fill, editors make their budget by cutting back on a huge expense: putting reporters in the field. Jay Carney, who covered candidates and Presidents for *Time* before joining the Administration as Vice-President Joe Biden's spokesman, says, "When reporters travel with us, it's not a no-brainer. They've got to sell it to their editors. . . . I have to have available for the press what the costs of the trip are. Before, it was just 'Sign me up.'" There are consequences, Carney says. "Eventually, there's a loss of what the public knows."

Like other reporters who cover the White House, Chuck Todd knows that the White House press corps, along with the rest of the media, is more superficial than it once was. It has lost the power to arbitrate what matters, as the speed of gathering news shapes its content. "We're all wire-service reporters now," Todd says.

The transformation in media technology has also altered government communications strategy. "The biggest White House press frustration is that nothing can drive a news cycle anymore," Mark McKinnon, the media adviser, said. "In the old days, you could say, 'We'd like October to be about the environment.'" Today, a vicious news cycle swallows most White House strategies. When the Berlin Wall went up, in 1961, Presi-

dent Kennedy was on vacation. "For six days, no one pressed him hard for a reaction," Beschloss said. "If that happened now, President Obama would have three seconds." While Obama was on vacation over Christmas in Hawaii, for three days he failed to respond to the foiled terrorist plot to blow up an American airliner. In his absence, Janet Napolitano, the Secretary of Homeland Security, made a disastrous appearance in which she claimed that "the system worked." Both she and Obama were savagely criticized.

This White House, like others, does its best to manipulate press coverage. Obama's communications staff, according to Kumar, has swelled to sixty-nine people, from fifty-two under Bush and forty-seven under Clinton. The shop is led by Robert Gibbs, whose office has the most contact with reporters; Dan Pfeiffer, the communications director, who focusses on media strategy; and Jon Favreau, the chief speechwriter, who heads a team of six writers.

Gibbs, who joined Obama's staff midway through the 2004 Senate campaign, is a powerful press secretary, in the sense that he has the President's ear. Obama has always liked to deal with a tight circle, and Gibbs—like Axelrod, Emanuel, Jarrett, and the national-security team—is definitely in the circle. Although he is only thirty-eight, Gibbs has the résumé of a Beltway journeyman. Before joining Obama's Senate campaign, he had worked for two congressmen, three U.S. senators, the Democratic Senatorial Campaign Committee, and the Presidential candidate John Kerry. Gibbs speaks with assurance on a range of issues, and is less likely than many of his predecessors to read scripted talking points or answer a tough question with "I'll check with the President." He is often in attendance at Oval Office meetings; this fall, he was admitted to the nine Situation Room sessions that the President conducted with his national-security team about Afghanistan. "He has the advantage press secretaries have to have, which is not just access to the President but a relationship," Gerald Seib, the *Wall Street Journal's* executive Washington editor and columnist, says. "He doesn't just deliver a message; he helps shape it. He's a principal."

But in the traditional role of the press secretary, that of getting the President's message out to the media, Gibbs has been strangely recessive. The CBS radio correspondent Mark Knoeller, who has been at the White House since the Ford Administration, says that Gibbs "is very smart, very knowledgeable, but he does not return phone calls as often as you like." This complaint—that Gibbs spends so much time with the President that he has little left to talk with the press—is widespread. Chuck Todd thinks that Gibbs is skilled at the podium, but says that he and the White House "have been slow on political stories. Everything with this Administration has been reactive."

This tendency toward slow-footedness, another longtime press-room resident observes, can be seen in the way Gibbs conducts the almost daily press briefing: "He looks at it as a time when he's going to respond to reporters' questions rather than using it to get out his message." Indeed, his briefings can be absurdly tendentious, with reporters asking endless variations of the same question in the hope of catching Gibbs out. This is especially true of the reporters in the front two rows of seats in the briefing room, where TV cameras are trained. Bill Plante, who has been covering the White House for CBS since the Reagan Administration, sees this as a journalistic pose: "There are people who shout questions like 'Why are you in Iraq?' They keep shouting variations of

the same question, even if they don't get an answer. Is it the reporters' job to be a surrogate for other people's emotions, or is it to let people see the answer?"

Gibbs has complained about the barrage of rhetorical and often conflicting questions. At the September 30th briefing, for example, he responded to one fusillade by saying, "Maybe you guys should huddle, maybe come up with one premise that we'll at

least test for one day, rather than contradicting in a certain day multiple premises." But, unlike many of his predecessors, he rarely asserts control from the podium, to steer the press onto the news that Obama wants to make. It wouldn't make much difference, William Burton, the deputy press secretary, says: "People walk into that room with a sense of the story they're working on already. Any-



thing that gets announced from the podium is generally not going to be written about by somebody who is in the room.”

One of the most controversial aspects of Obama’s communications strategy is his sheer visibility. He is a constant of pop culture, appearing with David Letterman on the “Late Show,” with Jay Leno, in the pages of *US Weekly*, and with an eleven-year-old student journalist named Damon Weaver. In August, Jennifer Senior wrote in *New York* of Obama’s strategy of deliberate ubiquity. Pundits have complained. George Will wrote, in a column the same month, that Obama’s omnipresence transformed his voice into “elevator music, always out and about, heard but not really listened to.”

The White House rejects the notion of overexposure. “It’s an anachronistic debate, because of the fragmentation of the press,” Dan Pfeiffer says. “With the Internet, with YouTube, with TiVo, with cable TV, people are selective viewers now. There may be a group of people in Washington who watch ‘Nightline,’ ‘The Daily Show,’ the ‘Tonight Show,’ ‘Good Morning America,’ and ‘Meet the Press,’ and they see Obama five times. Most people in America see him once at most. . . . People approach their news consumption the way they approach their iPod: you download the songs you like and listen to them when you want to listen to them. That infects our strategy in where the President goes and where he doesn’t.”

The Administration believes that Obama’s message will be lost if he is not constantly in the public eye. “What used to drive one or two days of coverage and questions is now readily subsumed every few hours,” Gibbs told me. “We got criticized for going on ‘Jay Leno.’ That was never a close call for us. It’s a big audience. And you reach a different audience. You have to figure out, How am I going to talk to the American people where they are?”

This strategy rests on the belief that the President is an irresistible persuader. “I don’t think there’s been a President since Kennedy whose ability to move issues and people through a speech has been comparable,” David Axelrod says. But when Obama dispatched himself to Copenhagen to campaign for Chicago as the site of the 2016 Olympics his team failed to do what Chicago pols are famous for: take a rigorous head count. Rio won;

Chicago came in last. And ever since the Jeremiah Wright crisis, some critics have noted a rhythm in which an issue festers for a long time and then, finally, Obama confronts it with an extended address. Officials assumed that the White House could take months to determine its policy in Afghanistan and that, in the end, the President could reason with the American people. Even Axelrod concedes that there are limits. “We’ve got the greatest running back of all time, so the tendency is to want to hand off to him on every play,” he said. “We need to involve all the other members of the team. If I were to rethink the last year, I’d like to spread the load around a little and use other members of the Administration.”

In keeping with the belief in Obama’s powers of persuasion, the White House has not limited itself to one issue at a time. Historical circumstances do not allow the luxury. Instead, the Administration has simultaneously pushed sweeping health-care legislation, a fresh offensive in Afghanistan, initiatives for climate change and peace between Palestinians and Israelis, sanctions against Iran, a new arms-control treaty with Russia, and a domestic jobs plan. Michael McCurry is dubious that the White House can sell so many efforts at once. “There is a tension between a national narrative and targeted narratives,” he said. “I don’t know if it’s possible to have multiple story lines going at one time.”

As newspapers have folded or contracted, new outlets have taken their place. The most prominent face of new media at the White House is Politico.com. This Web site, which also publishes a small daily print edition, was co-founded by two *Washington Post* reporters, John F. Harris and Jim VandeHei, who left the paper in 2006, after failing to sell the *Post* on the wisdom of starting a political site. Politico’s staff has grown to a hundred and eighteen, seventy-nine of them editorial employees; it has more than three million unique monthly visitors, which makes it the ninth-largest newspaper online. While most newspapers have drastically curtailed their travel budgets, there has been a Politico reporter on nearly every one of Obama’s domestic and overseas trips.

Mike Allen, Politico’s chief White House correspondent, has become one of Washington’s most influential journalists.

By seven each morning, Allen, a former correspondent for the *New York Times*, the *Washington Post*, and *Time*, posts “Playbook,” his account of what he thinks the major news stories of the day will be. Usually, it contains a paragraph or two on each and a link to a relevant magazine or newspaper story, the President’s schedule, White House pool reports, polls, a provocative speech, committee meetings, insider gossip, job switches, birthdays.

“No one gets out of bed without reading Mike Allen’s ‘Playbook,’” Hans Nichols, a Bloomberg News correspondent at the White House, says. For reporters and the Administration, it has become an essential bulletin board of what the media is focussed on, and what is happening in Washington that day. To insure that the White House gets a shot at featuring its version of what’s important, officials e-mail and telephone Allen starting at 5 A.M.; Dan Pfeiffer is frequently quoted in “Playbook.” “I wouldn’t say they lobby me,” Allen says. “I ask them what they really think, and hopefully they tell me. They know ‘Playbook’ is an efficient way to correct misconceptions and get ideas in the bloodstream of the press corps and punditry.” Politico has also become a forum where the White House can directly rebut its adversaries, and at times the cross talk resembles an Internet comments page. Earlier this month, when Politico’s Ben Smith reported that the former Illinois governor Rod Blagojevich had suggested that Axelrod had considered taking him on as a candidate in 2008, Axelrod e-mailed Smith within hours to say that it was a “total and complete fabrication.”

In the hope of having a similar influence online, the White House established an Office of New Media under Macon Phillips, the deputy director of new media in the Obama campaign. “Past Administrations had a Web guy who posted things,” Phillips, a thirty-one-year-old with the bulk of an offensive lineman, says. “But there wasn’t a lot of use of social media and engagement.” When Obama scheduled an Internet town-hall meeting, Phillips invited the public to submit questions online. A hundred thousand questions arrived, and three and a half million online votes were cast in response to the question of what mattered most to voters. The President’s weekly Saturday radio address is now simultaneously available on the Internet, and the White House regularly

posts alerts for its 1.7 million Twitter followers. Phillips has hired a team to produce videos—of Michelle Obama talking about health reform, of Presidential advisers answering policy questions—which are posted on the White House Web site, WhiteHouse.gov, and often made available to television.

Of course, none of this gives the White House control over the news; the traditional media does not pay much attention, Phillips says. “Our policy people are going on the Web and they are asked very difficult questions by the public. It’s unclear to me whether the press is actually covering that.” What the press is paying attention to, Anita Dunn says, is cable and blog attacks on the Obama Administration. Now fifty-one, Dunn worked for many public officials, including President Jimmy Carter and four U.S. senators, before becoming Obama’s chief communications officer, in 2008. (Dunn returned to her political-consulting firm this month, when her husband, Robert Bauer, became the new White House counsel.) She marvels at an often overlooked impact of the Internet: “The effect on people who cover the White House is extraordinary. The ability for online to drive stories into the mainstream media is significant.” Once a story gains traction, she says, the Administration must respond quickly or “rumors become facts.”

After a year in office, the Obama Administration has become keenly aware of the difference between campaigning and governing. In the campaign, David Axelrod says, “you want to be responsible,” but “by and large the only thing you have to worry about is getting elected. In the White House, you have to deal with the events of the day.” By mid-summer, events had overtaken the White House. At a press conference in July intended to promote health-care legislation, Obama was asked about the fracas between the Harvard professor Henry Louis Gates, Jr., and a Cambridge police sergeant. He riffed genially on the varied accounts of what happened, and then declared that the police had “acted stupidly.” Throughout the campaign, Obama’s team had expertly portrayed him as black for the purposes of history but as nonracial for the purposes of the electorate. Now he was perceived as taking sides. The furor consumed the better part of a

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week, until Obama invited Gates and the sergeant to share a beer at the White House. Though the gesture became a punch line for late-night comedians, it brought an end to the story. Obama discerned that talking about race, especially extemporaneously, was just not worth it.

The fight over health-care reform did much more harm. On August 7th, Sarah Palin claimed on her Facebook page that Democratic health-care legislation would impose "death panels" to decide whether elderly and infirm patients would be denied vital care. The White House didn't respond until four days later, when Obama explained at a town-hall meeting in New Hampshire that the "death panel" rumors were false. "We thought it was absurd," Pfeiffer says, "and there was a perhaps naïve view on our part that, if a major political figure says something that is entirely untrue and ridiculous, the press would treat it as untrue and ridiculous." As assertions about death panels and socialized medicine reached critical mass on conservative radio, cable shows, and the Web, the White House was hampered by polit-

ical considerations. Officials didn't want to look as if they were in a personal spat with a potential foe in the 2012 elections, Dunn says.

"Groundless accusations are not new to American politics," ABC's Jake Tapper says, "but this President has been forced to deal with more downright falsehoods than any President I can think of." Obama was brought up a Muslim; he was not born in the U.S.; he studied at a madrassa in Indonesia. "It bubbles up and we have to decide if we should report it," Tapper added. "Too much of my job has been correcting the record, which no reporter wants to do."

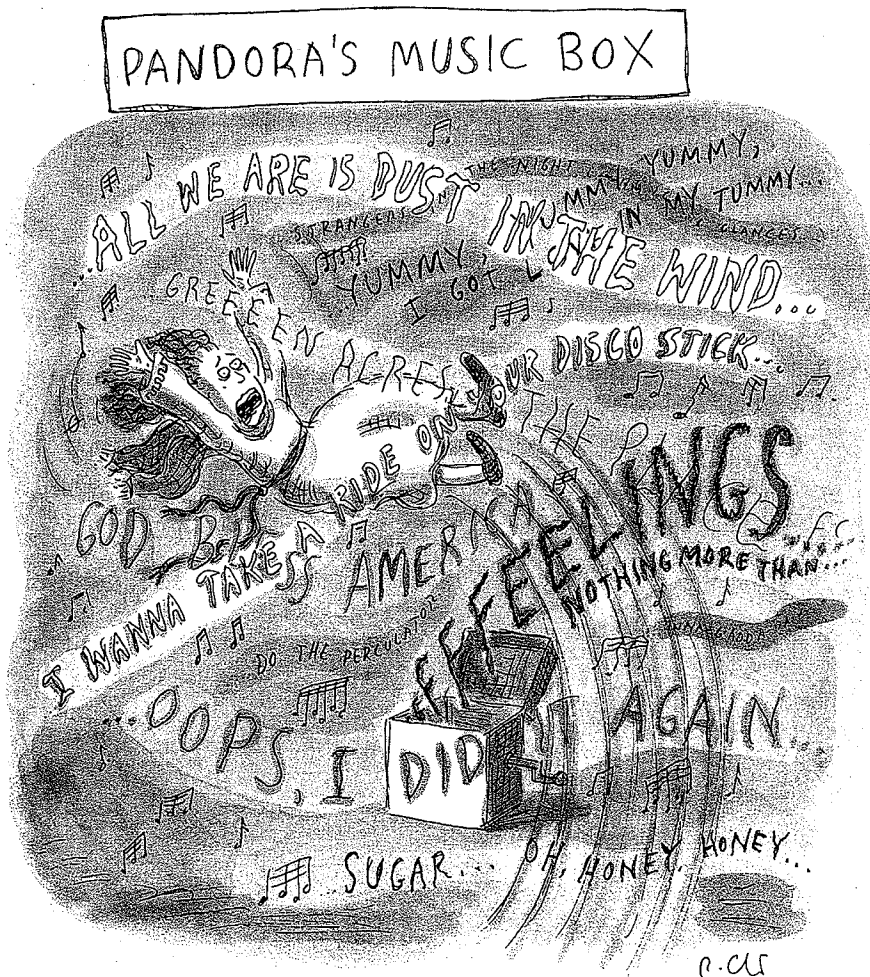
Two weeks after Palin's Facebook post, the White House established a "Reality Check" blog on which officials challenge assertions that they consider false. The site attracts some traffic, but has proved to be a tepid means of responding. It, too, is essentially reactive; it can only chase claims and rumors, not prevent them.

By midsummer, Congress, not the President, was shaping health-care legislation, and the President's vacillating estimates for the cost of the bill were encour-

aging the perception that the proposal was unrealistic. Obama's popularity plunged in the next several months; in a December survey, his job-approval rating had fallen to forty-six per cent. The White House lost control of its message, as David Axelrod acknowledged. "For the casual observer, this debate has appeared to be more about the fifteen per cent who don't have insurance than about the eighty-five per cent who do," he says. "The savings elements have been obscured. . . . We've always done better when the story did not center on congressional wrangling."

Anita Dunn thinks that Obama's drop in the polls was linked to rising unemployment, and insists that the way the President has dealt with health care is the Administration's foremost communications success: "At the end of the day, he will have framed the argument with his initial speech to the American Medical Association, laid out the principles, and then made a critical speech that framed the entire fall argument when he spoke to the joint session of Congress." Obama did give a resolute speech on September 9th, and the media spent hours of broadcast time and acres of print picking it over. But, three days later, thousands of tea partiers marched on Freedom Plaza, in downtown Washington, an irresistible event for the media. Within hours, the image of Obama at the lectern was displaced by one of marchers, placards, and populist rage.

Obama's efforts to reason with the press have at times given way to outright combat. Throughout the fall, the White House fought a back-and-forth battle with the conservative media. In late August, Glenn Beck, of Fox News, and his followers online mounted an assault on Van Jones, a White House environmental adviser, who, in 2004, had signed a petition claiming that the Bush Administration "may indeed have allowed 9/11 to happen, perhaps as a pretext for war." Days passed before Jones was compelled to resign. When the mainstream press, including the *Times* and the three major networks, initially ignored the story, conservatives were inflamed. Dean Baquet, the *Times*' Washington bureau chief, acknowledges, "We missed it. We should have jumped on it." One reason the *Times* was late, he says, was that "so much of cable is now partisan," and his first instinct was that the Jones affair was a man-



ufactured controversy. (He now more closely monitors cable newscasts and Web blogs.)

Cable has grown more partisan. Forty per cent of Americans, according to a Pew poll last July, now get their national and international news from cable; 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. Data collected by TiVo, Inc., from thirty-five thousand viewers, show that for each Democrat who watches Fox News there are eighteen Republicans, and for every Republican who watches MSNBC there are six Democrats. (Democrats outnumber Republicans on CNN by a lesser two and a half to one.)

Fox News is thriving. Glenn Beck's year-old show draws 2.3 million daily viewers, twice its predecessor's audience. The network's broadcasts now attract more viewers each evening than CNN, MSNBC, and CNBC combined. Why? Michael Clemente, Fox's senior vice-president for news and editorial programming, insists that Fox News is asking the "hard questions" that "too few people are asking." One of the reporters asking those questions is Major Garrett, Fox's senior White House correspondent, who, despite the controversy his network creates, is widely respected by his peers in the press corps. When I asked him whether he felt torn between his journalism and Fox, he did not answer for a full twenty-seven seconds. "The human answer," he said, "is that I do the best I can. The network obviously values what I do. They wouldn't give me all the opportunities they do if they didn't. . . . I just do the best I can."

During the campaign, Obama tried to approach Fox diplomatically. He met in the summer of 2008 with Rupert Murdoch, the owner of Fox News, and Roger Ailes, its founder and C.E.O.; in the fall, he consented to appear on Bill O'Reilly's program. In September, after Obama took office, David Axelrod met with Ailes in New York. But Murdoch was evidently unmoved by diplomacy, and the White House resorted to a deliberate snub. On Sunday, September 20th, the President's handlers booked him on a whistle-stop tour of five back-to-back morning shows, and Fox News was missing from the roster, replaced by the Spanish-language network Univision.

The White House had given up on changing Fox. The intent, Dunn says, "was to send a message to the rest of the press corps." This message, a correspondent at another network concedes, "has had some effect."

One Fox producer describes the White House staff's treatment of Fox as "gruff." Major Garrett insists that he and Fox are not being punished, but adds, "The door is not shut for me. It's just not opened first for me."

The *Wall Street Journal*—which, like Fox, is owned by Rupert Murdoch—has also become a source of concern at the White House. "I do believe the news pages and the editorial pages of the *Journal* are separate," a member of the White House press team says. "But there's definitely some influence there from the editorial page."

In media appearances, White House aides intensified the attacks on Fox News, and in late October the Administration went too far. It offered one-on-one interviews with the Treasury Department's Wall Street and banking "pay czar," Kenneth Feinberg. All the major networks were on the Treasury Department's interview list, except Fox.

The networks rebelled, and Fox and the blogosphere lit up with complaints about censorship. The Administration was forced to surrender. Gibbs invited Clemente to the White House, where they agreed to a truce and to stop discussing the matter. Gibbs now says that the decision to exclude Fox did not come from his office: "This started over at Treasury, and when it got to the White House it was fixed." What probably happened, Major Garrett says, "is that it was assumed to be the proper move by Treasury"—the staffer who barred Fox was trying to prove that he was a team player. Since then, Garrett said in December, he has had on-camera interviews with the President and many of his senior aides. "From our point of view, things have only gotten better."

While the press office wrestled with Fox, Obama kept up his campaign to teach reporters civility. In four of the five morning-talk-show interviews on September 20th, he criticized, without prompting from the anchors, the media's preoccupation with conflict. On NBC, he told David Gregory, of "Meet the Press," "What gets you on the news is

controversy." On CBS's "Face the Nation," he told Bob Schieffer, "I do think part of what is different today is that the twenty-four-hour news cycle and cable television and blogs and all this, they focus on the most extreme elements on both sides. They can't get enough of conflict. It's catnip to the media right now."

Obama has better odds of succeeding with health-care legislation than he does with his attempt to reform journalism. Ask dozens of White House reporters how they respond to the President's criticisms, and you'll get a fairly uniform response. "This is not something new," Edwin Chen, of Bloomberg, and the president of the White House Press Correspondents Association, says. "We've heard that from many Administrations," Margaret Talev, the White House correspondent for the McClatchy Newspapers, says.

NBC's Chuck Todd thinks that the Administration is just striking a pose when it criticizes the press for focussing too much on process and conflict. "You make a decision, somebody is going to disagree," he says. "The American democracy was designed this way. If they don't like it, complain to James Madison." One young White House reporter likens Obama to her parents: "My mom used to constantly say, 'We can do better!' Oh, shut up! We get it, Mom."

Does Obama's criticism of the press have an impact? "No," Major Garrett answers. He acknowledges that "there's more than a grain of truth" to Obama's criticism. But at times, he says, "this critique of the media is entirely self-serving. It's designed to get us back on our heels, to make us tentative about legitimate lines of inquiry."

Peter Baker sympathizes with one part of Obama's critique. The *Times* tries to counter the instant-news approach by rotating its White House reporters, allowing more time to write more thoughtful stories. Yet he knows that in some ways he and his colleagues are trapped. "We are, collectively, much like eight-year-olds chasing a soccer ball," he says. "Instead of finding ways of creating fresh, original, high-impact journalism, we're way too eager to chase the same story everyone else is chasing, which is too often the easy story and too often the simplistic story—and too often the story that misses what's going on." Like most journalists, he does not think much will change, no matter how many speeches Obama makes. ♦