

Governing 3.0  
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## INTRODUCTION

Earlier editions of *Governing with the News* by Timothy E. Cook argues for a monolithic media entity where decisions are made by its leaders to use their publications to influence politics and are in turn influenced by those politics. The book proposes the following hypothesis: “news media organizations and their products, far from being independent of politics, are highly influenced by political practices and political decisions.”<sup>1</sup> While this might have been true when the first edition of the book was published in 1998, by the time the second edition arrived in 2005 it was leaning towards untrue and today the hypothesis is false.

This change did not occur overnight, and in 2012, there are still news publications that are part of the governing apparatus as discussed in earlier editions. However, the proliferation of independent news websites, blogs, gossip sites, and the ease communicating directly with “the people” has reduced the news’s governing role. Many of the elements that characterized the news in the earlier “governing era” still exist in the “post-governing” era. News is still “interactive and interdependent,” now more than before since audiences are being encouraged to participate in the news gathering process.<sup>2</sup> In 2012 the diversified media environment creates a hybrid situation, where some traditional publications still retain elements from the earlier “governing era” while others are act more independently of policymakers and this shift has been encouraged by policymakers themselves.

## WHAT “GOVERNING” MEANS AND THE STRUCTURE OF NEWS

For news to have a governing role there must first be an institution of news, and an institution of politics, and the two must merge in a way that creates a new entity with traits of both. *Governing* lays out the criteria for an institution:

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<sup>1</sup> Cook, Timothy E. *Governing With The News: The News Media as a Political Institution*. 2nd ed. Studies in Communication, Media and Public Opinion. Chicago: The University of Chicago Press, 2005. 193.

<sup>2</sup> Ibid. 12.

Taken-for-granted patterns of behavior valued in and of themselves encompass procedures, routines, and assumptions, which extended over space and endure over time, in order to preside over a societal sector.<sup>3</sup>

*Governing* calls the news a “coproduction” resulting from the combined efforts of “news media and government” and that this collaboration turns the news media into a part of government.<sup>4</sup> The press is institutionalized in the governing structure. The presence of the press office in government agencies is not new, and while it has grown in size and institutional influence, early printers who published newspapers were often not independent, and in many cases held government-printing contracts. These printing contracts for official documents and legislative journals effectively subsidized early American journalism.

The rise of the formal press office, which earlier editions of “Government” contend facilitate the governing role of the news only institutionalize an existing relationship. Prior to the press office, there were individuals responsible for working with, and providing information to reporters. A press office brings all those people to a single place where the message can be managed. The expansion of the press office from the White House to all branches and levels of government simply changed an existing relationship, and did not influence the governing role of the media as argued in *Governing*.<sup>5</sup>

Press offices, as official arms of the political unit can only work within their limited abilities to influence the news, and their governing agenda. Communications directors, press secretaries, and others who work in “press shops” can issue press releases detailing their principle’s position on certain issues. These same individuals can influence reporting by pitching stories; however, this can only have limited impact since it is up to the reporter to choose what to write. Yet, the news organization has the final word on what is published and a lead from a press professional could lead to an unflattering story.

The governing model assumes that all technologies for reaching the public have a high barrier to entry and that they are the only way for a public official to communicate.

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<sup>3</sup> Cook, Timothy E. 84.

<sup>4</sup> Ibid. 3.

<sup>5</sup> Cook, Timothy E. 3.

Due to technological factors unexamined in *Governing*, this was wholly the case, and the lack of a governing role for media is becoming clearer as technology is becoming more diversified.

## THE ROLE OF TECHNOLOGY

*Governing* dismisses the impact of technology for innovations in the reporting and production of news, and instead argues that that the changes often attributed to technology were already underway before the new technology took hold. All technologies, especially the Internet, provide a faster means of distributing news compared to their predecessors. The telegraph was faster than the horse, linotype made production faster than individual letter setting. However, all these technologies were still dependent on delivery, and getting information to the news distribution center faster still did not guarantee getting the news to the consumer faster, especially if that still relied on horse or other forms of slow ground transportation.

When the first edition of *Governing* was published in 1998 Congress had at their disposal a means of connecting directly with the public dating back to the eighteenth century. The *franking privilege*, the ability of select government officials to substitute their signature for postage on official mailings provided earlier generations of legislators the ability to bypass the press and take their governing message directly to the people.

While the rules for franking have changed over time, the current guidelines for what qualifies free postage for members of the House of Representatives are outlined in an official manual produced by the House. Mailings, which qualify for the franking privilege, include any material that pertains to the member's official duties, including "all matters which directly or indirectly pertain to the legislative process or to any congressional representative functions generally."<sup>6</sup> Mailings which are excluded from the

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<sup>6</sup> *Regulations on the Use of the Congressional Frank By Members of the House of Representatives and Rule of Practice in Proceedings Before the House Commission on Congressional Mailing Standards*. The Commission on Congressional Mailing Standards, June 1998.  
[http://cha.house.gov/sites/republicans.cha.house.gov/files/documents/franking\\_docs/franking\\_manual.pdf](http://cha.house.gov/sites/republicans.cha.house.gov/files/documents/franking_docs/franking_manual.pdf).  
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privilege are those which are “personal or biographical,” “political and partisan,” or “solicitations, promotions or endorsements.”<sup>7</sup>

In its classic sense, franking applies to printed communications sent via the official United States Postal Service to voters. Technological changes that began before the first printing of *Governing* facilitate the distribution of explicitly partisan and political messages, which the franking guidelines published in the same year prohibit. In addition, while members could not use their free mailings for these purposes, campaign accounts can pay for direct mailings and robo-calls and nothing prohibited officials from knocking on doors and holding local events to spread their message.

The limitations on the franking privilege preclude members from using franked mail to attack their political opponents or to advance their political agenda. For this these messages, the news industry was still necessary as an efficient means of communicating with large groups of people, although relying on the news does not guarantee that the desired message is prominent or even present. Manufactured news events, a strong media message, and a compelling story all aid in using the news as a governing agent to promote a specific agenda, however the most efficient way to ensure that the public is inundated with a specific governing message is to go directly to the public.

In 2012, individuals have email, social networking, blogs and micro blogs, and online video all as a means to receive an unmediated message from their elected officials. These technological advances further diminish the governing role of news since political actors have greater means to go directly to the voters.

The Internet is different from all previous technological innovations in news production and delivery. Whereas all other technologies involved either the collection or the distribution of news, the Internet involves both, an individual or organization can publish their information onto a website live from a scene and have it read instantaneously by consumers. Previous changes in technology impacted the governing role of news organizations, in part because there was a high cost of entry to participate in those technologies, but also because there were fewer alternatives for average citizens to engage with government and for government officials to engage with average citizens.

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<sup>7</sup> *Regulations on the Use of the Congressional Frank By Members of the House of Representatives and Rule of Practice in Proceedings Before the House Commission on Congressional Mailing Standards*. 6.

*Governing* examines the role of technology in the changing nature of news; however, it dismisses technology as an insufficient explanation for the how news governs alongside official government entities, saying:

The technological explanation misses the mark. Even prior to the invention of the telegraph, the press had started valuing recency, relying on the pony express or the express steamships to get the news from colleagues in other towns.<sup>8</sup>

Recency, or timeliness, has value to news regardless of its governing role and the steamship, pony express, and telegraph were all means of spreading news that had already occurred. With these technologies only being useful for getting information to those capable of turning it into a final produced product, individual politicians still needed a newspaper to take their message over the “last mile” and get it to the people. Obtaining and raw information faster than competitors was a mainstay of news prior to the telegraph. Early reporters would obtain information about a ship’s contents when it docked, and to get that information more quickly, competitors would row out to meet the ship before it docked.

United States government activities in the 1800s, just as today were centered in Washington D.C. and the papers that were based in the nation’s capitol had an advantage for covering the debates and activities of Congress. By extension of covering these debates, these papers were prime for a significant place in the governing structure. *Governing* romanticizes the supplanting of Washington papers by “out of town” publications prior to ascension of the telegraph and the associated wire services.<sup>9</sup> While given access to the debates of government, non-Washington papers still relied on ships and riders on horseback to transport content from reporters in Washington to their publications across the country while their in-town counterparts faced no such obstacles.

Despite the ideals of Thomas Jefferson that the proliferation and subsidization of newspapers would facilitate a two-way communication, the technologies to do so by a means other than letter writing were unavailable until the late twentieth century.<sup>10</sup> If the Jeffersonian view prevailed, that there would be a communication between those

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<sup>8</sup> Cook, Timothy E. 18.

<sup>9</sup> Cook, Timothy E. 35.

<sup>10</sup> Ibid. 41.

governing and those who are governed, the role of the newspaper of the governing entity would be diminished to selecting which content from readers would appear. However, *Governing* suggests a greater role of the news media, that their role is not selecting what messages are received by the governed from the governing, but that the news media is active and influenced in their coverage by politics and policy.

Cook's example of non-Washington papers covering Congress before the telegraph made it easy to do so, demonstrate that publications and their consumers were looking for means of bi-directional communication before technology facilitated it. Jefferson in this case idealized the twenty-first century social Internet, which facilitates direct communication from elected leaders and reaction from those they govern without an intermediary of the traditional news media.

#### EMBRACE OF THE SOCIAL

Franking requires that members limit their message to one that is neither partisan nor political. Relying on the news media carries the inherent risk that a politicians' message could be ignored by reporters or worse be turned against them by the publication. For these reasons, and the zero financial cost, leaders have turned to social media as a means of bypassing traditional news media, thus further decreasing its governing role.

At the first Congressional Hackathon an event where leaders worked to find new ways to use social tools to communicate with voters, House Democratic Whip Steny Hoyer said, "For Congress, we have a duty to make the legislative process as open and accessible as possible."<sup>11</sup> These sentiments were shared by his Republican counterpart at the event, House Majority Leader Eric Cantor who also championed a more open and transparent government that is directly accessible to the people. Cantor said at the event:

In the world of six-second sound bites, it's very difficult for the media to do justice to some of the subject matter. So I'm hopeful that we can foster more engagement by our constituents by using the principles of social design to more directly involve the public in the legislative process.<sup>12</sup>

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<sup>11</sup> Lira, Matt, and Steve Dwyer. *Congressional Facebook Hackathon Summary Report*. Washington, D.C.: United States Congress, Congress, First Session 112AD. <http://majorityleader.gov/uploadedfiles/hackathonreport.pdf>.7

<sup>12</sup> Ibid. 6.

Cantor's values of "engagement...to more directly involve the public in the legislative process" are directly contradictory to a governing media and congressional leaders are actively pursuing their more open and direct approach.<sup>13</sup> Democratic leadership encouraged their rank-and-file members to embrace social media going as far as holding competitions to increase follower counts. A press release by Hoyer announced the winners of the 2011 Member Online All-Star Competition where members competed to increase their total number of followers across Facebook, Twitter, and YouTube social media platforms.<sup>14</sup>

As a social video site, YouTube specifically gives policymakers a direct means to communicate with the voters as individual members and as members of conferences and committees. The launch of "House Hub" and "Senate Hub" on YouTube were designed to give individuals a means of seeking out and connecting with their members of Congress. When launching these two new channels, Steve Grove a representative for YouTube's owner Google said in a blog post "These channels will allow people to get an inside look at the work that their elected representatives are doing in Washington."<sup>15</sup>

Citizens using House Hub and Senate Hub who are unsure of who represents them are provided with a map to look up members by state and district, and those who do know their representatives can navigate directly from the member's Congressional website as many post links to their YouTube pages and embed videos in that location. These videos serve one purpose for the public, to give the "inside look" into government Grove of Google championed. However, these pages also serve a purpose for reporters, it allows journalists to go back and search a member-created and member-curated archive of public statements. These videos can be downloaded and edited by producers as part of their reporting.

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<sup>13</sup> Ibid.

<sup>14</sup> "Hoyer Announces Winners of 2011 Member Online All-Star Competition." *The Office of Democratic Whip Steny Hoyer*, n.d. <http://www.democraticwhip.gov/content/hoyer-announces-winners-2011-member-online-all-star-competition>.

<sup>15</sup> "The United States Congress Is In Session on YouTube." Blog, January 12, 2009. <http://youtube-global.blogspot.com/2009/01/united-states-congress-is-in-session-on.html>.

## CONCLUSIONS

The second edition of *Governing*, published in 2005 recognizes that the media landscape is “more complex” than it was when the book was first published in 1998 when it examined mostly mass media including television and radio. The tools that Hoyer and Cantor promoted at the Hackathon to create a more transparent government are used by regular individuals to make informed decisions about government without the news media as an intermediary. Citizen journalists can take that same information that is available to the general public and professional journalists and produce “idiosyncratic information and interpretations about politics.”<sup>16</sup>

The result of these changes is a more diverse news media not beholden to politics because the politicians no longer use the news media to promote their message to the extent that they did in previous decades. Diversity in news media equates to more blogs and other independent news entities which can base their reporting on the official public record and the same socially charged information that political figures share to advance their agenda of a more informed and active citizenry.

The technical and social changes, which ushered in a more open era effectively ended the governing role of news, the criteria of an institution, which upheld the governing entity in some form, have now dissolved and have been replaced with a new means of gathering and producing news. The hypothesis proposed in *Governing*, that the news media is “highly influenced” by politics and policy, and serve as a governing arm is no longer true.<sup>17</sup> Institutions of old that created the governing structure are now supplanted by evolving news institutions that support a more independent and diverse news culture while simultaneously political institutions shifted and found new means of connecting with the voters and spreading their message.

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<sup>16</sup> Cook, Timothy E. 202.

<sup>17</sup> Cook, Timothy E. 193.

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