

A Month Before the Midterm: The State of Television and Media Practices in the Political Landscape

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The uses of multiple media platforms in today's political landscape can stand in, at least in part, for the heterogeneity of sources that Foucault identified as key to the effectiveness of a discursive formation. New technological formats create an impression of diverse activity; the spread of a political position across an array of electronic media simulates widespread popularity. This has been demonstrated particularly by the right, in the organization of conservative criticisms of Barack Obama as candidate and President. While conservatives do not offer the true heterogeneity of seemingly unconnected institutions that can create a strong formation by merging different perspectives, their use of a variety of information platforms mimics heterogeneity to some degree. Moving from obscure blogs to individual pundits to FOX News and finally to "mainstream" news outlets, conservative critiques and charges attain legitimacy through technological ubiquity.

Attacks on Obama climb through a series of platforms hierarchized in terms of credibility and legitimacy by mainstream corporate media. Street protests and obscure Internet websites and blogs put forward and amplify definitions of Obama as a foreigner, machine politician, socialist, black nationalist, Muslim, intellectual, Nazi, Communist, traitor, and novice, launching trial balloons of new charges on a regular basis to explore which criticisms can achieve larger public visibility and dominate media discussions of the contemporary politics. Conservative critiques then ascend to better-known individual bloggers and minor print pundits, to the central distribution point of FOX News. Once the charges make it to FOX, other large media outlets and well-known pundits can claim the talking points as sources of public debate and concern. The right's use of FOX News has been a crucial linchpin in its success to propel its claims into the mainstream, along with the cooperation of other corporate news outlets that choose to consider FOX as a legitimate news outlet.

The infrastructure for this strategy has been supplied by the proliferation of electronic media platforms over the past 15 years. As Foucault stated, the strength and effectiveness of a discursive formation depends on the multiplicity of disparate speakers echoing and adding to each other's claims to construct a set of definitions of identity and value. The left certainly has as much access to blogging and website technology, as well as journals of opinion and some well-known pundits. But the left does not move in the lockstep fashion of what David Brock dubbed the Republican Noise Machine, to flood the information sphere with a Message of the Day or Week.

The right's onslaught of criticism barely paused for breath after the 2008 election, although at first it had difficulty in breaking through the post-election feel-good vibes of mainstream media. Conservative discourse was augmented by vocal and visible protest by August, 2009, during the health care debate, reinforcing the newsworthiness of the right's arguments in a way that the flaccid McCain campaign could not. Notwithstanding the development of electronic social networking and mobilization tools, the practice of putting bodies and voices into physical public spaces remains a crucial way to garner media attention and create ongoing commitment among participants in a social or political movement. The active uses of the Web 1.0 and 2.0 as organizing tools by Tea

Partiers and others on the right have been channeled into creating public spectacles to be telecast and reported on by FOX and other large media outlets, creating a sense of an emerging social formation with an impact far beyond its actual numbers. While progressive rallies are often ignored or downplayed by mainstream media, the conservative movement's colorful and controversial public protests in town hall meetings and street rallies have provided the right with a momentum that cannot be achieved by the more individualized experience of virtual activism.

The conservative sphere continues to see itself as a movement, whereas Obama, wanting to put the campaign behind him, has let his following stagnate. Only recently has the Administration tried to mobilize its 13-million member email list to do anything more than to email Congress and send money to Democratic campaign fundraisers. In now calling for rallies in support of Administration policies, the Obama mobilizers are trying to answer the energy and ostentation of the Tea Party protests, but in the context of dwindling enthusiasm for Obama policies among progressives and exhaustion in responding to conservative attacks. The Obama forces have yet to launch protests against policy opponents, as Obama has decided to seek bipartisan paths to legislation and include major industry players in negotiations. The Administration, always dismissive of engaging with the daily onslaught of signification, has not been adept at creating any longer-lasting themes that make its actions cohere into a positive whole. Obama's image remains up for grabs, though most Americans reject the extremes of conservative labeling. Even his televisual defenders find it difficult to provide a consistent image for him. Without that, conservatives will continue to have a chance to advance even their most far-fetched definitions into the wider public sphere, with their combination of digital organizing, public spectacle, and cooperation and coordination with large-scale media outlets.