

Obama vs. Romney as Social vs. Mass Media

by [Paul Levinson](#)

What lessons can we learn about the power of media in Barack Obama's decisive win over Mitt Romney in the 2012 US Presidential election? As Karl Popper often pointed out, you can learn more from failures than successes, so let's look at the worst moment for each candidate in the campaign, and through which media those moments occurred or were brought to us.

Barack Obama's worst moment, clearly, was his lackluster performance in the first Presidential debate. Nonverbally, he looked tired and uninterested. Verbally, he failed to engage Romney for most of the debate. In this traditional mass media event on television - seen by 60 million people - Obama was obviously at a loss.

Romney surged in the polls after that debate. Obama did better in the next two debates, and erased the loss from the first debate. But the subsequent election was not even close. Obama received more than 50% of the popular vote and a landslide in the electoral college.

Romney's worst moment, clearly, was the grainy video recording of his 47% remark that was put up on YouTube and further disseminated on cable and network television. The remark - which attacked 47% of the American population as interested only in free handouts and unworthy of courting by Republicans in the campaign - was first made and the video recorded nearly six months prior to the election. Unlike the debates, the recording and initial postings of this video were not seen by millions of people. Like all social media - or, what I call "new new media" (because unlike the new media of iTunes and Amazon, any consumer can become a producer) - the impact of this viral video grew exponentially over a period of time.

The video was not recorded by a professional news crew or camera. Rather, as Ben Smith points out in BuzzFeed, "Its emergence offers a glimpse at the workings of the contemporary media: Chaotically driven by an anonymous leaker; empowered by ubiquitous recording devices."

Like the George Allen "macaca" video of 2006, the Romney video was his undoing in 2012. In both cases, traditional media played a crucial role in fanning the flames of the story. But the story itself was captured by a recording device which epitomizes a world in which everyone has become a potential producer - every attendee at a rally, every

person in every audience, can be a reporter through which audio and video clips of the event can be seen by everyone else in the world, first via posting to YouTube, then via ripple dissemination through mass media. Multiple copies of the Romney video were eventually viewed millions of times on YouTube, and millions more times on cable and network television.

It is hard to say who was more clueless - Allen or Romney - in the ways of new new media. Allen's error was made in 2006, when YouTube was just a year old and the iPhone still a year away. But he should have known that, even with the media of his time, anything said at a public, outdoor rally could be captured for later national listening and viewing. Romney must have been aware of what happened to Allen and was likely lulled into thinking he could say whatever he needed to please his rich Republican funders, without fear of it being made public, because the venue itself was so private. But not private enough. Nothing is reliably private in our age of smart phones and YouTube. Romney should have known that even the ritziest private venue was vulnerable to social media.

Politics continue to be shaped and driven by new new media - not just by their savvy use in campaigns but, even more profoundly, by the ignorance of campaigns of what new new media can do

The U.S. Presidential election of 2012 thus was a contest not only between Barack Obama and Mitt Romney, but between social and mass media, or brand new and much older media. Social media helped Obama and hurt Romney. Mass media, at least insofar as the first Presidential debate and its single broadcast to tens of millions of people, had the reverse result. As Marshall McLuhan pointed out, it was John F. Kennedy's "cool" performance on the cool medium of television in the 1960 debates – the new medium of its day – that gave JFK the edge over Nixon, and his awkwardly "hot" performance on television. More than half a century later, Romney's strong performance on television, now an old medium, was not enough for him to win the election – because newer, more powerful social media pulled in the opposite direction.

It would be a mistake, however, to count the mass media out. Romney likely would have done even worse without his good performance in the first debate. And, as indicated above, the mass media were a crucial partner with social media in disseminating Romney's 47% video after its initial posting on YouTube. As Isaac Asimov explored dramatically in his *Foundation* trilogy, a declining empire (read: mass media of today) can still exert powerful influence in a new age (read: social media).

But the age of mass media dominance in politics is no doubt at an end. Whether Presidential debates or millions of dollars spent on political advertising, the sounds and images on television now play a secondary role to the sounds and images on YouTube, accelerated by Tweets and Facebook status updates.