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The Powers that Were?

By Greg Shaw

Were you watching baseball instead of the debate Tuesday evening? Welcome to digital democracy. In the brouhaha over which network covered the debate live we may well be missing a new emerging medium's ascent as a political source of news and information – the Internet.

To be sure, the Internet has popped onto the nation's radar screen this election, creating news when Al Gore took credit for its creation, when George W. Bush published the names of contributors on his Web site and when John McCain created a sensation after New Hampshire raising significant funds online, mostly from small contributors.

But as Election Day approaches, the journalistic old guard continues to look backwards at the medium of the last century. Television remains the story de jour. Jim Lehrer has produced a two-hour PBS segment on televised debates, which in turn stimulated R.W. Apple of the *Times* to write a 35-paragraph article on televised debates. "The rise of television has transformed American politics," Mr. Apple gushes. Bill Kovach, representing the Committee for Concerned Journalists, spoke for others in journalism when he told The News Hour recently that "as a consumer I am not getting what I need" from broadcast journalism.

And now just in time for these elections, the University of Illinois Press has announced that after 21 years, it will reissue David Halberstam's celebrated staple of press and politics, *The Powers that Be.* In a new introduction, Mr. Halberstam complains that technological change, namely cable, has created a more dimwitted era in American journalism. Like his colleagues, Mr. Halberstam hardly touches on the profound implications of the Internet, both on the press and politics.

Ironically, *The Powers that Be* went out of print recently and it was only through an Internet bookseller that the title could be obtained.

The 2000 elections may well be to the Internet what the 1952 elections were to television – a time when a newly emerging medium started feeling its way into the mainstream of American politics. It is a time for exploration and setting expectations. Like TV in the 1950s, the Internet is at times rich, timely and central to the campaign, and at other times silly, floundering and reaching only small numbers of voters.

The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press found in its 2000 survey of the national news audience that 15 percent of Americans go online daily for news, up from 6 percent two years ago. During the same time period, regular viewership of network news has fallen from 38 percent to 30 percent. At this rate, Internet news will surpass network

news before the next election. Nearly 40 percent of online news junkies say they are looking for political news. And as Americans grow more reliant on the Internet for news, they also have come to find online news outlets more credible.

For those of us who spend much of our time online, it is humorous to hear the moaning of media critics and watchdogs that complain about NBC and Fox's decision not to broadcast the debates, or the dearth of substantive information in the media to inform the electorate. Online, we are swimming in political content – much of it very good and informative.

In a recent New York Times op-ed, William E. Kennard said the two network news organizations had reneged on their obligation to provide public affairs programming. Yet anyone watching the debates as we did over the Internet was struck both by the volume and quality of coverage, insights, background and opportunity to interact.

- All of the networks carried the debates online. They also posted chats and transcripts.
- NBC and MSNBC offered an interesting debate monitor that relayed real-time summaries of what the two candidates were saying.
- A number of political portals were active. Yahoo's political site carried the debates live. Speakout.com allowed Internet users to rate the debates.
- The birth of the e-buttal was evident on the candidates' sites. Setting a standard for future debates and future campaigns, both Gore and Bush Web sites were used extensively, in real time, to rebut the statements of their opponents. This coverage was apparently so popular that access was slow and many users could not log-on during the live debate. The Gore campaign also linked their supporters into an instant messaging network during the debate.

Research currently underway at the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania is tracking the Internet's role in the 2000 Campaign (available at NetElection.Org). We find there is a lively virtual campaign playing out in the cyber world that could become the model for how campaigns are waged in the future. There are many players with many sophisticated Web sites at their disposal: the candidates, the political parties, concerned citizens, all of the major print and broadcast media, civic and advocacy groups. And for the first time this election, Americans will actually cast votes online (interestingly in a Defense Department Internet voting pilot study) – perhaps the shape of things to come.

Ironically, Richard Nixon, who's career was dominated by many battles with the television medium predicted long before 1960 that the television would one day converge with something like the Internet to enable richer information and the ability to vote. According to Halberstam, Nixon had often talked to an aide about how "politics was changing, about days to come when people would vote right in their own living rooms." Kennedy may be credited for being the first television president, but perhaps Nixon doesn't get his due for having invented the Internet.

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