Remarks Prepared for Delivery at Princeton University
Conference on the Media and Politics
April 30, 1992
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What's news? I assume candidates for national office are "news" and I want to talk about the media treatment of such people. I know the media is no monolith, but for convenience I'll talk about: "the media."

All that I can bring to this discussion is a little bit of personal observation. In doing my research on the U.S. Senate in the late '70's and early '80's, I travelled around with, watched, talked to three U.S. Senators for several years before they ever became candidates for national office: John Glenn, Dan Quayle and Paul Tsongas.

From my narrow angle of vision, a problem with the media treatment of all three, as they began their national candidacies, was a certain lack of balance. Maybe that's always the problem--balance. But the problem of balance that draws the most public commentary is: "too much horse race coverage, not enough issue coverage." I'm not interested in that one. My interest is in the lack of balance between the media coverage of a candidate's non-political activity and media coverage of a candidate's political activity.

I have three ideas about this lack of balance:

First: Media attention to a candidate's non-political activities drives out media attention to a candidate's political activities.

Second: There is, as a result, too much treatment of a candidate's non-political record and too little treatment of a candidate's political record.

Third: This imbalance is most consequential in the very earliest period of a candidate's emergence--that is, when the press takes its' first look at a candidate and introduces the candidate to the public. It is the media that introduces our candidates to us and--in introducing them, gives them a legitimacy which improves or retards their future prospects. If, as students of the media tell us, media influence is especially strong when there is no pre-formed body of opinion on the subject at hand, then the responsibility of the media in dealing with candidates is never greater than when they frame their earliest introductions.

There has been a lot of media soul-searching recently concerning
the metes and bounds of their performance as "character cop." "How far should we go in investigating the private lives of candidates?" That is an important question. But I would argue that the more important question is: "How severely does journalistic investigation of a candidate’s non-political performance tend to diminish or drive out journalistic investigation of the candidate’s public political performance?"

Public attention, we know, follows media attention. And media attention is a scarce resource. Time spent writing candidate stories featuring non-political matters is time not spent writing about political matters. My own view is that this displacement of media effort has costs to the public--costs that are worth worrying about.

In the first days of a candidate’s emergence, it means that public attention will be drawn away from the past public record of the candidate. And that record of public service, I would argue, is the best basis on which citizens can make their judgment. At the very time, therefore, when the public most needs the best possible information, a Gresham’s Law of media coverage is at work. A useful kind of information is being driven from public attention by a less useful kind of information.

I am not saying that the press should not concern itself with "character." Far from it. Indeed, I think character is probably the ultimate question concerning any candidate. But I also think that an essential part of what we need to know about character--about the consistency among its private and public manifestations, about the relation of campaign promises to past performance, for example--is revealed in the public political record. We need to know about the commitments, the decisions, the accomplishments and the leadership that can only be found in that record. In the three cases I know about, there was too little media attention to those matters. I am arguing for more of it--and earlier.

For me, the prototype case--stark and consequential--was media treatment of Dan Quayle in the earliest days of his emergence as a national candidate. From my own observation and writing, I knew that Quayle had engineered an important two-year long legislative accomplishment in the Senate--the passage of the JTPA. And I assumed the press would immediately start digging into this--his main accomplishment--and make it the main vehicle by which to introduce Quayle to the public. But they never did. No media person ever went back to look at his senatorial record. Within two hours after Bush picked him, TV and press reporters had labelled Quayle a "lightweight," and had launched 10-days of total preoccupation with his non-political activity--his sex life, his college grades, his wealth and his service in the National Guard. Attention to his private life drove out all attention to his Senate record.
When their extremely unbalanced 10-day introduction of Quayle to the American public was over, his image had been cast in brass. That image contained no hint of the political leadership he had shown as a senator; and the press never gave him a second look. Quayle had been presented to the public in the most lopsided possible terms, as an "unaccomplished lightweight."

There was plenty of evidence—if they had dug in the committee rooms of Congress instead of the Registrar’s Office at DePauw, or in the commentary of Capitol Hill observers like Richard Cohen, Martin Tolchin and Alan Ehrenhalt—with which to fashion a much more balanced treatment than the media gave him. Not to mention one much less prejudicial to his future career.

That the media knew what they were doing, that they had done it before and that they relished their role seems indisputable. From his position inside "the pack" of presidential campaign reporters in 1972, Timothy Crouse described their pattern.

The private vocabulary of journalists reeks with obscenity, but the dirtiest word it contains is "lightweight." A lightweight, by definition, is a man who cannot assert his authority over the national press, cannot manipulate reporters, cannot finesse questions, prevent leaks, or command a professional public relations operation. The press likes to demonstrate its power by destroying lightweights, and pack journalism is never more doughty and complacement than when the pack has tacitly agreed that a candidate is a joke. (The Boys on the Bus, p. 196)

Early media treatment of John Glenn also focussed heavily on his non-political life; and this preoccupation, again, drove out serious attention to his political life. In this case, however, press preoccupation with Glenn’s non-political activity was extremely favorable. The picture they painted was that of an authentic American hero, a man of exemplary character—of integrity, decency and courage. On the basis of that dazzling first look, the national media quickly propelled the former astronaut into second place in the 1984 presidential race.

Had they moved equally quickly to examine his past political performance, however, they would have found very little to warrant that rating—certainly nothing in his 10 years in the Senate to match Dan Quayle’s achievement in his first two years. Nor would they have found that either of Glenn’s Senate reelection campaigns in Ohio turned on his senatorial accomplishments, as Quayle’s 1986 reelection clearly had.

On his public record, Glenn had shown precious little political prowess. He could not map a strategy, pick a staff, identify a constituency, negotiate a deal, or build a coalition. As time went
on, this lack of political talent--of his character as it got translated into his leadership potential--did begin to show up in bits and pieces in the press. But they never altered their original view that he would come in second the minute the voters voted.

Glenn’s crushing fifth place finish the moment he met Iowa’s caucus goers was the great unexpected shock of the early 1984 race. A more balanced media treatment in the beginning might have produced a more realistic view of the candidate’s strength, more realistic attention to other contestants and less of a sense of the unexpected. In terms of knowing the candidate, the public was not much better served by media preoccupation with John Glenn’s past non-political record and the neglect of his past political record than they were by the very same imbalance in the case of Dan Quayle. Furthermore, I would argue that John Glenn’s political fortunes, too, were adversely affected by the media’s treatment of him. The continued media exaggeration of Glenn’s prospects, to the very eve of the Iowa caucuses, encouraged him, 10 days before the Iowa vote, to take on the $2.5 million debt that has plagued his career and sullied his reputation ever since.

With Paul Tsongas, the press took a different approach--no early coverage at all. With Glenn, the press took their first look and said, "he looks good, there’s really something there." When they took their second look, they said, "there’s not much there," but we’ll stick with our first look anyway." With Paul Tsongas, they took their first look and said, "he doesn’t look good, there’s nothing there." And that judgment stood for nearly a year, until shortly before the New Hampshire primary.

Strikingly, in his 1978 Senate primary campaign, the Boston Globe had treated Tsongas the same way, writing him off early, favoring another candidate, not covering his campaign, and never acknowledging his prowess until just before he won the Democratic primary.

From my six years of watching him, I had come to two conclusions. First, among the (16) senators I studied, he impressed me as the best qualified to be President. He was an interesting and creative legislator, a key player in several Senate policy areas; he had a strong set of issue commitments; he did not hostage himself to voting blocs; he was a thoughtful exponent of Democratic party change. He had put his convictions on the line more than once. And he had the sense of humor necessary to keep his seriousness and his ambition in perspective.

Second, he was definitely a "three-looks" politician. First look-"nothing there"; second look-"there might be something there"; third look-"there is something there." For nearly a whole year in 1991-1992, presidential candidate Tsongas hung out there on the campaign trail waiting for the media to give him more than one
look, if not three looks. They didn’t. The only people that ever got three looks at him were the citizens of New Hampshire--no thanks to the media.

The consequence was that Tsongas didn’t get the early media help, and didn’t get the legitimacy he might have gotten had they turned to his public record and told us about it. A lot of what is involved in legitimacy is the idea that a candidate is viable. Students of the media tell us that media judgments about candidate viability are picked up early and quickly by the public. Tsongas’ candidacy suffered from the outset for lack of a favorable viability estimate from the media.

If you wonder what an early media boost might have done for his viability, consider how the early and highly favorable media appointment of Bill Clinton carried him through his New Hampshire defeat and gave him the residual strength to keep going. "Congratulations, Governor," said Dan Rather to open his interview with Bill Clinton the day after he had been defeated in New Hampshire--thus confirming favorable media judgment about Clinton’s viability.

In Clinton’s case, too, I believe the media fed the public a lot more early on than we needed about Clinton’s non-political activity and a lot less than we needed about his political activity if we were to answer the important question: "What kind of Governor of Arkansas has he been?" Attention to the one, again, drove out the other.

My view--from over the shoulder of three candidates--is that the answer to the question: "What’s news?" should contain relatively more of a candidate’s political activity and relatively less of a candidate’s non-political activity. A redress of this persistent imbalance would be most consequential in the earliest days of a candidacy, when opinions have yet to take shape and when introduction and legitimacy are controlled by the media. By this standard, Dan Quayle was denied legitimacy by an excessively negative introduction; John Glenn was granted a legitimacy bonus by an excessively positive introduction; and Paul Tsongas was penalized by not being introduced or legitimized at all. In each case, the public would have been better served if they had been given more information early-on about the candidate’s past performance as a public official. For all three candidates, their early media treatment was superficial, lasting, and damaging.

As to why this pattern exists, I have only a couple of speculations. The first is in the spirit of Stephen Hess’ observation that the media bias toward candidates is not ideological but stylistic. Hess describes the favored candidate style as "elegant, urbane, cosmopolitan." Other ingredients, like rhetorical skills, might be added. But Hess’ essential idea is that the media brings distinctive cultural tastes to its earliest
encounters with emerging national candidates. Stylistic bias, I
would suggest, helps us explain the nearly instant tribal rejection
of Dan Quayle by the national media and the nearly instant tribal
acceptance of Bill Clinton by the same group--prior, that is, to
any careful inquiry into either of their previous public records.

Which brings me to my second speculation--the parlous state of
local political reporting. If "all politics is local," then we
would expect that the public record--of all emerging national
candidates--would have been carefully scrutinized by the local
media throughout their previous careers. In which case, a
voluminous body of information--on candidate campaigning and
governing--would be ready for use by the national media. But such
is not the case. We may have a mismatch. Whereas all politics is
local, all political reporting is national. Those who control the
local media seem not to value sustained, in-depth political
reporting; and the national media must start digging from scratch
to uncover the past public performance of emerging candidates.
Early inattention to their local record may, therefore, be a path
of least resistance.

These are only speculations. But since the early treatment of
candidates is the time of greatest media impact and greatest media
responsibility, we probably ought to keep on speculating.