

The Virtual Stump

As we move into autumn in a year divisible by four, we look ahead, quite naturally, to November's presidential election. The conventions, the debates, the closely-watched polls, and all the other trappings of our quadrennial political circus are so familiar to us that we rarely pause to reflect on how profoundly they have all been shaped and changed by technology.

With the rise of the primary election system, party conventions are now fully pseudo-events, with merely the vestiges of their proud democratic past. They have become, in the last two decades, tightly scripted and highly stage-managed shows, produced for the benefit of the television camera. And "produced" quite literally: While party conventions of yore were led by chairmen struggling to manage squabbling delegates, today's conventions are lorded over by the same invisible wizards who choreograph shows like the Oscars and Grammys. The only suspense now comes from the possibility that something might go wrong—but the producers have already planned for most contingencies, as demonstrated at the Democratic convention in July. For instance, when delegates tried to wave signs and posters that hadn't been pre-approved by the show's producers, they were surrounded by party goons with bigger signs intended to hide the dissenters from the camera's eye.

The deeper irony in all of this is that a convention made for television was barely covered by the networks. And the chief technological innovation of this year's conventions—the credentialing of the bloggers—only added to the media echo chamber, as Andrew Ferguson noted in *The Weekly Standard*, with journalists reporting on bloggers, and bloggers commenting on each other.

Of course, not all high-tech politics is orchestrated make-believe. Interested voters can read the proposals and pronouncements of the competing candidates online. They can study databases of campaign contributions, which has creepy implications for privacy, but also brings a useful transparency to modern politics. C-SPAN junkies now have more sources than ever for up-to-the-minute news and analysis, much of it quickly irrelevant. For better or worse, the always-online, hyper-caffeinated, BlackBerry-toting, sound bite-speaking politico is increasingly at the center of our democracy. And perhaps one can be forgiven for occasionally confusing politics and entertainment, with people like Dennis Miller and Jon Stewart treated as serious "anchormen."

In the last few months of the presidential campaign season, the most significant of all political technologies, the modern opinion poll, comes to the fore, as we all seek desperately to find out what we all think. "Nothing is more dangerous in war-time," said Winston Churchill, "than to live in the temperamental atmosphere of a Gallup Poll, always feeling one's pulse and taking one's temperature." Perhaps he's right, but who can resist it?