



Media Darlings

"It almost never happens that there are two media favorites in one political race — and yet this year, there are," said David Folkenlik on National Public Radio.

Both Senators John McCain and Barack Obama can attribute their popularity and their choice as candidates of the Republican and Democratic Parties to the media. This doesn't mean they never receive negative coverage; however, according to Folkenlik, during their Senate careers and throughout the presidential campaign, both have received "pretty positive press."



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Folkenlik claims McCain is "widely considered a charming rogue in Washington" because of clashes with his party leadership over issues such as campaign finance, tobacco litigation, and healthcare. This "fight is something reporters like." He is partly correct, but McCain's appeal with the press has actually been constructed by McCain through the use of several strategies.

First, although McCain insists he doesn't want to talk about it, he consistently capitalizes on his experience as a Vietnam POW. At the Republican Convention, he made his wartime history a main part of his acceptance speech. "I fell in love with my country when I was a prisoner in someone else's," he said.

"A key part of McCain's Vietnam story as the press tells it is that the senator is reluctant to mention it," write David Brock and Paul Waldman in *Free Ride: John McCain and the Media*. And the press buys into the illusion. "In his speech to the Republican National Convention, *McCain opened up more than usual*," opined the *Los Angeles Times*.

McCain's insistence that he doesn't want to talk about Vietnam is contradicted by the fact that he built his entire 2000 presidential campaign around the POW story. During this campaign the story is brought up enough so that it is in the forefront of discussions about him, but not so much that reporters conclude that he is trying to exploit it. Nevertheless, a major story is seldom written about McCain that doesn't include mention of his military service.

Brock and Waldman found that in the first three months of 2008 there were more than 1,000 mentions of McCain's war experience. This presidential year will easily surpass the 3,000 mentions made by the print and broadcast media in 2000.

The second strategy McCain uses is to give the impression that he is out-of-step with old line politics and politicians - that he is not part of the Washington establishment. McCain carefully chooses breaks from his party to cause some Republicans to criticize him. He criticizes back, and the press love his one-liners that "tweak" his fellow Republicans. For his rebellion, he has been branded a "maverick," a label the media frequently use to describe McCain. Even McCain's advertising has picked up on this theme.

Brock and Waldman examined the incidences of "maverick" within 10 words of "McCain" in American



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news media from 1999 through 2006, as indexed in the Nexis database. These reached their height in 2000, with 2,114; the figure for 2006 was 808. However, in the first three months of 2008 alone Brock and Waldman found 889 uses of "maverick."

Press stories announcing his selection of Alaska Governor Sarah Palin as his vice-presidential running mate described the decision in terms of McCain's nonconformist image. *Washington Post* staff writer Chris Cillizza wrote: "In choosing Palin, McCain also doubles down on the maverick argument; Palin is the face of reform in the Republican Party nationally and is clearly not of Washington — a key element of her biography given how negative voter sentiment toward the nation's capital is currently."

However, according to *Congressional Quarterly*, McCain voted with the Bush administration 95 percent of the time in 2007, more than any other member of the Senate. He voted 90 percent of the time with his Republican colleagues. McCain's commitment to Bush's policy in Iraq still remains one of his key planks.

McCain also works at being available to the press. "John McCain's life is basically a press availability," ABC News senior political correspondent Jake Tapper told NPR. In the 2000 campaign, McCain dubbed his bus the "Straight Talk Express." He made it his policy to be available to the press whenever they needed him for a quote, even early in the morning. During this campaign he has revived the "Straight Talk Express" bus and added a new airborne version: a Boeing 737 "with specially designed benches for the press corps." Between campaign stops, McCain makes himself available to reporters. This contrasts with other politicians, whose handlers keep reporters away from the candidates, while feeding them an endless diet of canned talking-points.

McCain's approach makes it easier for him to deal with bad press. Earlier this year a *New York Times* story suggested McCain had "an inappropriately cozy relationship" with a female lobbyist. McCain called a press conference and responded to every single question reporters had to ask. "By doing that, McCain won points for being accessible in good times and bad — and the *Times* ended up taking heat for its coverage."

McCain also got absolution for his involvement as one of the "Keating Five." McCain and four other senators received campaign donations from savings-and-loan tycoon Charles Keating, Jr. and then interceded on his behalf with federal bank regulators. In 1989 when Lincoln Savings and Loan crashed, taxpayers were left with the largest bailout of the savings and loan failures — \$2.6 billion. The whole savings-and-loan scandal eventually cost taxpayers over \$100 billion. McCain held a press conference and for 90 minutes responded to every question the press threw at him.

McCain seems to get good publicity everywhere except in his own state of Arizona, where the press has borne the brunt of McCain's famous temper. McCain refused to talk with reporters from the *Arizona Republic* and in 2000 even refused to allow the paper's reporter to ride on the bus with other reporters. In 1999, the *Republic* had run an editorial questioning McCain's fitness to run for the presidency because of his inability to control his temper.

McCain's media coverage is what Brock and Waldman call "a parade of double standards." McCain continues to receive donations from corporation lobbyists, many of whom did business before his Senate committee, but the press hasn't called on him to account for these connections or conflicts of interest. McCain has more corporate lobbyists working for his campaign than any other candidate. "So it's fair to say McCain is a media favorite," says NPR's Folkenlik.

The Democrats' candidate, Senator Barack Obama, is a media favorite for different reasons.



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"What journalists do know is that he's an extraordinary orator who can electrify crowds," says Folkenlik. During the primaries, CBS reported, Barack Obama was often treated like a rock star on the campaign trail. His "soaring rhetoric," CBS's *Early Show* national correspondent Tracy Smith claimed, "is moving his audiences not just politically, but emotionally." He even moves audience members to tears on occasion, she said. The press fell as hard for the oratory as did the public.

According to the *Ryerson Review of Journalism*, the first time *Globe and Mail* reporter John Ibbitson saw Obama speak in person, he recounted how the power of Obama's speech affected him emotionally. "I was mesmerized," he said. "I found it very hard to be a reporter that afternoon." Obama owned the ecstatic crowd. "I just thought," Ibbitson said, "what a compelling presence this man is."

Obama is not as easily accessible to the media as McCain. However, he has built a campaign based on the power of the Web to organize a grass-roots network, to raise money, to draw in young supporters, and to energize black voters.

African-American radio stations have added to Obama's acclaim with their "Obama boosterism." Both Black Entertainment Television (BET) and TV One, cable networks with primarily African-American audiences, devoted extensive resources to cover the Democratic National Convention while ignoring the Republicans. "I don't have a problem with the cheerleading," said Darnell Hunt, head of the Ralph J. Bunche Center for African-American Studies at UCLA. "The black press will provide a perspective and viewpoint you won't get from other press."

Then there's the newness aspect of Obama. "The media loves new, and Barack Obama — warts and all — is new," ABC's Jake Tapper told NPR. "John McCain was new eight years ago — and he's not new anymore. And I think that affects the general tone of the coverage."

"With Obama, it's more the story of the man than the man himself," Mark Silva, a Washington correspondent for the *Chicago Tribune*, told NPR. "He's had an amazing trajectory, coming from nowhere, launching an improbable campaign at a time when it seemed that Hillary Clinton was unbeatable."

This newness aspect seems to have provided more of a boost to Obama early in the presidential race than of late. While Obama and Clinton were competing for the Democratic nomination, Clinton's people complained that Obama was getting favorable press. Now that Obama has the nomination it seems that he may be the getting the bad press while McCain gets the good press.

A George Mason University study in July comparing Obama's coverage with McCain's found that most of the reporting from the evening news was opinion-free, but when on-air media personalities expressed personal views, 28 percent of the statements about Obama were positive, while 72 percent were negative. In contrast, 43 percent of the statements about McCain were positive, while 57 percent were negative. Although the study found that network reporting was tilted against both major-party candidates, Obama faced a far more hostile environment than McCain. While Obama has been getting far more coverage than McCain, most of the coverage of Obama is negative.

This is a reversal of the trend during the primaries, when the same researchers found that 62 percent of statements about Obama — new to the political spotlight — were positive, but just 34 percent of statements about McCain were positive. Robert Lichter, the author of the study, said on Glenn Beck's program that Barack Obama got great press and a lot of it during the primaries, but "once Hillary Clinton dropped out of the race, all of a sudden, the bottom dropped out of Obama's coverage." "Far from being supportive of the Obama candidacy," claimed John K. Wilson who writes for the liberal



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Huffington Post, "the press coverage has hurt his campaign by refusing to focus on substance and confirming false charges of inexperience against him."

On the other hand, the Republicans have been concerned about the amount of coverage Obama was getting, but all that seems to have changed with the nomination of Alaska Governor Sarah Palin. The week following the conventions, according to the Project for Excellence in Journalism, McCain's coverage surpassed Obama's for the first time in three months. However, McCain's running mate got more coverage than he did, and most of the press Palin received was bad.

The bad news centered on coverage of Palin's personal and family issues — from her daughter's pregnancy, which she announced, to her husband's DUI, to her public record, which included the "troopergate" investigation, to her use of federal earmarks. Less coverage that is positive may benefit the candidate more than more coverage that is negative.

While Obama has great delivery style and his charisma is capable of working a crowd, what may really make a difference in this mediated world is the press a candidate gets. McCain may, in fact, win the media war (and the presidency) because of his relationship with the press.

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