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Did Twitter Kill the Boys on the Bus? Searching for a better way to cover a campaign

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Stuart's lament

Stuart Stevens, Romney's chief strategist and all-purpose svengali, was driving to Oxford on a warm evening in late April. A sixth-generation Mississippian whose first job in politics was an internship for then-congressman Thad Cochran in the 1970s, Stevens had just flown in from Los Angeles, where he is developing a television project for HBO, to appear on yet another panel looking back on the 2012 campaign. The latest one was being hosted by an old pal, the reporter and author Curtis Wilkie, a veteran of eight presidential campaigns who now teaches journalism at the University of Mississippi.

Stevens has never been shy about discussing—or decrying—the state of the political news media. Almost every reporter who covered the 2012 race can recall waking up to find a late-night email from Stevens bemoaning a story, or tweet, about Romney. A number of his compatriots on the Romney campaign, including communications director Gail Gitcho, spokeswoman Andrea Saul, and Deputy Campaign Manager Katie Packer Gage, were also known to fire off barbed emails to reporters about tweets they saw as silly or unfair.

Stevens' missives were often more whimsical or esoteric than mean, but it was clear he harbored some deep resentments about the press and its treatment of his candidate. Several of his colleagues from the campaign said that in the wake of Romney's defeat, Stevens had started drafting a lengthy takedown of the young and Twitter-happy Romney press pack to be published in a magazine like *The Atlantic*, but he shelved the piece because he thought it might come off as a petty exercise in score-settling.

As he cruised toward Ole Miss, fiddling with his GPS, Stevens started to open up about the disheartening deeds of the modern political press.

Maybe it was because he was still chewing over his HBO script—which tells the story of how *The New York Times* revealed the bombshell story about George W. Bush's warrantless wiretapping program—but tonight Stevens was on a roll about the media's declining interest in weighty matters and its growing obsession with process and trivia in the Internet age.

The *New York Times*, he claimed, is bewildered, “like Catholic priests in the sexual revolution.” The Associated Press was “atrocious” during the campaign. Politico served up nothing but process and “terrible journalism.” (Editors at these organizations, of course, disagree.)

A root cause of this, according to Stevens and others in Romney high command, was the experience level of the reporters covering the campaign, and the incentives that motivated them.

Never mind that his argument was limited to a relative handful of reporters in the traveling press—to many in the Romney campaign, the journalists on the plane set the tone for the rest of the media.

“Take someone like Garrett Haake, who I think is a really quality guy,” Stevens said of the NBC News “embed” assigned to Romney’s campaign. “Where is he now? He is out doing local news in Kansas City. What did he do before? A presidential campaign. What? Say it again slowly. Go re-read ‘The Boys on the Bus.’ Their dream was to do a presidential campaign. Talk to Curtis Wilkie. He worked his way up.”

Stevens recited story after story about having to explain the nuts and bolts of campaigns to the newbie reporters covering the race. Forget talking about policy matters, he said. Reporters today were starting from scratch.

“I don’t want to name names, but I had two reporters from leading publications in America in October 2012 cornered me when there was all this talk of polls, and say, ‘Will you explain crosstabs to me?’” Stevens said, pausing for effect.

In one instance, he said he witnessed two national newspaper reporters ignoring a blandly handsome man in pleated pants standing right next to them without realizing it was famed conservative activist Ralph Reed.

“Look at their experience level,” Stevens said of the Romney press corps. “It’s a tradition that newspapers have long had, a long and honored tradition of working people up through beats and merit. Look at Adam Nagourney. A local reporter banging around New York. You go up to Albany and get yelled at by Tim Russert when he’s a flack for Cuomo and he’s calling you at four in the morning screaming at you. And then you cover local politics around D.C. and you cover the Hill. And then you begin to cover presidential politics. Either you think that works and it gives you texture and meaning, or you are going to throw all that out and say, okay, you are going to come to this fresh. The difference just being able to talk to someone who has that context is just night and day.”

In a fit of nostalgia, Stevens said he missed The Washington Post’s David Broder, who would fly to a swing state, consult with a few local honchos, and then go spend time with seniors or veterans and soak in their observations for his columns. Reporters covering Romney, he claimed, had no interest in talking to voters or understanding the mood of the country.

“They would all get off the plane and go out to eat with each other,” Stevens said. “They wouldn’t try to talk to voters except like at rallies or something. But they literally didn’t know how to do that. Nobody trained them how to do that. They didn’t have any mentors. Literally. There wasn’t a senior person on the plane who said, ‘Guys, this is how you do it. There really wasn’t.’”

The truth was that the packed schedule and security limitations of the modern campaign “bubble” mostly prevented reporters from straying too far away from the ship at any given time, and constant deadline pressure prevented the kind of rich reporting that informed Broder’s pieces. That sort of enterprise writing, if it was even being done, was left to other reporters who weren’t required to fly around with the candidate every day.

Listening to Stevens, you almost wanted to conjure the basketball coach Rick Pitino, who languished through a brief NBA detour as the leader of the Boston Celtics many years ago. In a famous press conference in the bowels of the Fleet Center, Pitino once scolded the disappointed and wistful Celtics faithful with an admonition now famous in Boston sports lore. “Larry Bird is not walking through that door, fans,” he said. “Kevin McHale is not walking through that door. Robert Parrish is not walking through that door. And if you expect them to walk through that door they’re going to be gray and old.”

You wanted to tell Stevens that David Broder was not walking through that door. Neither was Jack Germond or Johnny Apple or Robert Novak or any of the hallowed journalists who personified a brand of journalism now on the verge of extinction. The truth was that Stevens and his colleagues on the Romney campaign had waged war in 2012 on a completely new battlefield, full of fresh faces and disruptive technologies. The landscape was shifting under their feet—and they had struggled to adapt.

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This paper will examine the merits of being a reporter “on the bus” during a presidential campaign, at a time when Twitter and other web-driven developments in the media have broken down walls between the political press and the public. A political junkie can follow a campaign minute-by-minute with Twitter, watch it via live-streamed campaign events, or read about it on a growing number of niche news outlets devoted to covering even the most incremental developments in politics.

But as some walls are crumbling, others are going up.

With Instagram and Twitter-primed iPhones, an ever more youthful press corps, and a journalistic reward structure in Washington that often prizes speed and scoops over context, campaigns are increasingly fearful of the reporters who cover them. Any perceived gaffe or stumble can become a full-blown narrative in a matter of hours, if not minutes, thanks to the velocity of the Twitter conversation that now informs national reporters, editors and television producers. In fact, this paper will argue Twitter is the central news source for the Washington-based political news establishment.

This filter-free new ecosystem is having a profound impact on how campaign strategists are deciding to present their candidates to the media and to voters. The speed and shallow nature of today’s political journalism has rattled elected officials, candidates and their advisers in both parties, from the smallest city hall on up to the top levels of the White House.

Candidates and politicians are increasingly trying to present their messages on their own terms, either through politically friendly news outlets or their own social media channels. More and more, the mainstream political press is being cut out of the election process, raising questions about the value of being a reporter on the bus, on the plane, or “in the bubble” with a presidential candidate.

This paper will inspect these phenomena using Mitt Romney’s presidential campaign as a case study, both to scrutinize the modern purpose of “The Boys on the Bus” — a term of art derived from the title of Timothy Crouse’s famous book about the reporters covering the 1972 presidential campaign — and to illuminate some broader, dramatic shifts in the political news media.

The relationship between Romney’s staff and the reporters covering them during the general election boiled over into a toxic mess littered with snarky tweets, questionable decisions and accusations of bad faith and paranoia.

Many of the complaints put forth by strategists interviewed for this paper, from the campaigns of Romney, President Barack Obama and others, might be waved off by journalists as yet another predictable round of press-shaming by partisan political operatives. But their observations should not be dismissed out of hand — the media shares a good deal of blame for the broken trust that now tints so many of the conversations had between reporters and campaign operatives today.

Nor should campaign operatives write off the reflections of the access-hungry reporters involved in the 2012 race. The Romney campaign made a number of strategic mistakes in dealing with their traveling reporters, and those mistakes hold lessons for any politician thinking about running for president in 2016, a race that is already well underway behind-the-scenes.

More than 70 reporters and political operatives involved in the 2012 campaign, along with some outside observers, were interviewed for this piece. The majority of them spoke on the record, but some were granted anonymity to offer more candid impressions about the campaign.

The paper is divided into four parts: An outline of the media organizations that comprised the “The Boys on the Bus” in 2012; a portrait of the frenzied news environment in which today’s reporters and political operatives are operating; a behind-the-scenes look at how these developments collided inside the hothouse environment of the Romney campaign bubble; and ideas for how news organizations and campaigns might improve their work for 2016.

A few disclaimers are in order before moving forward.

First, many of the arguments presented in this paper rest on the premise that access, in the context of a campaign, is a good thing. This should not be mistaken for an argument

for coziness between journalists and the politicians they cover, a dynamic in Washington journalism that has been documented and rightly criticized in recent decades. But the simple act of asking a candidate questions is, at least to this reporter, an essential part of good storytelling and more importantly, informing the electorate. Key insights about a candidate can also be gleaned from conversations with his top advisers and confidantes.

Second, using Romney's campaign as a means to examine the role of the traveling press is an imperfect exercise. Romney is a private man who ran a cautious campaign, and a different Republican nominee might have been more solicitous with the press. This paper also focuses on the general election rather than primary season, the raw and embryonic phase of the campaign that usually offers reporters a chance to closely examine a candidate before he becomes his party's nominee.

Another complicating factor is that Romney was a challenger, running against an incumbent president who happened to be a historic figure with a finely tuned political operation and unusual ability to command media attention. The expectations and behaviors of the reporters assigned to Romney were different than those of the White House press corps covering President Obama. In the White House, security measures and various protocols shelter the president from prying media eyes, even in an election year. Romney might have had Secret Service protection, but like any presidential challenger, he still had to cross a viability threshold with his reporters and with the American voter.

This paper's analysis is pegged to the reporters who traveled with Romney, and draws on their experiences to touch on some larger themes and trends in the political media. This is not to suggest, however, that reporting from inside the campaign bubble is the only way to cover a campaign. Quite the contrary. The value of traveling full-time with a campaign is rapidly diminishing. The road show, according to former Al Gore adviser Michael Feldman, is "packaged news." The most informed campaign reporters are the ones lucky enough to stray far away from the scripted bubble, and as far from Washington, as possible. While plenty of good reporting emanated from the Romney bubble in 2012, the finest stories were being told in the states where the campaign battles were being waged.

A final note: Many of the reporters and political professionals interviewed for this paper were sharply critical of Twitter's impact on Washington journalism, specifically the cynical tone of the online conversation and its preoccupation with insider gossip and process stories. The author of this paper, despite being an obsessive follower of political minutiae, shares many of those concerns. The author, it must be said, has also been guilty of some of the practices that are criticized in the pages that follow.

But it should be said up front that the arrival of Twitter, along with the proliferation of media platforms that now deliver content to hungry, informed consumers, marks a vast

improvement over an era when a small handful of sainted journalists interpreted political news for the masses.

The question now on the table is how this digital firehouse of information is being channeled by a new generation of campaign journalists, and how political decision-makers are adjusting their tactics, because there is no turning back.

THE BOYS ON THE BUS, 2012

Access and the interpretive journalist

Ask any half-decent political reporter why he or she would abandon their lives for weeks or months on end to ride around the country with a presidential campaign in a cramped plane, drinking warm beer and eating half-stale turkey sandwiches, and the answer will usually be the same: access.

“When I started doing this, it was all about the guy and what they were like and how they ticked, and that was the thing you were always trying to get,” said John Dickerson, the Slate writer and CBS Political Director, who covered his first campaign in 1996. “So you physically had to be there, because you might get some access to him, and hopefully get some access to him off the record, too, so you could hopefully get some sense of what ticked inside of him.”

Dickerson’s quest was the essence of Richard Ben Cramer’s great chronicle of the 1988 presidential field, “What It Takes” — a 1,074 page tome that sought to answer the seemingly straightforward questions of “Who are these guys?, What are they like?”

This model of political storytelling really began in 1961, when Teddy White published “The Making Of The President,” his dramatic inside account of John F. Kennedy’s campaign for the White House. Until then, campaign reporting was a dry and literal craft, something akin to stenography. Stump speeches were duly re-written, with little flair or color, for newspaper front pages.

White’s bestseller looked at campaigns in a new way. It was a sympathetic but textured portrait of a man struggling under the great weight of a national campaign, written with all the excitement and dramatic touch of a novel. Reporters who had scoffed at White’s project now envied him — and sought to emulate his groundbreaking style.

Then came the great disruptions of the Sixties, upending the traditional conventions of journalism. With the sweeping deceptions of Watergate and Vietnam, journalists became more skeptical and more aggressive. Political reporters won awards. What was once just a trade became a self-styled noble calling.

With television, some journalists even became more famous than the politicians they covered. Empowered, these reporters took on a new role. They did not just chronicle

politics for the American voter. They *interpreted* politics—and they had a story to sell, too. A premium was put on intrigue, on conflict and on the human element of a campaign.

In a superb 1978 essay about the tendency of political reporters to imbue their writing with literary tropes and amateur psychoanalysis, the late political scientist James David Barber wrote:

Campaign managers complain that their man is not taken at face value, but they do not really want that to happen, because mystery is a prime element in charisma. Probably many voters also want to perceive mystery so they can wonder what their king is doing tonight. Surely it helps the journalistic enterprise—dependent on new stories to write—to see the as yet unpierced shadows in the politician's aura.

But it is more than a simply utility. Year after year of campaign reporting teaches a reporter to let his wonder loose to forage for new characterological hypotheses. It is part of his stance, a mental practice he cultivates. He gambles that his explorations will turn something up. What sustains that quest is close to faith: that in truth there is something there to interpret. In that sense, too, he is a practicing psychologist.

To interpret a candidate—to figure out, in Dickerson's formulation, what makes him tick—a reporter had to get close to him, or his family, or his closest confidantes. To find those people and to get to know them, it was essential to be on the bus or on the plane. Every four years, reporters did just that.

"When a candidate is actually open, you find journalists, especially more experienced ones like me, flocking to the scene," said Joe Klein of Time magazine.

Former George W. Bush communications adviser Karen Hughes remembers that their campaign plane in 2000 was jammed with the so-called "big foot" Washington journalists, from newspapers and magazines and television networks. The campaign considered these veterans to be the primary storytellers of the campaign.

"I felt like the reporters who traveled with us were the most important," Hughes says. "I wanted them to understand what we were trying to do and the story we were trying to drive and the agenda we were trying to set. We set the agenda from the road."

Reporters from The Washington Post, The New York Times and Associated Press were seen as a notch above the rest of the traveling press, she said, because their pieces filed from the road were closely read by elites in Washington as well as the producers of network morning shows and evening newscasts, indispensable platforms for reaching voters. Those organizations generally abided by a certain sense of journalistic fairness and rigor, she noted.

If the Bush team had a story to push, or a leak they wanted to get out, it was as easy as summoning a hand-picked reporter like Ron Fournier of the AP or Frank Bruni of the Times up to the front of the plane. The candidate and most of his senior staff were all there, after all. And they were drinking at the hotel bar that night, and mainlining coffee at breakfast the next morning. For a reporter covering the campaign in the bubble, finding important people to talk to wasn't hard.

Veteran reporters—even those who started covering politics in 2008—all have tales about intimate moments with candidates that seem quaint today.

Dan Balz of The Washington Post remembers Gary Hart casually strolling up to a few reporters in 1984 and asking them if they wanted to grab dinner. “He was just looking for conversation,” Balz said. “There were like four reporters. It was kind of a not-overly political dinner. It was just dinner with a politician. It’s unimaginable today.”

When Jimmy Carter’s campaign was flailing in 1976 after he admitted “lust in my heart” to a Playboy interviewer, the candidate brought reporters into a San Diego hotel room and asked for their advice on how to handle the flare-up. Veteran reporter Jules Witcover, who recalled the scene in his book “Marathon,” refused to participate.

The Tribune Company’s Paul West, a veteran of nine presidential cycles, remembers a sweaty and freewheeling governor of Arkansas talking to reporters for hours on end in 1992.

“I can remember when there would be a group of reporters sitting around a breakfast table in Manchester in the downtown Holiday Inn finishing up breakfast, and here would come Bill Clinton in from his run, and he would plop himself at the table,” West said. “And after 45 minutes you would wish that the guy would go up to his room so you could get on with your day’s work.”

Even Hunter S. Thompson was permitted, somehow, to ride in a limo with Richard Nixon for a few moments in 1968 and have a friendly conversation about football.

But for reasons that will be explored in the coming pages, access—especially in the context of a high-stakes general election—is almost non-existent in today’s campaign environment.

Candidates and their aides, wary of young reporters and private conversations finding their way into the digital space, are fencing themselves off from reporters, and it’s having an acute impact on the American political process.

Top journalists decided to stay off the bus in 2012, because, in the words of Jonathan Martin, “What’s the point?”

“We are just isolated from these folks,” sighed Martin, the national political correspondent for The New York Times. “The layers and layers of staff, and the caution, is something that I think is detrimental to the process because we just don’t have the chance to see who these folks are as individuals, as humans. I think it’s just a shame.”

“For me and a lot of reporters who have read all these great books from our predecessors about flying around the country on campaigns and getting to know candidates and their spouses, that just seems like something from a different era,” he said. “It’s like black-and-white TV in the WiFi era.”

The bills of the bus

On June 1, 1972, when Rolling Stone reporter Timothy Crouse was reporting on the reporters covering George McGovern’s campaign for what would become “The Boys on the Bus,” he stepped on the press coach in Los Angeles and encountered a talented but hungover young scribbler named Curtis Wilkie. It was 7:30 a.m., Crouse wrote, and “two thirds of the seats were already filled with silent and bleary-eyed reporters who looked as cheerful as a Georgia chain gang on its way to a new roadbed.”

Crouse’s book, a cherished text among campaign junkies, is sometimes remembered, even celebrated, as a wild chronicle of the good old days of political reporting, when towering journalists boozed and cavorted with the candidates they covered as they manically shuttled from Milwaukee to Manchester to San Francisco and political ports of call in between. But Crouse’s book, which pulled back the curtain on the way reporters cover a campaign, is really a searing indictment of what was then a cozy and obscure culture of pack journalism. In stinging fashion, Crouse painted many of these great interpreters of the American presidential process as lazy, competitive, cynical and obsessed with the politics of the horserace. A handful of sharp reporters were exempted from his analysis. Wilkie was one of them.

But on re-reading “The Boys on the Bus,” what jumps out about Wilkie is not Crouse’s description of his clear-eyed news judgment or his spectacular “drooping moustache” — it’s the fact that he wrote for The Delaware News-Journal.

A reporter from a regional newspaper like the News-Journal stepping on the campaign bus in 2012 would have been treated like a strange visitor from a far-away land. That’s not because local papers employed terrible journalists or didn’t matter — quite the contrary. The Obama campaign in particular cared deeply about local papers and television news stations in swing states, and courted them aggressively in their hunt for persuadable voters.

Mid-size daily papers, though, rarely sent their reporters on the road. The big boys were there — The New York Times, The Washington Post, The Wall Street Journal, USA Today and the Tribune Company, which owns the Chicago Tribune, the Los Angeles Times

and other papers. But aside from the Boston Globe, which had a duty to cover former Massachusetts Gov. Mitt Romney, the regional dailies were mostly missing in action.

Writers from swing-state papers like the Tampa Bay Times, Columbus Dispatch and Pittsburgh Tribune-Review would periodically hop on the campaign bus when Romney arrived for an area campaign stop, but they were not full-time members of the national traveling press. Even just four years earlier, reporters from the New York Daily News, the Philadelphia Inquirer and McClatchy would come out for long stretches to cover what was, admittedly, a more compelling campaign. But not in 2012.

The reason, of course, was the same reason print newsrooms are wheezing and sputtering in markets large and small: money. At the height of the general election, it could cost as much as \$10,000 a week or more to embed a reporter full-time on the Romney or Paul Ryan's vice presidential campaign, a bill that usually included the cost of charter flights, bus rides, wireless internet, "hold rooms" and food.

A former Romney campaign press official averaged out the weekly travel costs for each reporter:

- \$6,000 per week for charter flights, which accounts for roughly 12, one-hour charter flights a week at about \$500 per flying hour
- \$1,750 per week for ground transportation
- \$1,050 per week for catering
- \$1,050 per week for hotel rooms
- \$280 per week for wireless internet access in filing centers and press holds

Costs varied depending on how many reporters signed up for flight legs and where the campaign decided to overnight (usually a Marriott, given Romney's familial ties to the hotel chain's founder and namesake). Reporters also racked up separate expenses along the way, paying for things like source dinners, electronic equipment, rental cars or commercial flights.

Several reporters interviewed for this paper provided their invoices for travel on the Romney campaign.

Six days of travel with Romney in October 2012 cost \$4,080 for one reporter and his news organization, a tab that included a \$9.54 food charge from Crepe Company, an Orlando dessert specialist. But that was a cheap week.

For the week of Oct. 29 to Nov. 5, the Romney campaign billed reporters traveling with Ryan a total \$12,805, largely for charter flights and "Ground Events."

On a single day, Nov. 1, reporters traveling with Ryan were charged \$4,381 to travel with the vice presidential nominee from Chicago to Fort Lauderdale to Las Vegas to Reno. An editor would be forgiven for questioning the value of those flight legs, given how little news Ryan was stirring up at that point in the race.

The costs were even higher for television networks, which were paying for up to five journalists—a correspondent, producer, “embed” and two-man crew—to cover Romney in the late summer and fall. And that’s not counting the cost of satellite trucks. One coverage director at a national television network said his company budgeted roughly \$55,000 a week to pay for the cost of covering the Republican nominee between August and November.

Most of the television networks devoted early, full-crew coverage to Romney’s running mate but pulled back once the staid Wisconsinite faded from the headlines. NBC was the exception. The network was the only one paying for a similar five-person team to cover Ryan for the duration of the race even though their correspondent, Ron Mott, would go days on end without making an appearance on network television.

NBC Political Director Chuck Todd said one reason for their expensive decision to cover both Romney and Ryan was that his network was “feeding four entities”—NBC, MSNBC, CNBC and Telemundo—in addition to MSNBC.com. He needed the manpower.

Todd also brought up the nakedly liberal leanings of MSNBC, the cable channel that broadcasts his political show every morning. “I had a chip on my shoulder,” Todd said, saying he did not want the news side of the network to be accused of “half-assing coverage” of Romney.

“It’s funny because if you talk to the Ryan people, they’re all like ‘Yep, NBC was always here,’” Todd said. “We have this one editorial page, shall we say, of our network that was a constant thorn in the side of Republicans. They just needed to know that NBC News was serious about making sure we were there every time.”

Most news organizations lacked the budgets of the television networks, and some bristled at the cost of covering Romney.

After the campaign, several print and web organizations, including The Washington Post, The New York Times, Yahoo! News and BuzzFeed, sent a letter to Romney officials disputing some of the charges, specifically citing “exorbitant charges for food, filing centers/holds and ground transportation.”

Meanwhile, the three leading wire services—the Associated Press, Reuters and Bloomberg—were never absent from the plane.

Then there were the major weekly news magazines—Time and Newsweek—which once housed many of journalism’s liveliest storytellers and were seen by campaigns as crucial agenda-setters for media elites and voters alike.

Karen Hughes placed a premium on courting the magazine writers covering the Bush’s 2000 campaign—including Time’s Jay Carney, now President Obama’s White House spokesman. Once Bush was in the White House, Hughes even held a weekly briefing for magazine writers, a routine that no longer exists.

“If they chose to put something on the cover it could drive stories for several days,” Hughes said of the two magazines. “They were important.”

By the time the 2012 campaign was in full bloom, there was only one newsweekly, Time, that the Obama and Romney campaigns cared about.

Newsweek had seen its circulation tumble by a staggering 51 percent between 2007 and the end of 2012, when it rolled out its final print edition and moved to an all-digital format after merging with Tina Brown’s website The Daily Beast. The site was heavy on opinion writing and essays but, with few exceptions, thin on original reporting.

Full-time Romney reporters had trouble recalling any Newsweek journalists in the traveling press. One Obama press strategist described the once-mighty brand as “so unimpactful I honestly don’t know what you’re talking about.”

That’s a startling comment considering Newsweek’s heavy campaign footprint in previous cycles, when they paid for multiple reporters at a time to fly around the country with a candidate—one or two writers to cover the campaign as it unfolded, and another to report only for a behind-the-scenes book project that would be printed after the election.

Time, too, had suffered through the economic downturn with a drop in circulation and subscribers, but the magazine still outpaced its old rival with over 3 million subscribers and healthier bottom line. Their covers still had the potential to generate cable news attention, particularly on CNN and MSNBC, and the Obama campaign was eager to cooperate with them as a result.

Still, financial pressures kept their journalists out of the Romney bubble full time.

Reporters Michael Crowley and Alex Altman spent a good amount of time on the Romney plane during the general election as part of press pool in the summertime, but the writers stopped traveling frequently with the candidate as the race lurched into the fall. Mark Halperin, a columnist for the magazine and its website, also dropped in on occasion.

Nancy Gibbs, the Deputy Managing Editor of Time, said it was “a reflex for many years” at the magazine to dispatch reporters on the bus or plane full-time to monitor a presidential candidate around-the-clock. That impulse was re-evaluated in 2012, she said, a financial decision but one made easier by an increasing lack of access to Romney.

“We are constantly having to make decisions that if we decide to cover X it means we are deciding not to cover Y,” Gibbs said. “So, during much of the campaign it was, week by week, a decision of a finite number of resources with an almost infinite number of choices of how we deploy them.”

The buzz on the bus

Ben Smith made a different calculation. In January of 2012, the Brooklyn-based reporter had surprised many of his colleagues in New York and Washington by wriggling out of his contract at Politico, the belle of the new media ball in 2008, to become editor-in-chief of BuzzFeed, a “social news” upstart geared toward the rapidly growing slice of consumers who read and share news on Twitter and Facebook.

As recounted in a recent New York Magazine story about the website and its meme-obsessed founder, Jonah Perretti, Smith lent a veneer of seriousness to a site that normally trafficked in content like “50 Wicked Adorable Pictures of Boston Terriers” and “Ke\$ha Explains How She Writes Music With Her Boobs.”

Smith came on board in the thick of the Republican primary contest and promptly dispatched a team of young journalists to sniff out news. One of them, Zeke Miller, had just graduated from college in 2011.

Smith, who revels in flouting the dull customs of the legacy media, acknowledged that his lead reporters covering the Romney beat, Miller and McKay Coppins, lacked a certain gravitas and political know-how. But he didn’t see it as a problem.

“I would have rather hired more experienced reporters, obviously,” Smith said. “The reporters I hired were less experienced, but they were the kids who were inevitably going to be the dominant reporters four years later. They were super talented kids. It’s just when I was coming in, the talented people who weren’t spoken for weren’t quite ready. And I figured by my working incredibly closely with them I could pick up the gap in their knowledge and writing skills and that they would learn really, really fast.”

“Fast” was the modus operandi at BuzzFeed. The platform quickly became a go-to place for posting opposition research and “quick hits” peddled by mischievous campaign operatives, at all hours of the day or night. A negative story or provocative web video could fly from the desk of an Obama staffer to BuzzFeed and onto Twitter in a matter of minutes, generating precious clicks and shares along the way.

As an experiment at the 2012 Republican National Convention, this CNN reporter and BuzzFeed's Miller agreed to file their stories—each roughly the same length and on the same topic—via email, at exactly the same time. It took Miller's story just four and half minutes to be checked by an editor and posted on BuzzFeed. The competing CNN.com story showed up online 31 minutes after that.

Smith loved the run-and-gun pace. "Scoops are just the coin of the realm in that world," he said of political reporting in the Twitter age.

When legacy organizations like Time and the daily papers were increasingly yanking their reporters out of the bubble, Smith sent his reporters charging in. Being a permanent presence on the plane gave his reporters a slight advantage over the competition, he said.

"You develop sources on the campaign that you just can't get sitting at your desk," Smith said. "And you develop a feel for the candidate in an extremely competitive environment. It's a relatively small edge, but the environment is so competitive that a small edge matters."

Besides, Smith said, BuzzFeed could afford it. He wouldn't go into details about his campaign budget, but said it was "well into the six figures." From the beginning to the lackluster end of Romney's campaign, BuzzFeed was in the bubble.

So were several other news organizations that were barely out of the cradle. Holly Bailey of Yahoo! News, a former Newsweek reporter who covered John McCain's presidential campaign in 2008, was a fixture in the traveling press. Politico, launched in 2007, always kept a reporter on the Romney plane, as they did during the 2008 campaign. Huffington Post reporters Jon Ward and Sabrina Siddiqui also made frequent appearances in the bubble.

These digital reporters came to the campaign with different backgrounds, objectives and mandates from their editors. Some, like Ward, who had covered crime and city government on the metro desk for The Washington Times, had deep experience in journalism. Others were new to the game and on their first presidential campaign.

Their revenue models were opaque, but the constant presence of these nimble online outfits on the Romney plane—and the growing absence of their legacy rivals—was a stark reminder of which news organizations had the resources to send their reporters on the road and which did not.

"News is hard work and it's expensive and it doesn't usually pay for itself," said Ward. "So it has to be subsidized by something, whether it's side-boob or cat pictures. I work somewhere where they have some resources, and they give me some space to do good reporting."

#embedlife

It's a long way from New York City to Pataskala, Ohio, but Garrett Haake was on a mission. He flew to Columbus, rented a car, drove half an hour east into the Republican hotbed of Licking County, and walked into the warehouse of a construction vehicle manufacturer. He snapped a Sony mini-HD camera onto a tripod and aimed it at an empty podium. Then he tweeted:

@GarrettNBCNews Preparing for @mittromney event in
Pataskala, OH. #decision2012

It was July 27, 2011, and Mitt Romney was getting ready to deliver a campaign speech. Haake's job, starting at that moment, was to be at Romney's side, for every minute of every hour of every day, from then until Romney won, lost or dropped out of the race.

Haake, a genial Texan with a rangy build and close-cropped blond hair, came to embody what the Romney campaign resented about the modern traveling press corps. It wasn't that Haake did anything wrong, or particularly egregious. He was a nice guy. He worked extremely hard. He broke a big story or two. In fact, in conversations with top decision-makers in the Romney campaign, Haake was frequently cited as a reporter they personally liked. Haake did everything he was asked to do by his bosses at NBC, who lavished praise on his work.

But Haake was an embed. And the Romney campaign loathed embeds. From the earliest weeks of the campaign, even before Romney won the Republican nomination, his advisers came to view the entire press corps through the prism of these youthful, multi-tasking TV journalists who were covering their first presidential campaign.

"If I had to pick three words to characterize the embeds, it would be young, inexperienced and angry," said one of Romney's top advisers who wished to remain anonymous. "Their first journalistic assignment was being given a camera and sent on the plane of a presidential candidate. It's remarkable. They have no formal or practical reporting experience."

The Romney campaign's amazement at this phenomenon is somewhat surprising, since networks have been sending young producers on the road with campaigns for decades. Romney advisers actually developed a friendly relationship with the embeds who covered the candidate's short-lived presidential effort in 2008. But in 2012, when Romney won the Republican nomination, it was a different ballgame.

ABC, CBS and NBC began assigning "embeds"—originally known as off-air reporters, or "off-airs"—to travel with presidential candidates sometime in the 1980s. It's unclear which cycle was the first to see this new species of campaign reporter, but a brief article in a 1988 issue of *Time* about "the kids on the bus" referred to the off-air model as "the latest innovation in network political coverage."

The job developed out of necessity. Television correspondents often had to hop off the plane in the evenings to file packages or do stand-ups for the nightly newscasts, and the campaign would fly on to the next city without them. That meant somebody from the network had to remain on board and stay glued to the candidate at all times for editorial purposes. In another morbid sense, the embeds were on “body-watch” —in case the candidate fell down some steps, keeled over with a heart attack, or got shot.

The task of embedding full-time with a campaign alongside veteran newspaper and wire reporters usually fell to some talented and hungry young producer. Every four years, hundreds apply for these coveted network positions, which have launched more than a few careers in journalism.

Veteran political writer Mark Halperin was an off-air reporter covering Bill Clinton for ABC News in 1992. John Berman, now a CNN anchor, was an off-air covering George W. Bush for ABC in 2000. Alexandra Pelosi, the daughter of Nancy Pelosi, spun her experience as an NBC embed—and her off-the-record video footage—into a light-hearted HBO documentary about the same Bush campaign called “Journeys With George.”

Embeds from the 2008 campaigns of Barack Obama, Hillary Clinton and John McCain leap-frogged up the television news food chain, landing correspondent gigs, overseas postings or prestigious producer slots on shows like “60 Minutes.” Some took jobs in print and began covering Congress and the White House. The author of this paper was a CNN embed on the 2008 campaigns of Hillary Clinton, John McCain and Sarah Palin.

For an ambitious 20-something willing to sacrifice his or her personal life for a year or longer—and risk gaining a few pounds along the way—it is a once-in-a-lifetime opportunity.

“In addition to the reporting, your job was to be the concierge with campaign, to help with bookings, to help with every little thing, to be the liaison between the campaign and the network,” said Berman, who was 26-years old when he covered the Bush campaign.

Berman’s road trip with the Bushies came before the all-consuming demands of the Internet. Online access was scarce, and reporters did not yet have BlackBerrys. The Bush press corps used email once or twice a day from filing centers, where they could connect to the web via modems and phone jacks.

Berman wrote a story for the network’s nascent website “a few times a week.” If he or his colleagues had a scoop, they would sit on it and wait to break the news on broadcast.

The relative free time allowed Berman, either in Austin or on the campaign trail, to develop sources in all levels of the Bush campaign and relay precious information and gossip back to the producers, correspondents and anchors back in New York and

Washington. He would send a detailed daily note via email that would, in his words, “really direct the network reporting on the candidate.”

“It was, in a sense, a reporter’s dream because you had all the time to gather information and not as much pressure to churn it out,” he said.

Berman hustled. He had dinner at Karl Rove’s house twice. He sourced up with the campaign baggage guys. Diane Sawyer would call him looking for inside dirt.

“I would have the anchors calling me all time, and I was just a little twerp,” Berman said.

Today, embeds are expected to be a similar resource for their networks. But their portfolios today have expanded dramatically, with their primary role being to shoot video for their parent networks and their cable partners, websites and local television affiliates.

ABC, CBS, NBC, Fox News and CNN assigned one of these hybrid reporter-producer types to cover each of the Republican candidates. Like Haake, most of them began chasing their candidates to pancake breakfasts and rubber chicken fundraisers in the summer of 2011, many months before the Iowa caucuses formally kicked off the GOP nomination fight.

In a sense, their careers were tied to the fates of their candidates. When Tim Pawlenty dropped out of the Republican race in August 2011, many of his embeds had to go back to their previous jobs or were sent to cover another flash-in-the-pan candidate. After getting a taste of the road, returning home to a desk job at the Washington bureau could be a brutal reckoning.

When Romney became the GOP nominee and the media stepped up its coverage of the presidential race, his embeds rose in editorial prominence at their networks. Show producers looked to them for all manner of Romney trivia, from minor tweaks in his stump speech to his favorite kind of sandwich (peanut butter and honey).

“The role of the TV embeds was to be the Mitt Romney bureau,” says Haake, who is now a reporter at the Kansas City television station KSHB. “You have to know everybody, you have to know exactly what’s going on, where every event happened. You’re part encyclopedia of everything the candidate’s ever said as a TV embed. Your role keeps you tethered to him all the time.”

But that’s only one slice of the job. Yes, Haake had to report, as much as he could from the suffocating confines of the bubble, and send that information back to his superiors. But he also had to file blog posts about Romney’s speeches after almost every campaign event. He was asked to do cable hits on MSNBC. He worked closely with NBC’s lead correspondent on the Romney campaign, Peter Alexander.

He wasn't alone. His fellow embeds—ABC's Emily Friedman, CBS's Sarah Boxer and Sarah Huisenga, CNN's Rachel Streitfeld and Fox's Chris Laible—all had the same demanding daily routine.

They had to produce interviews, babysit cranky satellite truck operators, and mark off space on press risers for photographers. They tweeted—some more than others—often about the colorful aspects of the campaign trail, frequently punctuated with the hash tag #embedlife.

Their colleagues from print and digital organizations eagerly joined in the 140-character fun, a development that grated on Romney officials in Boston who monitored the tweets obsessively, even curating them into lists and sending them around headquarters by the hour.

To top officials in both the Romney and Obama campaigns, the tweets were often navel-gazing and childish:

@GarrettHaake I think Mitt Romney and I are wearing the same shirt today. #embedlife

@EmilyABC Set alarm for ten minute nap and slept. #embedlife

@GarrettHaake Few things say #EmbedLife quite like uploading video from an Applebees off the interstate at 8:45pm on a Sunday night on 4 hours sleep.

@sarah_boxercbsnj Abt 300 here for Romney town hall in The Villages. I think we are in the ballroom from cinderella..?

To their bosses in New York and Washington, the embeds' most important job was to lug around a hi-definition camera to film Romney's every move for broadcast.

During the primaries, with as many as eight GOP candidates out on the hustings in Iowa and New Hampshire, having embeds behind the camera proved to be a cost-saving measure for the networks, which could get useable HD video without having to pay overtime to their regular camera crews. This could be a source of tension for veteran photographers, who sometimes derided the embeds and their "weenie cams."

The demand for embed camera work slackened somewhat in the general election, once Romney became the nominee and the networks began dispatching professional two-man camera crews to go out on the campaign trail.

But even in the fall, it was still common to see a clutch of embeds along the ropeline after an event, holding their cameras above their heads in pursuit of the perfect shot of Romney shaking hands with voters, footage that probably wouldn't be used by their network anyway.

In previous campaigns, union contracts at the networks prevented producers from shooting video.

In 2012, embeds not only shot video, but they were able to put up live satellite signals using a backpack-sized “LiveU” kit filled with multiple Wifi cards that plugged directly into their cameras and live-streamed video back to their bureaus. Romney’s embeds, then, were not just acting as producers, reporters, bloggers and tweeters—they were now anthropomorphic satellite trucks, too.

To Berman, it’s just too much.

“It’s ridiculous,” he said. “It’s absurd. They are asked to do way too much. You are not going to be great camera person, a great reporter in terms of gathering information, and a great writer, and a great producer, which is an important skill. It’s not all going to happen. They are pulled in way too many directions. The amount they are asked to do is crazy. And the value of the return of it is nominal.”

The young and the sleepless

In the summer of 2012, Reid Epstein’s editors at Politico moved him from the Romney beat to the White House. Epstein, then 33, remembers being among the oldest reporters in the press pack when he left the Romney bubble. At the White House, he was suddenly one of the youngest.

This isn’t too surprising. Since the 2004 campaign, with budgetary and deadline pressures weighing heavily on editors, news outlets have increasingly opted to send younger and more digitally savvy reporters on the road with campaigns.

The White House beat, meanwhile, is considered a “prestige” job. Editors and television bureau chiefs often put their more experienced reporters there, even though it’s a heavily controlled and sometimes too-cozy environment with very little news to sniff out. Plus, you can have children and maintain healthy personal relationships while covering the White House. The president lives in Washington, too, after all. Not so on a campaign.

Chuck Todd calls campaign coverage, with its ruthless travel schedule and ungodly morning call times, “a young man’s, a young woman’s game.”

“You have to be single,” he says. “It’s hard to do this with a family.”

In Crouse’s time, when the old pros went out on the road, there was usually just a single daily deadline that left plenty of time for carousing, late-night poker games and skirt-chasing. Crouse noticed that on the “Zoo plane” chasing George McGovern—a second

charter jet filled with lower-rung journalists and television crews—people were dabbling in “pot, hash, MDA, cocaine.”

The TV people were not as rowdy, even in 1972. They had to send their TV film back to New York by noon so it could be processed in time the evening news, so they actually had to be somewhat alert in the mornings. The print folks could afford a nasty hangover.

There is some myth-making involved in all recollections about the good old days, but campaign veterans remember naughty behavior on the trail continuing through the rest of seventies and early eighties.

“I was doing this shit in the crazy ‘80’s, when people were filing on Radio Shack TRS-80s, blowing coke off the keyboard before they hooked it up to the payphone,” said Mike Murphy, a longtime Republican media strategist. “The truth is, it’s Disney World now compared to when I came up.”

By the end of that decade, when George H.W. Bush and Michael Dukakis were on the ballot, the press was working a little harder and going to bed a little earlier.

“There were deadlines, the day ended,” said Adam Nagourney of The New York Times. “So we would definitely go out at night and get drunk. There was sexual intermingling on the campaign trail, but it wasn’t excessive. It wasn’t an around-the-clock party. This was a beginning of a generation of reporters who worked a little harder and drank a little less. The fun of it to me was just covering a great story.”

Coverage of the 1988 election was criticized for being process-obsessed and too soft on the scorched-earth tactics of the Bush campaign. But some memorable pieces of journalism did emerge from that race, including an amusing GQ piece by Maureen Dowd and Alessandra Stanley called “The Dweebs On The Bus.”

In it, the authors described an “appallingly well-behaved” pack of reporters on the bus. They filed stories on “briefcase-size lap-top computers” while listening to tape-recorded speeches on their “Walkman-style earphones.”

“Others underline The New York Times in red ink or murmur into cellular phones to their editors about the day’s schedule,” Dowd and Stanley wrote. “Some tune in to the morning news shows on their Watchman TVs. When the bus stops at a new and strange city, the reporters race off. They aren’t scouting for the best steak house in town. En masse, they swarm toward the nearest Radio Shack outlet. You never know when you may need more AA batteries.”

There were more women on the bus, and a notable concern with staying fit and eating right. “Perrier has replaced the martini as the drink of choice,” they wrote. The biggest scoundrel was Time’s Michael Duffy, who once violated the rules of the Jesse Jackson campaign by smuggling a case of beer onto the plane.

The 2012 class of reporters made their 1988 forefathers look like Motley Crue in comparison. Duffy and many of his peers still only had to file stories once or—gasp!—twice a day, and sometimes for the Sunday edition of their papers. CNN was alive, but cable news was not the hungry beast it is today. Jack Dorsey, the co-founder and chairman of Twitter, was 11 years old.

Thanks to an evolutionary mish-mash of Drudge, blogs, cable, Politico, BuzzFeed, Twitter and a general migration of journalism toward the web, campaign journalism in 2012 was a culture that rewarded hustle, impact and “winning”—even when it came to the most incremental of stories. Plenty of cocktails were consumed, but work was the most intoxicating element of the trail.

Print reporters still had to file day stories for the next morning’s paper, but the notion of a deadline was just that—notional. To cover a campaign in 2012, a reporter had to be always on, tweeting with gusto, filing multiple blog posts per day and preparing for television live shots and “phoners,” all while fielding calls or emails from editors desperate for nuggets of news in an environment that was often devoid of content. And if you were an embed, you had to shoot and transmit broadcast-quality video in the process.

The campaign trail today attracts reporters with the kind of metabolism to thrive in this new world order. To the dismay of the Romney campaign—and their counterparts in Chicago—that meant their press retinue was young and, in their eyes, ill-equipped to cover the most far-reaching and momentous story in the country.

Ashley Parker, one of two New York Times reporters assigned to cover Romney, was 29 for most of the campaign. Philip Rucker of The Washington Post was 28. Most of the television embeds were even younger. Many of the reporters in the press pack were covering their first presidential campaign, but some had covered previous ones and most, including Parker and Rucker, had experience covering politics in other contexts.

The Romney campaign was quick to blame much of their bad press on the age and relative inexperience of their traveling reporters, but they did little to adapt to the arrangement other than to stiff-arm them at nearly every turn.

Both the reporters on the bus and the campaign they were covering would find themselves struggling throughout 2012 to adapt to a treacherous media obstacle course that incentivized speed, smallness and conflict, leaving little room for goodwill or great journalism—but plenty of tweets.

THE FREAK SHOW MEETS THE TRUMAN SHOW

The following item appeared in Politico’s “Huddle,” a morning roundup of happenings in Congress, in March of 2013:

SPOTTED: A casually dressed Sen. Jeff Merkley (D-Ore.) shopping by himself last night at the CVS in Takoma Park, the neighborhood where he lives. No word from our Huddle source on what he was buying.

This is the Truman Show environment in which national politicians and candidates for office, including Mitt Romney, are now required to operate. Every one of their moves is obsessively documented and breathlessly promoted, either on websites or on Twitter, by reporters hungry for even the tiniest crumb of unique information.

The upside to this no-filter new world is that bad behavior can be caught and punished, a fact that former Congressman Anthony Weiner knows all too well. The downside is that even the toilet paper buying habits of the Jeff Merkley—a junior Senator who could walk unrecognized through most corridors of America, at least the ones without Politico tipsters—are no longer off-limits.

The disruptive shifts in technology and media that encourage and enable this kind of political reporting have been at work for years now, and were alertly documented in 2006 by the journalists Mark Halperin and John Harris in a book called “The Way To Win,” which explored the challenges facing any politician hoping to capture the White House.

They dubbed the out-of-whack Washington media ecosystem “The Freak Show.”

The book’s predictive power is flawed: The authors deemed Hillary Clinton a sure fire bet to win the White House in 2008, and conservatives were assumed to have an entrenched advantage in the new media world. Barack Obama is not mentioned once.

Both Halperin and Harris are participants in the culture they describe: Halperin, a Time columnist who co-authored the 2008 campaign tell-all “Game Change,” has made a career by covering the inside game of politics. Harris, alongside his former Washington Post colleague Jim VandeHei, went on to launch Politico, the aggressive political news outfit that covers Washington like ESPN covers sports, from all angles.

Because of this, perhaps, the authors deliver an apt diagnosis of the off-balance reward structure in Washington’s political/media complex, a cutthroat world in which “self-restraint is commonly regarded as a weakness and rarely is rewarded economically or politically.”

A central premise of their book is that the noisy success of insurgent new media entities on cable, talk radio and the web are forcing legacy traditional news organizations to abandon their editorial filters and values in a rush to keep up in the race for ratings and clicks.

If you worked for Mitt Romney or Barack Obama, when Twitter poured gasoline on the Freak Show fire, this hypothesis rang as true in 2012 as it did when Halperin and Harris wrote it in 2006.

The gathering place

For campaign reporters on and off the plane, Twitter was the usually the first iPhone app they opened bleary-eyed in the morning, and the last one they peeked at before falling asleep at night.

Everyone in politics, it seemed, was on Twitter: journalists, editors, pundits, campaign managers, television producers, bureau chiefs, flacks, pollsters, activists, lobbyists, donors, wives of donors, daughters of donors, hacky operatives, buffoonish down-ballot candidates, cousins of direct mail specialists, interns desperate for re-tweets. Even Dick Morris was on Twitter.

“I feel like for covering the campaign, it was part of being part of the conversation and doing your job,” said Ashley Parker, one of two New York Times reporters assigned full-time to Romney’s campaign.

Parker and many of her colleagues on and off the plane came to regret the way Twitter affected newsgathering and the tone of their coverage, but in the heat of the campaign, it would have been malpractice to ignore the social media service for more than a few hours.

When political news broke, Twitter was the place to find it. Top officials from the Obama and Romney campaigns would joust, publicly, via tweet. When news producers back in Washington and New York were deciding what to put on their shows, many looked first to their Twitter feeds.

“Twitter is where that central conversation is taking place,” said Ben Smith of BuzzFeed. “It’s not that Twitter is where you’re discussing the news. So much of it is actually happening on Twitter. It was just the central stream of the conversation for everyone.”

Jonathan Martin of The New York Times, who uses the service to share news, tweet political trivia and swap food tips with other frequent travelers, agrees.

“It’s the gathering spot, it’s the filing center, it’s the hotel bar, it’s the press conference itself all in one,” said Martin. “It’s the central gathering place now for the political class during campaigns but even after campaigns. It’s even more than that. It’s become the real-time political wire. That’s where you see a lot of breaking news. That’s where a lot of judgments are made about political events, good, bad or otherwise.”

Twitter consumed the political class, especially the media, throughout the campaign battles of 2011 and 2012. Among reporters, the pressure to join was immense, even if some of the reporters signing up eyed it warily.

“I think there is a feeling on the part of some folks that if I’m not tweeting, I’m not in the game, and my voice isn’t being heard,” said longtime Washington Post reporter Dan Balz—a Twitter user, but a cautious one. “So much of what we write never quite gets read. At least with tweeting you’ve got an inside audience.”

Twitter launched in the summer of 2006 but took almost three years to reach critical mass in political circles as early users struggled to figure out the point of sending out 140-character bursts of information. Among the early adapters were a young class of web-savvy political operatives and activists, many of them in the conservative movement, who saw it as a way to connect and share information with like-minded people.

A handful of reporters began using Twitter in 2007, but its reach within the political class was limited, and so was its impact on the unfolding presidential race.

By the end of 2008, however, younger reporters in Washington were rushing to sign up, partly as a way to find news and information faster than their older colleagues in the business. The service also offered a way for up-and-coming reporters to push their stories and reporting into the Washington bloodstream, bypassing the traditional pathways up the beltway media ladder and enhancing their “personal brands” in the process.

For talented journalists this was a blessing. Twitter was a meritocracy. Smart reporters who hustled and had a knack for breaking news or delivering incisive, informed analysis thrived on Twitter and were rewarded with promotions, TV bookings or even columns at the stolid news organizations they once derided.

Twitter was also the great corrector. Bad reporting was, generally, mocked or debunked with great speed.

And for consumers exhausted by hackneyed Washington viewpoints and lazy reporting, the discovery of new voices, both in journalism and politics, was refreshing.

“Someone who’s young but has an edge and a voice and an ability to cut through and be concise can absolutely break out, especially if they’re funny,” said Tommy Vietor, a former Obama White House spokesman. “It’s good to cut through the roving, musical chairs game of people that go on ‘Meet the Press’ or on those Sunday show political panels who have a perspective that is often entirely colored by the Clinton administration or the Bush administration or whatever their past experience was that isn’t necessarily anchored in the reality of today.”

Veteran journalists remained skeptical—a few still refuse to sign up—but by the time Politico’s Mike Allen slugged the Feb. 19, 2009 edition of Playbook with the headline “Washington-a-Twitter,” the service had already caught fire in the green rooms, lunch spots and U Street watering holes where political gossip was being shared.

“Social networking programs tend to tear through communities—high schools, upper levels of media—at exponential rates, and Twitter has now fully arrived in Washington’s media scene,” Ben Smith, formerly of Politico, declared that same week in a blog spot titled “Twitter solidifies grip on Beltway.”

The golden era?

Twitter is here to stay. Whether this is good or bad for politics and political journalism depends very much on who you talk to—their ages, their affiliations, their experiences in the news business or their roles in the political universe. The answer is most often a qualified one.

“Twitter is a really imperfect medium,” said Maggie Haberman, a senior reporter for Politico. “I use it. We all use it. But the reality is that 140 characters is not ideal and I don’t think that anybody would argue that it is.”

There are plenty of skeptics and evangelists standing on both sides of the Twitter debate.

Tim Miller, a GOP operative and former spokesman for the Republican National Committee, remembers being a college student starved for updates about the 2000 presidential campaign, but having only limited resources to find them.

“The only information a 19-year old political junkie like me could get on the campaign was from one random politics blog I stumbled upon, Judy Woodruff’s TV show on CNN, stodgy newspaper coverage, or I’d have to go to the library to read a weeks-old copy of the Weekly Standard,” he said.

Now, he argues, we are living in “the golden era of political news,” where consumers have at their fingertips polling data, an array of viewpoints, behind-the-scenes reporting and the ability to follow a campaign minute-by-minute on Twitter. Miller, whose job is to sift through a digital avalanche of news and construct a narrative that he can peddle to the media, thrives on having as much information as possible.

“Our current political information environment is an unqualified benefit for voters and our democracy,” Miller said. “To complain about the triviality of Twitter and glorify the golden era of journalism is ridiculous. For starters, there was no such thing. Letting a bunch of cranky old white men determine what they deemed worthy of the masses’ ears only served them and the ruling elites who were in on the joke.”

In a macro-sense, it's hopeless to argue with Miller and mount a case for a time when news wasn't at our Googling fingertips and political intelligence was closely kept by a privileged cluster of Beltway insiders.

But a variety of studies have found that a byproduct of this free-flowing information, on social networks and other media platforms, is an increase in partisanship, as like-minded communities of people silo themselves in their preferred news bubbles. Conservatives are only listening to conservatives, and liberals to liberals.

And in Washington, political insiders are mostly just talking to political insiders.

Liz Sidoti, the National Politics Editor of the Associated Press, called Twitter "a great measure of what a narrow select band of people are talking about in this business."

"In that sense, it's a good tip sheet, but one that has no standard and has a lot of opinion and snark," Sidoti said. "What it's done, it's created a groupthink, and the groupthink component of it is really kind of scary. It means we're all reporting the same thing, and only half of it might be right. We are thinking the same way. It's become the new conventional wisdom setter, and that conventional wisdom gets amplified as well, because you have editors sitting in bureaus watching this stuff. When everything is in 140 characters, it gives a skewed version of reality, and that impacts how editors think about what reporters should be covering, and it impacts what reporters think is important."

Flacking Twitter

During the 2010 midterms and by the beginning of 2011, when the Republican primary season was beginning, political operatives understood the potency of Twitter as a way to watch, and influence, how narratives were forming among journalists.

Romney adviser Eric Fehrstrom said his campaign began to notice this phenomenon during the marathon GOP primary debate schedule.

"Every debate reinforced how important Twitter was to the coverage of the campaign and how it presaged the reporting you'd be seeing later that evening on TV or in the next day's newspapers," he said. "In every debate we would open up our laptops and would call up Tweetdeck, and we'd be able to search all the Romney mentions, whatever the debate hashtag happened to be for that debate. We would search all that, and be able to react in real time to what people were thinking and saying about the candidate. It became part of the rapid response. The most important element of the debate rapid response was reacting to Twitter."

Fehrstrom said Twitter "made it easier to spin."

“We knew if there was a favorable storyline that was developing on Twitter, we knew to take that and emphasize it in the spin room,” he said. “If there was negative storyline that had developed during the debate we knew that that was going to be a talker in the spin room. And we would prepare a specific response to that.”

The trend was most evident during the first general election debate between Obama and Romney in Denver. Even a casual observer watching Twitter during the debate could see that Obama, with his halting and uninspiring stage presence, was losing the spin war before the debate had even concluded.

Longtime New York Times political reporter Adam Nagourney, who took a pass on the 2012 campaign while spearheading a new general interest beat in California, observed how the debate consensus formed rapidly on Twitter. “It was kind of weird,” he said. “Four years ago it would take little time for opinions to coalesce.”

There were eye-rolls in the press file at the University of Denver when, just 40 minutes into the showdown, Ben Smith posted an item on BuzzFeed titled, “How Mitt Romney Won The First Debate.” But Smith was only reporting what was obvious to any political junkie with half a brain—Obama was stumbling badly and quickly losing control of the narrative.

Smith just didn’t feel the need for the bell to ring before posting his story. The judges of Twitter had already delivered their verdict.

“We were clobbered in almost every way in the first debate,” said David Axelrod, a top adviser to President Obama. “One thing was clear was that the Republican-oriented tweeters, and also their influence on what reporters were tweeting, was far more effective in the first debate than our efforts. And we really beefed up on those efforts in the second and third debates. These tweets tend to frame how people are reading this and how they are evaluating what they are seeing. Twitter was a big player in the debates. Twitter is a powerful force.”

Throughout the campaign, reporters on and off the bus began to notice something startling: Campaign operatives seemed to care more about their tweets than the stories they were actually writing or linking to.

“I could write a piece that was incredibly critical of either campaign and no one would care,” said John Dickerson, the CBS News Political Director and Slate columnist. “And say one snarky thing on Twitter and you get phone calls and outraged emails from both campaigns.”

This depended, of course, on the reporter’s platform: The campaigns considered an AP story that might be published in thousands of local papers to be more consequential than, say, a blog post on ABCNews.com.

But it was true that Twitter became the first place that campaign press operatives went to engage with journalists, either to halt one storyline from developing or to peddle another.

“I got more push-back from the campaign for tweets than for anything I ever wrote online or said on television, easily,” said Garrett Haake of NBC News.

Strategists in the campaigns came to understand that the meta-narratives of a race were no longer being formed by a small group of ink-stained print reporters riding around on a bus in Ohio. For the operative class, this presented both danger and opportunity.

“The Boys on the Bus model, where a handful of people analyze and interpret a candidate for the entire country, those days are gone,” said Ben LaBolt, the Obama campaign’s national press secretary. “There’s a lot of reasons for it: You can go online and watch candidates directly. The Twitter narrative, in some ways, allows anybody to be on the bus and to communicate their impressions. Their impressions of something might take off and lead to a new narrative. That’s absolutely the case.”

#getoverit

Political knife-fighters in 2012, the good ones at least, understood that journalists were getting much of their information from other political insiders on Twitter, and found ways to use it to their advantage.

They knew that a well-placed leak, a provocative statement or even the lamest scoop could snowball on Twitter and force rival news outlets to chase the story and turn it into a much bigger deal than it actually was.

In the spring of 2012, North Carolina Gov. Bev Perdue was fending off questions about an ongoing sexual harassment scandal that was roiling the state Democratic Party. Republicans were accusing Democrats, including Perdue, of a nefarious cover-up.

When Jon Camp, a reporter for Raleigh TV station WTVD, asked Perdue about the controversy in April, the governor offered this response:

“Jon, get over it, none of us ever condoned or put up with or tolerate sexual harassment. It’s unacceptable, intolerable and illegal. What we have here and what has been going on here is an internal personal matter being dealt with by this party.”

Most of Perdue’s answer came straight out of the crisis communications playbook. But three words did not.

Rob Lockwood, a communications officer at the North Carolina Republican Party, invented a hashtag—#getoverit—and his team in Raleigh started tweeting.

Forget that Perdue had already announced she wasn't seeking a second term: Lockwood's mission was to stir up trouble for Democrats, and Twitter was the place to do it.

The #getoverit hashtag quickly drew notice from conservative activists and writers. Soon after, staffers at the Republican Governors Association in Washington noticed. The chairman of the Republican National Committee, Reince Priebus, even got into the act—taunting Democratic National Committee chairwoman Debbie Wasserman Schultz with this tweet:

@Reince WOW. All NC Gov. Perdue have to say about sex harassment & cover-up at the @NCDemparty is #GetOverIt? Agree @DWSTweets? <http://bit.ly/HRpNF3>

Reporters from mainstream news outlets, including the Raleigh News & Observer and Politico, took notice of the trending story and covered it.

"You can control so much with so little," Lockwood would say later. "You can ruin someone's week with a damn hashtag. It wasn't a piece of mail. It wasn't a TV ad. It was a hashtag that defined a news cycle."

'A link is a link, dude'

LaBolt, Obama's press secretary, said that back during the 2008 campaign, his press shop could safely assume that the producers of the network television morning shows would read, or at least scan, the front page of The New York Times before going to air each day.

That was no longer the case in 2012.

The campaign correctly figured out that reporters, producers, anchors—and voters—are gathering information from an ever-expanding, complex patchwork of news and opinion sources beyond the dead-tree front pages of the legacy newspapers. Twitter became the clearinghouse for that news.

"That's one of the reasons why any time we got a story placed, either a proactive push on the president or a contrast on Romney, we'd create a digital package to push out with that story to make sure that people actually saw it, because we couldn't assume that getting it in the paper was enough to get it on TV nationally, and certainly not regionally," he said.

The Romney campaign took similar steps.

Placing a story on the front page of The New York Times print edition didn't really matter so much in 2012 outside the confines of the "Morning Joe" green room.

That didn't mean those stories weren't, in themselves, weighty or influential. Nearly everyone interviewed for this piece, from Romney campaign officials to BuzzFeed reporters, pointed to The New York Times as perhaps the most significant news outlet in the country—but still only one piece of a larger media puzzle.

"Relatively, I think it is still the most authoritative thing," Nagourney said of his paper's hallowed A1 real estate. "Does it have the kind of clout and kind of adjudicating power that it once had? No. There is much more out there. We put a lot of more out than just the front page. The front page does not have the kind of unambivalent clout that it once had. But do I think it has more than anything else? Yeah."

The Times content that mattered most to the people working inside the campaigns was the their digital product—the stories seen by political insiders who woke up in the morning and immediately starting scanning the headlines on email and Twitter using their BlackBerrys or iPhones.

"A link is a link," said Matt Rhoades, Romney's campaign manager. "I've said this a million times. I used to say it going back to, like, 2004. A link is a link, dude."

It might be a link to The New York Times or Politico or RedState or ThinkProgress—an online story, no matter how biased or thinly reported, had a URL that could be peddled to other news outlets, linked to the Drudge Report and, most importantly, pumped directly into the Twitter feeding frenzy where influencers lived.

One Obama campaign press official said flatly that BuzzFeed, which thrived on Twitter, was a more reliable outlet to reach media elites than CBS News.

"I hate to use the word, but they're just buzzier in political circles," the Obama official said of BuzzFeed. "They contributed more to political opinion among the political class."

Buzzfeed could get campaign press operatives the link they needed—and quickly.

"In today's media age, BuzzFeed is just as important as The New York Times, and the price of doing business is cheaper," said Mo Elleithee, a Democratic strategist who was Hillary Clinton's traveling press secretary in 2008. "All I need is the link. Matt Drudge taught us that. The Internet takes care of the rest."

While blogs and news websites had been serious players in past campaigns, it was only this cycle that many seasoned reporters realized their print content was going mostly unnoticed.

"I would get pushback from a campaign for a web story or a tweet, something that was happening more or less in real time," said Paul West. "I never got one single reaction, pushback, comment for something that appeared in print. And that goes for the Obama campaign that was based in Chicago and was reading the Chicago Tribune."

Campaign junkies were just hungry for the latest tidbit, regardless of where it came from.

“With new information, people remember and even care less and less where they got it,” said Ben Smith.

Editors of iconic newspapers were also aware that the campaign information wars were mostly playing out online instead of in their thinning print editions. Marcus Brauchli, the executive editor of *The Washington Post* during the election, beefed up what he called the paper’s “intra-day” reporting staff, hiring more reporters to work under franchise bloggers like Chris Cillizza and Ezra Klein, in order to feed the web monster.

“I don’t think you can call us a newspaper anymore,” Brauchli said. “Basically these are news organizations. We have one more big platform than some of our real-time rivals do, but we produce video and breaking news throughout the day.”

The link-driven culture of 2012 meant that campaign operatives had a major advantage over previous cycles: They could increasingly sidestep the traditional print and television media filters of Washington and create news for the web on their own terms.

Campaigns produced their own content and pushed it out through their social media channels and watched as the rest of the press scrambled to chase it. Not that it was all good news: Press shops repeatedly had to play whack-a-mole to knock down false or unflattering stories that popped up on Twitter by the minute.

But the campaigns could go to friendly outlets to generate a favorable story, and then move that link around to other news organizations.

One Romney official pointed to Robert Costa, a talented conservative reporter for *The National Review*, as an example of how this process works. Costa was skilled at sniffing out and breaking his own news, but the Romney campaign also liked to go to him with scoops and inside information.

“No offense to CNN.com, there is a lot of traffic there, but I can go to Robert Costa and I can take his link off *The Corner* on the *National Review* and I can generate as much news out of *The Corner*,” the official said. “Now with Twitter, you can make your own news and put it up on your Twitter feed.”

The balance of power was tipping away from the press and toward campaigns, even though reporters and their news organizations in 2012 had more platforms to deliver news and opinion than at any point in the history of mankind.

Pew’s Project for Excellence in Journalism documented this phenomenon during the campaign by studying the sources of the major narratives and assertions about Obama

and Romney. The results were striking, and in some ways embarrassing, for the news media.

Political candidates and their allies—spokespeople, cable news surrogates, Super PACs and the like—were the source for about half of the prevailing narratives about the campaigns in the press, Pew found. The media was not setting the agenda: they generated only about a quarter of the national political conversation. That’s a remarkable shift from the presidential race of just 12 years ago, when reporters and pundits generated most of what was talked about during the campaign. In 2000, 50% of the “master narratives” and claims about the candidates emerged from media types. Just 37% of the discussion emerged from campaigns and their allies.

The Pew study determined that today, “journalists to an increasing degree are ceding control of what the public learns in elections to partisan voices ... The press is acting more as an enabler or conduit and less as an autonomous reportorial source.”

The erosion of sourcing standards in the press was a notable factor in this shifting power dynamic, Pew found.

“Interestingly, 41% of the time that these surrogates appeared, they were anonymous or on background, meaning a formal staffer was allowed to talk about a candidate without being named,” Pew wrote. “That ratio is higher from what we have found in the past. In 2004, for instance, 33% of the assertions were from unnamed sources.”

Partisan claims went unchallenged as reporters scraped for even the tiniest shred of news or he-said-she-said nonsense.

Campaign operatives, when they bothered to go through a mainstream media complex they no longer thought they needed, still fed national reporters a pellet of news here and there.

Most of the time, though, they were looking for other avenues to get their message out.

“We’re just fishing where the fish are,” said David Axelrod. “Our job as a campaign was to find out the viewing habits and the reading habits of the people who were going to be decisive in the campaign. And as it turns out, a lot of those people were low-information voters who were absolutely not reading The New York Times and likely weren’t reading a newspaper at all. They weren’t watching the CBS or ABC or NBC Nightly News. They weren’t watching Morning Joe. They were more likely to have been watching ESPN or re-runs of Star Trek.”

#nobodycares

From afar, the tweets and reporting that drove campaign coverage looked kind of silly.

“Washington is weird that way,” said New York Times media columnist David Carr. “Sometimes I hear what some of my friends are chasing and I’m like really? That’s it? Washington thrives on a kind of incrementalism that wouldn’t reach the standard of news elsewhere.”

Carr, who was watching the campaign from the safe distance of his home in New Jersey, was not immersed in the daily minutiae of the race. But even people who collected their paychecks toiling in politics were struck by how narrow the day-to-day reporting seemed.

“There is all this process talk,” said Mike Murphy. “Like, ‘Senator Bagadonuts endorses!’ Or, ‘Oh my God! They’re going to fire their focus group guy for Latinos!’ All this staff shit. But in the old days, Jack Germond would look over and say, ‘God, shitty day huh? You’re trying to roll out shit endorsements?’ And he would be right. And his column would be very smart about it in a day or two. And often you’d have to give him some real news to avoid that column, because he was on to you, because he’s covered 100 of these fucking things.

“Now what happens is Twitter makes the campaigns a lot noisier, and the noise can eclipse the news,” Murphy said. “And there is no incentive in Twitter journalism or any of this kind of 23-year-old embed journalism to have a filter, an editor, to separate the noise from the news. So the noise becomes the news.”

When Jon Huntsman ended his mercurial bid for the Republican nomination in late January 2012, his staffers found themselves stuck in South Carolina without a job. The upside: They were stuck in Charleston, which meant food and drink were quickly put on the agenda.

After a few beers, one of Huntsman’s press aides, Jake Suski, decided to start tweeting at political reporters with the hashtag #nobodycares. It was a riff on the tart answer—“Nobody cares”—that Huntsman gave in response to John McCain’s endorsement of Romney before the New Hampshire primary.

In one tweet, Suski mocked New York Times polling guru Nate Silver:

@jakesuski #nobodycares RT @fivethirtyeight: We’ll have a new SC forecast out in about 10 minutes.

Suski was having fun, but he was also aggravated with the way journalists on Twitter obsessed over stuff like stagecraft and fundraising instead of the “real” issues—taxes, jobs, schools—that voters say they care about in polls.

Accusing political reporters of fixating on process is like accusing Ryan Gosling of being handsome. It’s an obvious statement, and not a new one. Media critics, politicians and academics have been documenting the phenomenon for decades.

“The reporter’s instinct is to look first to the game,” Thomas Patterson wrote in his landmark book “Out Of Order,” a study that was published 20 years ago but remains amazingly salient today.

“Although the reporters’ view is narrow, their claims are broad,” Patterson noted about the tendency of campaign reporters to make big deals out of small things.

The criticism bubbled up anew every four years, but the 2012 media was covering the campaign through a magnifying glass never before seen in political journalism, treating every ordinary development—candidate travel plans, staffing decisions in Iowa, miniscule polling shifts, veepstakes voodoo—as if it were the invasion of Baghdad.

Tip sheets like The Hotline and ABC’s “The Note” had covered the inside game in past elections. But an array of reporters and political operatives interviewed for this piece pointed to Politico, the aggressive website that launched in January 2007 and unleashed swarming coverage of all-things-Washington, for promoting a brand of reporting that fetishizes process talk and beltway gossip in a never-ending quest for the clicks.

“The Internet forever changed political journalism,” said Sidoti. “Folks who decided to use the Internet to become specialized in political journalism with a focus on the bottom line has led to almost a phenomenon of process and tidbit journalism that has put the pressure of on the non-trade publications, the mainstream publications, to follow suit. Unfortunately, I think we in general as a political journalism industry have not done a good enough job in staying strong with our roots, which is standard-based journalism that breaks news, focuses on the big stuff. What it means and how it matters to you.”

At the same time, it was next to impossible to find a reporter who said they didn’t subscribe to Mike Allen’s morning news roundup, “Playbook,” or peek at Politico at least once a day. During the campaign, Politico reporters Maggie Haberman and Alex Burns regularly broke news on a blog that was considered essential reading by other reporters and political insiders.

Chuck Todd said Politico’s style is so deeply ingrained in the Washington’s news culture that he hears top White House officials griping about them on a regular basis.

“To them, all journalism is covered through the prism of Politico now, or BuzzFeed and that mindset, whether that mindset is there or not,” Todd said. “Look, I think there are a lot of reporters who are stuck with editors who are rewarding that, so that’s their reward system. And that’s messed up. The whole game is just clicks for so many people.”

John Harris, Politico’s editor-in-chief, called these claims a great misunderstanding of the kind of work the organization is doing as it covers the White House, Congress and regulatory agencies around town with a newsroom of roughly 200 reporters. In 2010,

Harris and his team launched “Politico Pro,” a subscription-based news service covering specific policy developments in sectors like Technology, Energy and Defense.

“The bulk of our growth in recent years,” Harris said, “has been in coverage of policy-making, on critical subjects such as health care, technology, energy and others—including many subjects which The Washington Post and other competitors either never covered or from which they have retreated in recent years.”

But back to Suski.

His worry, summed up so succinctly in that Charleston hashtag, was that the obsession with process seemed to be getting even worse as the 2012 cycle progressed, with more and more reporters jumping on Twitter to find and share content at all hours of the day. Everyone was talking to each other about stuff that, well, nobody in America really cared about.

Turns out he was onto something.

In March of this year, the Pew Research Center released a study comparing Twitter reaction to major events to the reaction of the America public, as measured by polls.

The study examined big political moments, like President Obama’s 2012 State of the Union address and the Supreme Court’s decision to uphold the president’s health care reform law. Pew found a startling disconnect between how Twitter users interpreted the events versus the reaction of the public at large.

The explanation was fairly straightforward: “Twitter users are not representative of the public.”

Only a “narrow sliver” of Americans—just 13%—were using Twitter during the fall campaign. Twitter users are younger and skew liberal. And only 3% of Twitter users “regularly or sometimes tweet or re-tweet news or news headlines on Twitter.”

In other words, what political junkies were talking about on Twitter—the news wire that directly informed what influential reporters, editors and show producers decided to write and talk about on a minute-by-minute basis—was mostly irrelevant to the American populace.

In a digital world where consumers seek out news according to their specific interests, the media is fracturing into niche coverage. As Politico has demonstrated, there is absolutely a market for micro-reporting of politics alongside sweeping, big picture journalism.

But the risk of bathing in a Twitter waterfall from dawn until dusk is that reporters become so consumed with the inside game that they lose sight of what Americans want to read about, said Dan Balz.

“Most people aren’t on Twitter,” Balz said. “It’s just a fact of life. It’s a very small percentage of people who are on Twitter. To some extent it just accentuates the gap between the media and ordinary folks. I think Twitter has an important place but it is not necessarily reflective of public opinion and shouldn’t be mistaken as such.”

Richard Stevenson, who presided over political coverage for The New York Times during the 2012 cycle, admitted that even the Grey Lady was guilty of occasionally lapsing into process coverage. He said the paper succeeded, though, in keeping a larger focus on basic themes like the character of the candidates, their policies and their visions for the country.

Stevenson frequently urged his reporters to step back from the kind of Twitter-driven story “that had a shelf life of like six hours before it gets overtaken by events.”

“Things start blown out of proportion,” Stevenson said. “Everything becomes tactical, everything is about not just winning the news cycle but winning the hour, winning each engagement, and defining the terms of the game before the game even begins. I think one of our jobs as journalists and certainly one of my jobs as an editor during this process was to try to detach from all of that and keep in mind that the vast, vast majority of our audience doesn’t consume news that way and certainly doesn’t want that kind of journalism.”

Speed freaks

Few things aggravate the modern political staffer in the Internet age more than something called “checkbox journalism.”

In Tim Pearson’s telling, this is defined by a reporter who calls and says, “I’m going to post in five minutes, and I need a response.”

Pearson, an adviser to South Carolina Gov. Nikki Haley, says he gets these calls or emails from reporters, both local and national, several times a week. Often, the calls come when he’s away from his computer, or driving to the grocery store, or in a meeting, or just too busy to come up with a publishable response in that exact moment that doesn’t include a filthy word.

But ask the reporter to wait for another 15 minutes? Or 30? Or just have a conversation about the story in question? Inconceivable.

“There is no interest in actually telling some sort of full, all-encompassing story about what’s going on,” Pearson said. “The problem all comes down to one thing—the most important thing in journalism today is to be first. It’s this constant rat race.”

Nearly every political hand interviewed for this piece levied a similar complaint against today’s web-driven reporter. The journalist’s impulse, they argued, is to post a story as quickly as possible, blast it out on Twitter so he or she can be “first,” and update the story later as needed.

The need for speed comes at the expense of reporting that is rigorous, thoughtful and accurate, argued Mo Elleithee, a Democratic communications strategist who worked for Hillary Clinton’s 2008 presidential bid.

“There is less due diligence to check it out and less due diligence to contextualize it,” Elleithee said.

Elleithee copped to peddling his fair share of negative research about opponents over the years. Doing so is an essential part of the campaign tool-kit. But operatives today pass out “oppo” like Halloween candy, knowing that the endless hunger for content is a driving imperative for reporters and their editors.

More and more in the Internet era, he and others argued, one-sided information is eagerly re-packaged as news.

Axelrod said “the race to get impressions and reporting out before everybody else” in the Twitterverse conspires against thoughtful analysis.

“Today, you have in most cases young embeds and less experienced reporters who are basically being fed by the campaigns, who rarely stray beyond the campaigns,” Axelrod said. “I think it’s deluded coverage. This has been a trend for some time. Cable also contributes to it. Everything that lends itself to the free flow of unfiltered, unreflective, unedited information has eroded the quality of political reporting.”

In cases of factual errors, strategists often grouse that corrections are rarely added to stories—language is instead “tweaked” or “fixed” in digital copy. If stories are corrected outright, readers might never see the clean-up because narratives take off so quickly in the Twitter ecosystem.

“The people that offer the middling, half-hearted correction,” says Tommy Vietor. “That shit drives me crazy.”

Journalists have noticed the trend.

Marcus Brauchli, the former executive editor of The Washington Post, calls the instinct to be first with even the smallest scoop or petty accusation “a pretty craven and cynical

way of handling the news.” Brauchli blamed the Post’s Virginia-based rival, Politico, for encouraging reporters to be first with a story rather than wait to flesh it out with context or counter-argument.

“One of the things that I find troubling about Politico is that Politico practices journalism in a way that we don’t practice journalism,” Brauchli said. “They publish things all the time. If one side in a campaign, on an issue, even on something personal, says something about the other side, they adopted an interesting, and I think problematic, philosophy of publishing that before they would check with somebody. If you look at the way Politico does a lot of things, their view was ‘the minute somebody says something, we put it out.’”

His comment drew a rebuke from Harris, Politico’s editor-in-chief, who said his reporters abide by traditional values of accuracy and fairness but are adapting to the contemporary demands of the digital news ecosystem.

“Modern audiences expect and follow news in real-time, not on the leisurely print newspaper schedule of a generation ago,” Harris said. “Marcus is a journalist we respect but he seems confused about both what we do at Politico and the ways in which journalism has adapted to new technologies and the new expectations of the audience.

“These new technologies and expectations have changed journalism for the better—it is more transparent, quicker to correct errors and hold itself accountable,” he added. “It is not just futile, but misguided to long nostalgically for some lost age—far better to build newsrooms that are capable of carrying the best journalism into a new age.”

The Huffington Post’s Jon Ward said there is a certain allure to breaking even the most incremental of stories. On Twitter, you can witness your scoop, or “scooplet,” go viral in real time and collect congratulatory tweets from your colleagues in the process.

But Ward views that type of “ephemera” reporting as ultimately kind of pointless.

“Even if I had an appetite for endless, 200-word posts or just tweeting all day—which I don’t, I find it exhausting and boring—but even if I did, I wouldn’t be able to sustain that for more than five years, faster than the 22-year old who is coming up behind me who is also adapting to new technologies faster than I am,” he said.

Tommy Vietor, who served as spokesman for the National Security Council in the Obama White House, said he was relieved in hindsight that Wikileaks provided its classified batch of leaked documents to The New York Times, which gave administration officials a heads up about what had just fallen into their laps.

The Times dispatched its Washington Bureau Chief at the time, Dean Baquet, and two reporters to meet with military and intelligence officials in a secure room at the State

Department in 2010 before publishing the story, to hear their concerns about publishing sensitive or classified information.

The White House could work with the Times, Vietor said, even if they were furious at them for publishing the leaked cables.

If Wikileaks had delivered their cache to a digital outlet like BuzzFeed or The Huffington Post, he said, he'd be worried they might post that information first, and update their story later.

"It would make me nervous," Vietor said.

Re-tweet journalism

Just as troubling to political professionals is the tendency of reporters to tweet or re-tweet news that they, or their parent organizations, have not confirmed to be accurate.

"The only thing worse than Twitter journalism is re-tweet journalism," said Elleithee. "It used to be journalists wouldn't even dare utter a word unless it's been sourced twice. Now they are broadcasting thoughts after it's only been tweeted once, even if it's wrong, and with no ramifications."

Elleithee and others working in politics regularly grouse about reporters pretending that the commentary or content they share on Twitter "doesn't count" as real news, even though they sometimes have thousands of followers who follow them for news updates.

For Sidoti of the Associated Press, there is "responsibility that comes with the power to publish."

"To me, tweeting is publishing," Sidoti said. "Why is re-tweeting something any different from verifying something and putting it in our papers?"

New media cheerleaders might argue they're just pulling back the curtain on a "conversation" between reporters, editors and sources that was already happening before Twitter.

But the common disclaimer "RTs do not equal endorsements" — the one that's posted on many a reporter's Twitter bio—is nothing more than a lame excuse to tweet anything and everything that flits across their screen without repercussions, said Tim Pearson, the Haley adviser.

He has a point.

In March 2012, an obscure blogger in South Carolina posted an item stating that federal agents were preparing to indict the governor on tax fraud charges related to her

previous work at a Sikh religious society where her parents are leaders. The blogger cited “well-placed legal experts” as the source for his story, which he linked to on Twitter.

The “story” quickly zipped around Twitter and was re-tweeted by reporters from The Washington Post, The Hill, CBS News, Huffington Post and BuzzFeed. The Daily Beast posted a brief news item about the looming indictment. The Daily Caller wrote about it, a link to that found its way to The Drudge Report.

None of those Twitter-addicted reporters had bothered to make calls into South Carolina before tweeting about the story or posting it on their websites, and the few reporters who did bother to do some actual reporting on it weren’t tweeting it—unless they were scolding their colleagues to quit tweeting about a sketchy story that no one had confirmed.

The buzz got so bad that Pearson had to become a registered tax agent for the Sikh temple in question just to get the IRS to produce a letter declaring there was no audit of Haley.

The incident was such an abysmal example of eroding journalistic values that The New York Times later wrote about the false story’s “rapid journey from hearsay to mainstream journalism” in a piece examining “the latest lesson in the perils of an instantaneous news culture.”

“It was all because of some guy on the Internet,” an exasperated Pearson said. “An editor would have laughed at him out of a newsroom if he had walked up to him with what he put on the Internet, and yet real reporters at real newspapers with real standards were able to move this stuff around the Internet with no repercussions.

“Reporters are like, ‘Well, if it’s on Twitter, it’s not the Washington Post, it’s my personal Twitter page.’ Well, that’s not true, because no one would care what you said on your personal Twitter page if you weren’t a reporter for the Washington Post. So where is the oversight that exists for the reporters to be accurate and truthful and not to put stories that are factless out there on Twitter?”

Pearson, never one to mince words, sighed and collected his thoughts.

“It’s a joke,” he said.

THE CAMPAIGN

Being there

There is still value to being in the bubble, a number of reporters and editors said, assuming one’s news organization can foot the bill.

Witnessing a campaign up-close – “going out,” to use reporter parlance -- provides a feel for the mood and conduct of the candidate and his advisers, small but precious insights that can inform bigger-picture stories.

“You get body language from the principal and the staff, you get a flavor for the crowds and for what voters are responding to in the speeches,” said Jonathan Martin of The New York Times. “It’s not without merit.”

But like a number of print reporters surveyed for this piece, Martin bristled at the idea of traveling full-time with a candidate, especially in today’s restrictive campaign environment. The limitations of the bubble seem tailor-made to inhibit the kind of thoughtful, deep reporting in which veteran reporters like to indulge.

Dan Balz of The Washington Post said jumping on the plane can be worthwhile in short spurts, because you can get such a heavy dose of the campaign—multiple rallies, a sense of the candidate’s energy and the crowds—in just one or two days. After that, he advised, it’s time to get the hell out.

Balz, considered by many in Washington to be the reigning wise man of campaign scribes, said he only traveled with Romney “a few times” in 2012.

“It’s been a gradual but steady decline in the value of being in the bubble,” Balz said. “This last campaign was probably as bad as it’s ever been. It was just one more extension of where things have been heading. The access to the candidate is minimal to none and that didn’t matter whether you were traveling with the president or traveling with Romney. It doesn’t mean there is no value in being in the bubble. The power of observation is something important, and I don’t think you can cover a campaign by not going out. But the frustrations of being in the bubble are greater than they’ve ever been.”

Print reporters could afford to jump in and out of the bubble. The TV networks, both broadcast and cable, did not have that luxury.

A vast majority of the raw video shot by the embeds or photographers never made it to air. But if a candidate stumbled, said something goofy or arranged a last-minute press conference and it wasn’t on camera, a field producer somewhere was getting yelled at by his or her boss.

Adding pressure to the TV networks were live-streamed campaign events available on sites like CNN.com and C-SPAN.org. These feeds became essential for the political class in 2012, not just for reporters viewing back in Washington but also campaign staffers in both Chicago and Boston, who relied on the streams to watch the opposing candidate’s daily speeches and respond in real-time.

Television networks worked out pool agreements between themselves to ensure that a camera and satellite truck were present at every campaign event, which meant print and digital reporters didn't have to be.

As for the journalists assigned to the bubble, the "body watch" could reward reporters who lingered just a bit longer than their tired or hungry colleagues at the end of the day.

In April 2012, NBC's Garrett Haake and Sara Murray, a Wall Street Journal reporter also covering her first campaign, lingered on a sidewalk outside a private but open-air Romney fundraiser in Palm Beach, hoping to overhear something of news value.

Romney, who was notoriously thin on policy specifics, gave them something to work with: He floated the idea of eliminating or consolidating the Departments of Education and Housing and Urban Development, and proposed killing the mortgage interest deduction for high-income earners with second homes. He admitted that the GOP had a broken relationship with Hispanic voters, and suggested pushing for some version of the DREAM Act, which would have created a path to citizenship for the children of illegal immigrants.

The comments made news only because Haake and Murray were outside listening to Romney, and the campaign was forced to backpedal the next day on some of his more provocative remarks.

"By having somebody who's there all the time, you stand a much better chance of catching those things which you don't always do," said Haake. "You make a point of being there and, occasionally, it pays off. Not only are you there, but you also have a sense of the context of, 'Wow, this is nothing like what he normally says.'"

'If this campaign were a guy, I'd punch it in the mouth'

And yet, scoops like the one that fell into the laps of Haake and Murray in Palm Beach were rare.

It's hard to be a great reporter in the bubble. Your movements are tightly controlled. Advance staffers and press flacks shuttle you from tarmacs to vans to roped-off press files multiple times a day. The chances of finding an undecided voter at a campaign event are slim. The biggest news of the day happens when the candidate tinkers with his stump speech, responds to an external news event, or makes a gaffe.

There just isn't much to see beyond the confines of planes and buses and hotel rooms and scripted rallies, and not enough time to see it, so what gets written on the road tends to be narrower in focus, inward looking and sometimes just trivial.

"I always tell people before they go out, the minute you start doing your campaign food story, you've jumped the shark," said John Berman of CNN.

But when a campaign tries to cut you out entirely, there may be nothing left to cover besides turkey sandwiches and crowd counts.

Throughout the Romney campaign there was decidedly less to "get" inside the bubble than ever before.

Jeff Zeleny, whose byline was a fixture on The New York Times front page during the race, said "there was less value spending time on the campaign plane in 2012 than in any of my three previous presidential campaigns."

"Spending time in Boston at headquarters was much more instructive," said Zeleny, now at ABC News. "But I spent most of my time traveling independently to Romney and Obama campaign rallies, watching television ads in battleground states, talking to voters and trying to observe the race from ground level. The campaign or plane or bus was not the best place to study the race in 2012."

Some reporters saw this dynamic developing four years earlier. Adam Nagourney, Zeleny's former colleague at the Times, remembers being stunned by the lack of access not just to Obama and McCain in 2008, but also to their senior advisers.

"The best part of about being on a campaign covering a candidate was access to his top-level staff," Nagourney said. "When I went out with both Obama and McCain, I was struck by how they just kept reporters away from the staff. It was really bad. You were just sort of covering the TV show basically. It was not rewarding or fruitful at all. I am a big fan of going out there and doing stuff. But there were no candid moments."

By 2012, Romney advisers harbored so much distrust toward the press, and kept the candidate so cocooned, that veteran reporters did not even bother jumping on the bus to cover the Republican nominee.

Maggie Haberman of Politico didn't travel with the campaign a single time.

"He almost never strayed off script," Haberman said of Romney. "You didn't really get to watch him interact with voters that much. So if you were going to watch him deliver the same stump speech three times, you were probably going to get the same version you could watch on the livestream."

Paul West of the Tribune, who was never a huge fan of covering a campaign from the bus, recalls reluctantly going out with the Romney campaign for a brief swing through Pennsylvania.

“That was enough for me,” he said. “It was just a typical day of the reporters being pushed around, kept in the dark, being separated from the candidate and not being told what he was doing, not staying remotely close to where he was, at least 20 or 30 minutes away when we finally found out where he was. From everything that I heard, that was typical. There was no contact with anybody with him on the plane.”

Just hours into his trip, West remembers hearing Reuters reporter Sam Youngman, seated a few rows up from him on the bus, blurt out to no one in particular: “If this campaign were a guy, I’d punch it in the mouth.”

Adult supervision?

Despite their many disagreements with Romney and his aides, several reporters on the plane were actually sympathetic to one of the campaign’s biggest gripes: that the Romney press corps was too damn young.

“For some of them, it was their first reporting assignment,” Romney adviser Eric Fehrnstrom said of the traveling press.

The lack of veteran journalists on the plane was indeed problematic, according to many journalists who rode along with Romney in the press cabin of “Hair Force One,” as some in the press dubbed their charter jet, in honor of the perfectly coiffed Republican nominee.

“We didn’t demand a lot of respect as a group,” said Youngman, who covered the Romney campaign for Reuters alongside Steve Holland. “Most of the time during the campaign, at 35 years old, I was the oldest guy on there. It ain’t supposed to be that way. Hell, I am supposed to be learning from guys older than me.”

In 2008, there were also plenty of young reporters on the road during the titanic primary fight between Obama and Clinton, and the general election that followed, including a group of television embeds that brought the median age down by several notches.

But it was also common then to see experienced reporters like Nagourney, Balz, David Espo of the Associated Press or John King of CNN board a campaign plane. That rarely happened in 2012.

“I did often feel, honestly, it would have been nice to have had a layer of people with more experience to kind of look to,” said one national print reporter on Romney’s plane. “Like, the Romney campaign just said X, and we’re in the air, and we can’t get in touch with our editors ... It would be have been nice to have more adults who commanded more respect from the Romney campaign, and who could have said, ‘This is what happened in 2008 and here’s how we handled it.’”

Several reporters who did not want to be named expressed similar regrets about the collective age of the press corps. Having seasoned political minds on board would have been nice, they said. But it also would have been useful to tap into some reliable institutional knowledge about media-campaign relations, to answer questions about access and procedures.

“I felt like I didn’t have anybody to learn from,” said another reporter on the plane who wished to remain anonymous. “Young reporters have always been on campaigns, but in the past there were also reporters who had traveled on a day-to-day basis who had been there and done that and had a bit of gravitas and stature and ability to throw their weight around with a campaign.”

To others in the press corps, the frequent griping from Romney-world about age and experience was misguided.

One reporter dismissed the complaint as a “canard.” For one, age and talent are not mutually exclusive. There are plenty of wonderful young political reporters, and there are more than a few terrible old hacks.

There was more experience on the plane than the Romney campaign veterans would like to admit. While most of the television embeds and one or two other reporters were still eligible for their parents’ health insurance coverage, seating manifests from the campaign plane reveal a number of reporters with experience covering national politics, or other serious beats.

Of the regular faces in the traveling press, Holland of Reuters and Carl Cameron of Fox News were, by far, the most seasoned campaign veterans. Holland had spent 20 years in Washington for Reuters, 16 of them covering the White House. “Campaign Carl” began his career reporting in the political hotbed of New Hampshire in the 1980s and had been covering presidential races since 1996 for Fox News, earning a reputation as a workhorse.

Youngman of Reuters, Maeve Reston and Seema Mehta of the Los Angeles Times, Jim Acosta and Rachel Streitfeld of CNN, Holly Bailey of Yahoo! News and Lisa Lerer of Bloomberg had all covered past presidential races inside the bubble and out, though 2008 was the first experience for many of them.

Others, like Michael Barbaro of The New York Times, Philip Rucker of The Washington Post, Jan Crawford of CBS News, Julie Davis of Bloomberg, Steve Peoples and Kasie Hunt of the Associated Press, Matt Viser of the Boston Globe, and Reid Epstein, Ginger Gibson and James Hohmann of Politico had previous experience covering political beats like the White House, Congress, the Supreme Court or state and city governments.

Ashley Parker of The New York Times had been a close observer of politics as the columnist Maureen Dowd’s assistant, had worked on the paper’s metro desk and was

considered one of the most talented writers on the plane. Peter Alexander of NBC News was new to the political beat in 2012 but had previously toiled overseas and was cited in conversations with both Romney and Obama campaign officials as a reporter they considered fair and hard-working. That's not to mention the many producers and photographers on the road who were grizzled campaign stalwarts.

So, despite the fact that many of these reporters were covering their first presidential campaign, they were not just a bunch of wide-eyed journalism rookies. But they were covering the race in a media environment that differed wildly from years past and was evolving by the day.

Even if the gold-plated political journalists of yore did miraculously show up and ride along with Romney on his "Believe in America" tour, would the campaign have sent their man to the back of the plane to engage with the press on a regular basis?

In the face of a dozen or more iPhone cameras, it seems doubtful.

The Orchestra Pit

After the 1988 presidential race, Roger Ailes, a Republican campaign consultant who would later become the president of Fox News, came up with a simple theory about the media's approach to presidential races.

"If you have two guys on a stage and one guy says, 'I have a solution to the Middle East problem,' and the other guy falls into the orchestra pit, who do you think is going to be on the evening news?," Ailes asked.

The question, with its obvious answer, came to be known among media critics as the Orchestra Pit Theory of News.

Ailes was talking about the media's obsession with gaffes, defined by Thomas Patterson as "blunders, misstatements, indiscretions, and other mistakes that supposedly expose a side of the candidate that he seeks to hide."

Gaffes can be debilitating if they nourish an existing narrative. This was especially true for Romney, who had a knack for awkward commentary that fed into an image of him as phony and out-of-touch.

"There were innumerable things that Romney said, like 'The trees in Michigan are just the right height,'" said Marcus Brauchli of The Washington Post. "That in itself is of no consequence. It is a ridiculous thing. But it reinforced a perception and it resonated ... So while none of them by themselves is of great consequence, collectively they, like blood poisoning, eventually accumulate and kill you. That's why they matter."

But the media can also overstate the importance of a gaffe or eye-opening revelation.

Take the news of George W. Bush's 1976 drunk driving arrest, a huge story that rocked the closing days of the 2000 campaign and raised very real questions about the candidate's judgment. While 83 percent of the public said they had heard of the story—a huge percentage—only 17 percent said they actually found the story “informative.”

Still, media strategists like Ailes and his successors lived in mortal fear of gaffes (unless they happened to the other guy, of course). A verbal slip-up, cringeworthy encounter or skeleton-in-the-closet had the potential to consume media coverage for days and throw a campaign dangerously off message.

Matt Rhoades lived by the Orchestra Pit Theory.

"Twitter has changed the back of the bus," Rhoades said. "This environment is just not as conducive for us to go back there. It's just people on Twitter waiting for Mitt to fall in the orchestra pit."

Rhoades was Romney's campaign manager. He came up in politics toiling in the worlds of rapid response and opposition research. Despite being an approachable guy fond of the word “dude” who liked to watch the New York Jets, Rhoades had developed a reputation as a secretive master of the dark arts, thanks in part to his hard-to-come-by relationship to Matt Drudge, the famed online news mischief. His friend and fellow Romney adviser Kevin Madden once called Rhoades “Keyser Soze” in the pages of *The Washington Post*.

Some reporters covering the Romney campaign didn't even know what Romney's campaign manager looked like during the early days of the race, a point of amusement for staffers in Boston.

Rhoades hopped from crisis to crisis behind the scenes during the most recent Bush administration, working on the infamous Florida recount in 2000 and later as a senior research analyst at the Republican National Committee. He would go on to run the RNC's rapid response “war room” and went on to become communications director for Romney's first, unsuccessful White House run in 2008.

The Bush years happened to coincide with the web's emergence as a force in political campaigns. By the time Barack Obama launched his presidential campaign in early 2007, partisan blogs, online fundraising tools and YouTube were starting to be taken seriously by decision-makers inside campaigns.

But Rhoades was also observing how the web was changing journalism. He first noticed the burgeoning demand for web content back in 2000, and he watched the shifting currents of the online media atmosphere carefully as the decade progressed. Of particular interest to him were the mutating behaviors of journalists in the Internet era.

Reporters, he saw, seemed to care about self-promotion, clicks and buzz as much as the journalism they were supposed to be practicing.

Sourcing standards were increasingly slipshod, too. In one sense this was helpful. Reporters were more likely to write up negative research or use an anonymous quote without much skepticism or pushback—as long as they got the story first.

Rhoades' experience in attacking opponents through the media and crafting narratives meant he viewed everything on the Romney campaign in 2012 through the almighty prism of The Message.

In the Twitter era, staying on message proved to be spectacularly difficult. Every interview Romney did—local or national, television or print—could be live-streamed, linked-to and tweeted about by any reporter, anywhere. Romney's bad habit of fumbling the ball didn't help.

In February 2012, when Romney flubbed his position on a controversial federal contraception bill in an interview with Jim Heath of the Ohio News Network, it went national in minutes thanks to Twitter (and the Obama press staffers who pushed the story to reporters).

This new universe explained the campaign's desire to sit Romney down for sympathetic interviews with conservative Fox News anchors, talk radio hosts or friendly bloggers. Interview requests from national television networks and major newspapers were routinely rebuffed. And taking questions from the traveling press? Forget it. During the general election, Romney might go two to three weeks without talking to them, reporters estimated.

"You could physically get close to him, but they were not interested in answering the questions more often than they had to," said Haake, the NBC embed. "The general feeling was that he would do a press conference when they had something they wanted to push. The press conference was the cost of speaking directly to the reporters and getting a message across. So he might come out, even in the primaries, and say, 'We're going to talk about Medicare,' and he would give a minute speech on Medicare, and then know he had to take three or four questions. But press conferences were few and far between."

When Romney did talk to his press corps, his advisers were either nervous or terrified.

Romney officials said that once the long slog of primaries concluded, the campaign tried to give their traveling reporters about as much as access as President Obama gave to the White House press corps—pretty much none.

"You want to exercise a degree of higher control over press access, and I think you are also looking for a rough equivalency between the two campaigns," said one Romney

adviser. “So if Obama is not holding press avails, and if Obama isn’t inviting people up to the front of the cabin on Air Force One, then why would Mitt subject himself to this type of cross examination if the president himself is not doing it?”

Eric Fehrstrom said the press corps had “unrealistic expectations about access.”

He said the campaign would rather sit the candidate down for an interview with Fox News than take questions from his press corps. At Fox, he said, the candidate could safely explain himself without being pressed by a crowd of news-starved reporters.

“We’d much rather go on a Fox program where we know the question is going to come up and Mitt can give his answer and it’s not going to a frenzy of questioning,” Fehrstrom said. “He will be able to give his response. There may be a follow up or two, and then that’s it. The frenzy is not something that you would willingly do if you had other options. It’s like here you can either do this frenzied news conference, or we can do a more sedate studio appearance with Sean Hannity. I’d take the sedate over the frenzy any day.”

To Rhoades, Twitter was an essential reason the campaign decided to keep Romney away from his traveling band of reporters, with their cameras ready to catch Romney saying or doing something even slightly off message. Every step Romney took toward the press pack was a few inches closer to potential disaster.

With Twitter, Rhoades said, “the Orchestra Pit Theory is in the stratosphere.”

“It can ruin your whole day,” he said. “Like, you’re going to have your candidate go to the back of the plane with Twitter? What if he trips on someone’s laptop on the way back or stumbles? I guarantee that will be tweeted out. That will be the first thing you get out of your guy going to the back of the plane.”

Death to the filter

In September 2012, Air Force One encountered some mechanical problems on a tarmac in Richmond, Virginia. Romney, his aides and the press were stranded in the plane for hours.

After another long day on the campaign, reporters in the back of the cabin passed the time by drinking and playing music—and sending out a flurry of sarcastic tweets about the broken plane:

@mckaycoppins I wonder if—at moments like this, when Romney’s stranded on a tarmac & press is blasting Kanye on the plane—he questions his life choices.

@samyoungman Defense attorneys, doctors and chartered planes—three things you don't wanna cheap out on

@bkappCBS Romney charter turned power off+on twice now. reax in press section: that's what I do with my computer when it isn't working

Romney aides were watching the tweets on their phones in the front of plane, angry but not surprised that the press was once again publicly mocking the campaign.

“These guys were sitting in the back of the plane drinking their faces off and tweeting non-stop,” said one Romney official present at the time. “Like three, four drinks deep, and tweeting non-stop about themselves. They were reporting about themselves. And then they were reporting about the plane, and there was this non-stop snark.”

Though it was late on a Saturday night, Romney officials back in Boston were also watching the tweets with increasing alarm, and worriedly calling their co-workers on the plane in search of a solution to the broken plane.

“You don’t want the Today Show the next morning being like, ‘A sign of the state of the Romney campaign! The plane broke down!’,” said one of Romney’s top advisers.

The incident crystallized two major sources of frustration for the Romney team as they grappled with the behavior of this social media–friendly generation of reporters.

First, the notion of “the filter” — that old-timey cocktail of relaxed deadline pressure and gentleman’s agreement that once kept behind-the-scenes color from making the papers — was completely extinct.

During the 1972 race, Ed Muskie’s wife passive-aggressively shoved a cake into the face of Newsweek’s Dick Stout at an after-hours party in Green Bay, but the moment didn’t make it into print. In 1976, Vice President Nelson Rockefeller was caught on camera giving the middle finger to a pack of hecklers at a GOP rally. Some newspapers declined to run the photo, an unfathomable notion today.

During the 2008 race, Hillary Clinton sometimes wandered to the back of her plane to sip beers (her favorite was Blue Moon) with reporters. Occasionally her lighthearted remarks made a blog post later that night or the next day, and a few photographs of her drinking beers would hit the AP wire. But even just four years ago, the content delivery was not immediate.

In 2012, the most trivial moments on the Romney campaign became immediate fodder for public consumption as reporters tweeted out all kinds of minutiae, said Will Ritter, Romney’s trip director.

“Embeds were tweeting that the food has not being delivered yet, the bus driver wasn’t good, the temperature in the press tent was too hot, the WiFi is slow, or that they weren’t happy with the placement of priority seats on the plane,” Ritter said. “The kind of things we’d much rather take care of behind the scenes. Every day.”

A second source of aggravation was the tone of the tweets. Campaign advisers in Boston monitored and passed around tweets as proof of anti-Romney bias or evidence that the press was just not taking the whole venture seriously.

“A lot of it is very self-involved chatter about the embeds themselves, as if they are the story and the center of the campaign,” Fehrstrom said. “They are not. It’s about the candidate. I am surprised that more employers didn’t crack down on that, or at least publish rules that would guide these young people and how they should use this technology.”

Fehrstrom called the reporting on the plane “petty.” Stevens went so far as to compare the reporters to paparazzi.

“Can you imagine if campaigns tweeted about reporters the way reporters tweet about campaigns now?” Stevens asked. “Like, I am going to tweet about what they are wearing? The snarky stuff. You don’t think that occurs to us?”

A surprisingly large number of reporters who were asked to reflect on the campaign experience said they now regret how they used Twitter to fill their idle moments.

“In some ways, I wish Twitter hadn’t existed,” said Parker. No matter how responsible you try to be, you have moments where you’re like, ‘Maybe I shouldn’t have tweeted that.’”

One of the younger reporters on the plane who declined to be identified described the press corps as “a bunch of snotty brats.”

Another, Sam Youngman, then of Reuters, said Twitter “enhanced the pettiness” and corroded already bitter relationship between reporters and the Romney team.

“I will freely admit I was one of the worst offenders,” Youngman said of his Twitter habits. “I don’t think there is any question it trivialized the coverage to a great deal.”

The embed’s burden

Despite the presence of experienced and diligent journalists on the plane, the Romney campaign came to view the Romney press corps as just one giant, tweeting blob.

It became clear in conversations with Romney advisers that they viewed the entire press corps through the lenses of the television embeds, who were the first reporters to begin

covering Romney full-time in the summer of 2011 and rarely left his side until the campaign reached its gloomy end on a freezing night in Boston last November.

“It’s the TV folks,” said a senior Romney official when asked which faction of the traveling press were the most influential. “They are the ones who make the biggest splash because they are the ones with the cameras for the most part.”

In interviews, several Romney aides had a tendency to refer to press corps as a whole as “embeds,” even if many of the reporters were innocent of the digital and editorial sins ascribed to them.

Editors back home noticed the trend as well and found it troubling.

“When the networks moved to the embed model, the campaigns to a large extent internalized that and came to view the reporters who were traveling with them as embeds, there were people on the Romney campaign who referred to Ashley Parker and Michael Barbaro as their embeds,” says Richard Stevenson, who ran 2012 election coverage for the New York Times.

“We never viewed them that way,” he said. “To us, Ashley and Michael were our Romney reporters. They weren’t embeds. They weren’t there to carry out their jobs the way that network embeds were. They were there to do something different. So I think a lot of the perception of what these jobs have turned into has been driven by a model that for our purposes wasn’t one that we ever embraced.”

The distinctions might have been lost because the web-driven demands of newspaper, television and web reporters were, in some ways, blurring together.

“Now, all the embeds, in addition to being TV people, we all also write for our websites,” said Haake. “And a lot of the print people also shoot video on their phones, or they appear on cable news or whatever.”

But the role of the embed, in particular, had warped into something far different than what it was when John Berman was flying around with George W. Bush in 2000. Back then, embeds filed a story for the Internet once or twice a week with a dial-up modem.

TV networks gave their embeds an expanded portfolio, including blogging from time to time, during the Democratic primaries of 2004. By 2008, embeds were expected to shoot and edit video, keep editorial tabs on their candidate and file stories or blog posts for their websites as much as five times a day. For relative chump change, each of the networks was able to extract a decent amount of news content from just a single overworked person.

Campaign aides eyed these young reporters, and their ability to project their callow observations directly onto the web, with great suspicion. The only thing a story needed to spiral out of control was, after all, a link.

The 2008 embeds were frequently confronted by exasperated traveling advisers—from Obama spokesman Robert Gibbs to Clinton aide Mo Elleithee to McCain strategist Steve Schmidt—over what they viewed as unfair or silly blog posts that managed to rocket around the web and land on the front pages of the Drudge Report or Huffington Post.

Even McCain himself once confronted an embed aboard his campaign plane on a flight to Arizona over a story about the Iraq war he considered inaccurate.

But four years on, with an ever expanding number of platforms hungry for content and less bandwidth to satisfy them all, embeds were facing even more pressure from their bosses.

In a memo announcing NBC's 2012 class of embeds, the network's president Steve Capus boasted about just how much his team would be asked to do.

"These folks are going to become mainstays thanks to their constant reporting from the road—a crucial component to uncovering the truth and presenting the fairest facts about each candidate, and an advantageous complement to our top-notch correspondents," Capus said in the memo. "They will contribute daily across all of the platforms of NBC News—including our network newscasts, MSNBC, msnbc.com, and more. In the past, our embeds have been helpful and complimentary but this cycle it will be even more so—this class of embeds will play an essential role in the smart journalism that our television viewers, web readers, and app users trust and expect."

In essence, the TV networks were sending out a group of smart, ambitious twenty-somethings to test out a new brand of multi-platform journalism on the fly while covering a presidential campaign.

To Romney officials in Boston, this was malpractice.

To the embeds of four years ago, well, they were just grateful they had the chance to cover a campaign before Twitter temptations took hold.

"I think Twitter was more responsible than anything for negatively influencing the collective approach of the embeds," said Scott Conroy, a reporter for RealClearPolitics who covered Romney and Sarah Palin as an embed for CBS News in 2008.

"There's an inevitable sense of entitlement and self-importance that comes with being a 25-year-old associate producer who's suddenly gallivanting around the country on private planes and doing frontline reporting on a presidential campaign for CBS News," he said. "There were certainly times in 2008 when I acted as if my blog posts carried the

weight of Murrow on the rooftop during a German bombing raid, and I can only imagine how embarrassing it would've been had I been spouting off 50 times a day, rather than five."

'Racing toward nothing'

"Do we have this?"

It's one of the most annoying emails a reporter can get. The answer, of course, is usually no.

But if an editor is sending you that question, you can be sure someone else has it—and your job is to go get it.

Political reporters have always been forced to chase news, but they say the impulse grew worse during the 2012 campaign because of Twitter.

Editors and producers back home were following the campaign on Twitter, and when another news outlet broke a story, even one of dubious value to their readers or viewers, they felt obligated to confirm and report it.

Maybe it was a "major" endorsement from a no-name state legislator, or a flattering fundraising leak, or a thinly sourced story about a staff "shakeup"—if another news organization had the story, their competitors wanted it as well.

"It started to feel like with Twitter you had to chase every little thing," Ashley Parker said. "Sometimes, all the editor sitting in front of the computer screen knows is that this tweet just came past their eyes and they want you to match that. And all your time is spent racing toward nothing."

Parker and other reporters on the bus said they began to internalize the pressure to confirm even the most fleeting of stories being tweeted about by their rivals sitting across the aisle from them on the bus.

"If you looked at the tweets, especially on the endorsements that don't matter, like some New Hampshire state delegate or something, it would be one tweet that goes out, normally from the Union-Leader or whoever the Romney campaign gave it to," said one reporter. "There's not even a huge degree of journalism involved."

"And then you see the tweet from the NBC intern, saying 'NBC News can now confirm.' And then it's like 'Wall Street Journal can now confirm,' 'New York Times can now confirm,'" this reporter said. "It's almost like you were tweeting to prove that you got it, too, to the person sitting next to you who is about to get it in three seconds or just got it three seconds ago."

Liz Sidoti of the Associated Press called Twitter “a good tip sheet,” but said too many editors in Washington were asking their reporters to chase and confirm tiny developments that were not, in themselves, news.

“You have editors sitting in bureaus watching this stuff,” Sidoti said. “Some editors are saying, ‘Well, we have to have the piecemeal tidbit of minutae.’ Typically something we would put in a story but use it as an illustration point. Instead we are blowing it up to something big.”

The context-free nature of the news—or “news”—being shared on Twitter frustrated Axelrod and his compatriots back in Obama’s Chicago headquarters.

“If two kids with an abacus in Keokuk, Iowa, put out a release that said we just did a poll, and that went out on Twitter there would be a lot of discussion in Washington and Twitter about the Keokuk poll,” Axelrod said. “And completely indiscriminate. Nobody would know whether this was a good poll or a bad poll, whether the methodology was right. When you have 140 characters, there is not a lot of room to provide for disclaimers about the quality of the poll. And there is no doubt that assignment editors watch Twitter, so Twitter has had some impact in that regard.”

This was a strange new form of pack journalism, a far cry from the kind Crouse observed in “The Boys on the Bus,” but one that was still riddled with problems.

In 1972, the authoritative judgments were rendered by “the heavies,” writers like R.W. Apple, Jr. of The New York Times and Walter Mears of the Associated Press. The rest of the reporters followed the agreed-upon consensus and filed their stories. Those reports would radiate outward, often the next morning, rippling through the rest of the media and then outward into the American consciousness.

Forty years later, the reverse was true. On any given morning in 2012, the Twitter conversation had already set the table for the day’s headlines and conventional wisdom before Romney’s reporters had even covered a single campaign event.

The news hole

With almost no access or unique content to use in their daily stories and tweets, reporters in the bubble focused on minor things, like goofy hats at rallies, the brand of Romney’s jeans, confrontations with staff members or minor mistakes by the advance team.

One anonymous Romney reporter told the Washington Post during the campaign that the dynamic was “freeing.”

“Because they don’t comment, you are freer,” the reporter told The Post. “They have no leverage, and so you’re freer to write harder stories.”

The author of that Post story, Jason Horowitz, went into the bubble in the fall to document the campaign and didn’t find very many “hard” stories. But he emerged with a few colorful portraits about the astounding lack of news on the inside, along with an amusing tale about the press pack’s obsession with collecting Marriott points that angered reporters on the plane.

A series of TV pool reports by ABC embed Emily Friedman in late October illustrated just how tedious bubble reporting had become toward the end of the campaign. Pool reports, in which a small “pool” of designated TV, print and wire reporters document the movements of a candidate or high-profile elected official, are notoriously mundane. But Friedman’s pool notes on the night of Oct. 21 in Delray Beach, Florida were enough to put a court reporter to sleep.

At 4:42 p.m. that afternoon, Friedman sent this note around to her fellow TV producers and embeds: “For planning/not reportable: We expect a movement tonight and will have more tape to feed. I’ve heard he may go get burgers.”

Almost two hours later, she confirmed the rumor: Reportable: “Going to dinner in the Romney entourage tonight is Romney, Ann, son Craig, his wife Mary, and grandsons Parker and Miles. They will eat at BurgerFi, a burger joint across [the street].”

After the burger excursion ended later that night, Friedman emailed around this 429-word summary of the painfully newsless Romney food run:

+ Romney got into the motorcade and drove away from the press that was on foot and he was out of site for at least 3 minutes until I saw the motorcade come back to the marriott. Obviously I said this was not OK.

+ Pool going back to hold at hotel.

Here is how the OTR happened:

Romney emerged from the side door of the Marriott to walk across the street to Burgers. Romney was holding hands with Parker, 6, who held with hands with Craig who held with Miles, 4, as they crossed the street.

“That’s our next president!” One patron said (off camera) as everyone entered.

Romney walked around the open seating area at the restaurant and was stopped by a few patrons who wanted to shake hands. Many snapped pics with their iphones.

As Romney waited in line to order with the family, he had his hands on Parker’s shoulders. At

one point he lifted him up from under his armpits high into the air.

Ann wore skinny pants with white open coat/shirt top. Hair up.

Mitt in jeans and blue checkered shirt.

Total order on the register came to \$52.72 (did not see how they paid and would check tape to make sure that's the register they paid at.

Ann leaned on Romney and put her hand on his shoulder as he paid.

They moved to a long wooden table. On one side it went Mary, Miles, Romney. Across from Romney was ann, then Parker then Craig. They ate a tray of french fries while they waited for their food.

When they sat a few people came up to speak to Romney and have him hold their kids for photos. After awhile the patrons cooled off and the Romney's were left alone. Ann and Mitt both sipped on Dasani water bottles.

Waiters brought what looked like milkshakes on a tray that the little boys grabbed. The waiters posed for photos with Romney too.

They walked out 7:01pm to cheers and whistles and got into the motorcade.

Press is walked back to the hotel now.

+ will send stills from my iphone to embeds

+ order from reading the partial receipt was: (this doesn't include milkshakes so not clear if this is complete)

1 vegifi burger grill add special prep add green style

2 single chz 2 add ketchup 2 add lettuce

1 single burger add ketchup

1 vegifi burger grill add spec prep add green style

1 cheeseburger

1 regular fries

W/ dessert

+ Kasie from the AP says he got the single burger in the above order.

At top of receipt it says "VIP 63" not sure if that means the order was specially prepped for him.

The pool reports distributed by print reporters were hardly more consequential. There was just no news to be had in Romney-land, so what else was there to write about besides French fries and Ann Romney's "skinny pants"?

Phil Rucker of The Washington Post figured the campaign could have easily filled the vacuum with information from senior officials, had they bothered to put them out on the road with reporters.

"The Romney campaign failed to understand the environment and work it to their advantage," Rucker said. "There were opportunities to manipulate the press that weren't taken. This is a big failure on their part. They viewed the traveling press as a group to stay away from and keep him away from and kind of ignore, and that was a problem."

"Romney basically had this press corps captive following him, and he could do anything that would get on all of our networks or websites," he said. "If we are on a two-hour bus ride across Iowa, I don't know why you didn't have Eric Fehrstrom or someone on the bus spinning."

Instead, bored reporters looked for other ways to pass the time.

Will Ritter, the campaign's trip director and event planner, remembers Haake inventing a hashtag—#RitterProblems—for his tweets about logistical muck-ups at campaign events:

@GarrettHaake Must be frustrating for Romney team to have a lot of empty space in their venue and packed sidewalks outside security. #RitterProblems

@GarrettHaake Audio is really low at Romney rally. Folks in the back complaining they can't hear. #RitterProblems

Haake was hardly the only reporter tweeting about mundane process issues. The Romney press shop would routinely forward negative tweets from reporters about coffee, or the charter plane, or power outlets to Ritter and his team in the operations department.

"I didn't understand the insatiable appetite for filling the news hole with process details that simply had no bearing on who voters should pick to be president," Ritter sighed. "It felt like they had a quota."

In themselves, most of these tweets weren't offensive, and despite what some Romney advisers said, the majority of them did not compromise the ability of these reporters to cover the race fairly.

But taken collectively, the never-ending flood of sarcastic tweets rankled Romney advisers who thought the press corps was taking a very serious enterprise and making it seem juvenile and petty.

It wasn't just complaints that found their way onto Twitter. There were also tweets about campaign birthday parties, group bowling outings, food outings and other navel-gazing fare or inside jokes:

@SaraMurray Nearing hour 3 of speakers screaming into the mic in Spanish. Mitt Romney has yet to utter a word. #trappedinpuertopolitics

@mikiebarb Breaking: Romney hugged Meatloaf post endorsement. #MITTLOAF

@EmilyABC Honorary member of the Romney pool today: this awesome turtle in our hold pic.twitter.com/Mtdv165M

Obama officials in Chicago, who kept an eye on these same tweets all day long, began to refer to the Romney press corps as "campaign camp."

When he arrived at BuzzFeed in January of 2012, Ben Smith had already noticed that some reporters couldn't help themselves when it came to tweeting about their wild field trips through Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina.

"There was a thread of the Twitter conversation that was sort of an innocents abroad thing," Smith said. "Like, 'Wow this is all so neat and amazing!' And I forbade our reporters from doing anything like that. Readers are not paying attention to you because you don't know anything. You're supposed to know more than the reader. You're supposed to be telling them things they don't know. And if you're an idiot, if you're ignorant, that's not something you should be bragging about."

Michael Calderone, a media writer for The Huffington Post, spent a few days in the bubble last March for a magazine piece he was crafting about the Romney campaign.

Riding around with them on the bus in Wisconsin, he immediately noticed that Twitter was "an obsession" for the press corps and "a big departure from the experience on campaign buses just four years earlier, when there wasn't the added distraction of constantly keeping up with what every other journalist, press representative, and candidate is doing."

He joked that the 2012 campaign seemed more like "The Noise On The Bus" than "The Boys on the Bus."

"They tweeted line after line from Romney stump speeches and small scoops here and there, alongside inside jokes and Instagram shots from birthday parties or the bowling alley," Calderone remembered.

“They even tweeted any momentary annoyance with the press team for missing a designated pick-up,” he said. “Whether physically on the bus, or just following the press corps’ movements on Twitter thousands of miles of way, social media consumed the campaign. While a historian could someday string together a moment-by-moment record of what it was like covering the 2012 campaign, and that may be useful for something, it’s hard to see how the real-time publication of every moment and micro-controversy on the trail benefited the public’s understanding of the presidential election or the policy differences of candidates.”

Other campaign journalists watching the coverage emerging from the bubble had a similar take.

Dave Weigel of Slate, who is never more than a few inches away from his iPhone, described what the campaign looked like when he was watching it on Twitter.

“Remember how many Instagrams there were, from people who were embeds, and they had so many Instagrams of just, like, Romney getting in a plane and Romney getting off a plane?” said Weigel. “There were whole days when people like Phil Rucker and Garrett Haake and other people who were on that beat who would just point out, here is Romney, this is the only time we saw him today. There was a whole day where because they were on that beat they had to be on the plane and in the hotel and nothing else happened.”

This is not to say that many of the reporters in the bubble failed to deliver quality reporting; they frequently did. Judging by the insightful quotes and behind-the-scenes intel that appeared in his stories, Rucker often seemed to have a secure phone line into Romney’s North End headquarters in Boston.

It’s just that for most people in the Romney press corps, there was only so much to write about being stuck in an airplane for half the day covering a campaign that, for the most part, doesn’t have any use for you.

“I don’t want to disparage people who are trapped in the bubble,” Weigel said. “They are really good. Editors don’t throw people into that unless they trust they can get something off that beat. I never thought I was better than they are at all. This is a harder, lamer job they have. I have this fun job where I can kind of bounce around. And these people are stuck on the plane. I wonder what they are missing because they are stuck on the plane. It seems like a weird way to spend money these days because you don’t get that much.”

Matt Viser of The Boston Globe observed something else when he started leaving the bubble with increasing frequency as the campaign moved into summer.

Reporters arriving at campaign events, after being cooped up in the plane or bus with no one to talk to but each other, were rapidly tweeting out the same quotes and applause lines from Romney's speeches.

Zeke Miller of BuzzFeed made a habit of tweeting even the most humdrum updates at GOP rallies, developments like, "Huckabee takes the stage."

"Everybody is tweeting the same thing," Viser observed.

"You'd notice when you're not on the road that everybody is essentially tweeting the same thing, or they're doing the same Instagram of the same picture," he said. "I guess not everybody is following the same 12 people who are on the campaign. So maybe there is some woman in Natick that's looking at my tweet and not looking at Ashley Parker's tweet. So she's getting a unique Instagram. But at times everybody is doing the same thing, which you're going to get, I guess, because everybody is seeing and hearing the same thing."

In one sense, this was useful for the people following campaign events solely on Twitter. But Viser eventually decided to take a more considered approach to his Twitter feed, sending out updates that he figured would be somewhat distinctive.

Or he'd just stop tweeting and focus on the story he was supposed to be writing.

Ground rules

The conflicting priorities between the print and television reporters on the plane led to disputes over ground rules that had arisen in past campaigns.

When a fresh round of jobs numbers came out in September, Romney aides wanted their boss to come to the back of plane during a flight to Iowa to address the news, but under one condition: His remarks could not be on camera.

Haake, who was serving as the television pool producer that week, raised an objection.

"I said that wasn't acceptable," he recalled. "If he was going to be on the record, it had to be on the record, and we had to be able to shoot it. There were a couple people from the print side who supported that and several other people from the print side who were furious at me."

Romney aides refused to let the comments be on-camera, and they promptly canceled the session, frustrating many of the print scribes who just needed quotes.

Youngman exploded at Haake, questioning his experience and judgment in full view of the press corps, but the embed said he was just doing his job as representative of the five television networks. "The five families" — as the desk managers and bureau chiefs at

each of the five networks were known—had Haake’s back when he told them about the flare-up.

Past campaigns are littered with incidents like these. The imperatives of broadcast media and print media are frequently at odds.

But in 2012, when the line between private and public could be erased with a few quick swipes of a thumb across an iPhone screen, negotiations over ground rules at times became trickier.

Off-the-record interactions with Romney, for instance, could be nerve-wracking for campaign aides.

Political reporters famously disagree about whether candidates should be allowed to go off the record with reporters in group settings. But when offered by campaign aides, the Romney reporters agreed to a handful of these sessions. Accounts vary, but there were at least eight of them during the campaign. In a few cases, the press found the discussions to be informative.

One reporter remembered an off-the-record chat with Romney aboard a flight to South Carolina during the primaries. The interaction, this reporter said, humanized a candidate who had developed a reputation for being stiff and uncomfortable.

“I don’t remember anything he said to us, except I remember when he left it was like, “Who was that guy dressed like Mitt Romney?,” the reporter said. “Who was that funny, sort of charming guy who looked just like Mitt Romney, but talked to us like we’re all normal people?”

Engagements like these, though, worried Romney advisers who knew that every reporter had a camera in their phone, a digital audio recorder in their pocket, and a well-worn Twitter or Instagram account. Background briefings by campaign advisers who insisted they were not to be identified by name were also concerning.

“The presence of cameras, both from embeds who wanted to record everything, and even frankly from print reporters with their iPhones, complicated everything because normal things that you would want to do on background, the campaign was loathe to do for fear someone would tweet out a picture or post video,” said another print reporter who did not want to be named.

“And so it forced all of these contentious ground rule negotiations that you wouldn’t have had 10 years ago, when advisors could wander back to drink and shoot the shit, without having to worry about who’s going to tweet this, who’s going to blog this, who’s going to leak this to Dylan Byers [Politico’s media reporter]. Even if most of us understood the ground rules and never would have dreamed of doing something like that, all it took was one person to mess up and the campaign blamed all of us.”

The rope line ruckus

Romney aides were always on guard around reporters, fearing that any mistake or offhand comment would be witnessed by a reporter and blasted out to the online world.

To mixed success during the campaign, Ritter instituted a policy in which reporters were to be kept in separate hotels from Romney—Ritter liked to call him “the gov”—at the end of each day, a departure from what campaigns did in the past. In many cases, reporters were not even told the location of Romney’s hotel.

“At times, we joked that the gov was a prisoner in his hotel room because there, the car and men’s room were the only places we could keep off-limits to reporters,” Ritter said.

The hotel policy was met with protests by the press corps.

“I would quibble with the idea that we were hiding beside potted plants trying to get a candid picture of him in the hotel if that’s the suggestion,” said CNN embed Rachel Streitfeld, one of the more restrained tweeters on the Romney plane. “We felt we needed to be physically close to the candidate for editorial purposes, in case some larger story should break.”

The reporters frequently vented on Twitter about their inability to get close to the candidate.

Because Romney refused to talk to his press corps, the embeds and other reporters would often “crash the rope line” at the conclusion of rallies to shout questions at the candidate while he shook hands with supporters. Romney ignored them with practiced nonchalance.

The shouted question, one of the more dubious tactics in political journalism, annoyed Romney’s controlling handlers to no end. But in a newsless vacuum, it was also a mess of their own making.

“While the rope line stuff seems silly, and it is, it’s also a consequence of being shut out,” said Youngman. “I remember I rode Romney very hard on the rope line because otherwise what’s the point of being out there? If you don’t do press conferences, you’ve got to ask hard questions somewhere.”

On a few occasions, reporters were blocked from approaching the ropeline and forced to stay in the press pen or on the risers. A New York Times story by Parker and Barbaro documented one such incident, which they dubbed a “rope line ruckus.”

When strongly worded emails requesting more access were sent to top officials in Boston and promptly ignored, reporters would take to Twitter to complain about press

restrictions. Those tweets would spark another petty flame war that resembled one from the day before, and the day before that.

One print reporter on the plane confessed that tweeting complaints about access was about as productive as getting Romney to wear his shirt un-tucked.

“Because you are so annoyed, you are trying to find an even nastier way to say we can’t go up to the rope line,” the reporter said.

“And then we tweet that out. And it starts getting re-tweeted by conservative bloggers or by liberal bloggers and all the tweets get picked up and put into a BuzzFeed list, or they get Storified on Huffington Post, or whatever. And then the Romney campaign is forced to react because it’s now become a story. And they are pissed at us, and they are pissed at our snarky tweets, they are pissed that we started this shit in the first place, and they have to let us up to the ropeline. But we both had this big fight with them where they are pissed at us, and we are pissed at them and neither of us behaved in a particularly mature way. And it all played out on Twitter. And what is the upside of that? There is no upside.”

Ritter said the campaign eventually just gave up on trying to please the press, figuring that no matter what they did, their decisions would be met with complaints or sarcasm that would end up on Twitter or in blog posts.

“We might go the extra mile when a top correspondent was doing a piece on the trail, because we knew that would be part of a TV package and help get the gov’s message out,” Ritter said. “It didn’t seem like we got the same chance to communicate substance via the traveling press pool, because they were barking angry questions from the rope lines, or at religious sites in Poland.”

‘Kiss my ass’

Jonathan Martin is one of the most inquisitive campaign reporters on the beat. But despite covering Romney and his presidential ambitions for almost six years, he had stayed far away from the newsless Romney bubble for most of the 2012 cycle.

When Romney announced a July trip through Europe and the Middle East, Martin figured he’d give the trip a shot. It would be a crucial test for Romney, and the famously cautious candidate might actually give the reporters traveling with him their money’s worth and take a few questions.

He was wrong.

“During the course of that trip he came back to the press corps on the back of plane exactly zero times,” said Martin, who covered two campaigns for Politico before

jumping to The New York Times earlier this year. “It was deeply frustrating and I think a lot of us asked ourselves, ‘What’s the point?’ It’s not acceptable to go on a foreign trip with a candidate and never once talk to him. It’s not fair to the traveling press corps, and it actually hurts their cause.”

Romney’s trip to Europe—and specifically his visit to Poland—marked the undisputed nadir of the ever-souring relationship between the campaign and its reporters. It was a sojourn that culminated in Warsaw with a Washington Post reporter shouting “What about your gaffes?” at a candidate for president of the United States, while a furious campaign aide held reporters back and told them, “Shove it.”

In the eyes of the Romney camp, the incident revealed the media’s true colors: unserious, obsessed with process and just plain rude.

For access-craved reporters fed up with being stiff-armed by Romney and his advisers, the Poland shout-fest was the logical conclusion to a dismal week overseas.

Aside from a three-minute long “media avail” outside 10 Downing Street in London, Romney did not talk to reporters during the trip. He refused requests for print interviews about his foreign policy vision, including one with Jodi Rudoren, the Jerusalem Bureau Chief of The New York Times. Romney did not unveil any new proposals in his speeches.

“At one point, I literally had my editors begging me for news, saying we couldn’t write, again, about his disastrous start in London and hadn’t he said anything, at all, about Syria?,” said a print reporter on the trip. “But the answer was no. Even for those of us who wanted to write real news stories, the campaign provided us with no opportunities.”

Romney advisers said the press corps was not interested in foreign policy issues, anyway.

“It was a mistake to send political reporters on the foreign trip,” said Stuart Stevens. “They should have sent more foreign policy people. He wasn’t going over there for pancake breakfasts.”

And yet, throughout the trip, Romney offered little insight into his vision for America’s role in the world, saying that it wouldn’t be right for a political candidate to criticize a sitting president while on foreign soil.

During that brief press conference on Downing Street, Steve Holland of Reuters asked Romney if the United States and Europe should intervene in the unfolding conflict in Syria. Romney dodged the question.

When Romney did make news, it was self-inflicted: He offended Londoners by casting doubt on the preparations for the Summer Olympics, and he offended Palestinians by telling a fundraising crowd in Jerusalem that Israelis are better off economically because of their supposed cultural superiority.

The latter story, first filed by Kasie Hunt of the AP, touched off a heated battle between the press and top campaign officials who said Romney's remarks about "culture" were taken out of context. Nevertheless, the story took off and Romney was on the receiving a sharp rebuke from the Palestinian leadership, further muddling the campaign's attempt to stay on message and project strong leadership.

Stuart Stevens was "reaming out reporters left and right" after the story snowballed, according to Phil Rucker.

"The next day was Poland, and by then Romney had not been asked to explain himself on the Palestinian comment," Rucker said. "In general, everybody felt like we'd had very little access to what he was doing and it was a bunch of photo ops."

By the time the campaign road show arrived in Warsaw, where Romney was to deliver a speech and visit a historical site, the atmosphere was toxic.

As Romney strode to his car outside Poland's Tomb of the Unknown Soldier, reporters began shouting questions from a 30-foot distance, in full view of television cameras and audio recorders.

While others in the press were yelling just as loudly, the voices of two reporters came out crystal clear in the digital audio that subsequently went viral online.

Rucker yelled out: "What about your gaffes?" Ashley Parker of The New York Times asked one question about the Palestinian comments and then shouted: "Do you feel that your gaffes have overshadowed your foreign trip?" Romney, predictably, ignored them.

Rick Gorka, the traveling press aide who aggravated many in the Romney press corps because he rarely had any information to share with them, tried to shut the situation down but only made it more embarrassing.

"This is a holy site for the Polish people," Gorka said in hushed shout. "Show some respect."

When Parker complained that Romney had been avoiding questions all week, Gorka shot back: "Kiss my ass. Show some respect."

Martin also complained about the lack of access, but Gorka told him to "shove it."

One of the reporters present at the scene called it “a reflection of how much the situation had broken down.”

“Phil Rucker, as I’m sure you know, is a talented, serious journalist, and I can assure you that if Mitt Romney had taken five minutes to sit down with him or any of us, Phil would have no doubt asked several serious, well-thought-out policy questions,” the reporter said. “The Romney team, unfortunately, never gave us the chance.”

In hindsight, even Gorka tended to agree.

“A press corps was exhausted, jetlagged, flying all over, no access to the governor, and the only Q and A happened in London,” he said. “You have a press corps that is paying a ton of money, the trip is going badly, and there wasn’t any information. That was the chance they had to see him and the last chance they had to shout a question. And that was just frustration at that point than anything. At a certain point you’re done asking me and Andrea [Saul] or Stuart for access and you start screaming at him. The press has a job to do.”

Gorka, who spoke by phone about the campaign during his daily commute to a public relations job in Philadelphia, paused momentarily as he reflected on the skirmish.

“It’s a weird culture on the road,” he added. “You kind of go a little bit insane.”

Patty Hearst

Campaigns often come up with nicknames for the journalists that cover them. Some in Al Gore’s campaign referred to the female print reporters on their plane as “The Spice Girls.” Hillary Clinton aides in 2008 referred to their cliquish band of embeds as “The Heathers.”

The Romney press corps liked to call themselves the “Romney Ramblers,” a nod to the innovative automobile that made Romney’s father George rich and famous.

David Axelrod had another name for some of them: “Patty Hearst.”

The Obama campaign agreed with their counterparts in Romney-land that the traveling press was younger and less experienced than their predecessors.

But while the Romney campaign saw the press as small-minded and out to get them, the Obama team saw them as a sympathetic and obsequious bunch, more interested in cozying up to the Romney team instead of pissing them off.

“They became invested, personally, in the stake of the campaign,” said one Obama press operative who frequently dealt with Romney’s reporters. “Clearly some of them had illusions of a President Romney, where they would be the White House beat reporter.

“The thing that frustrated me was that they were no longer getting access. So what were they protecting? They weren’t getting access or information. They were covering events from a distance and then moving on to the next hotel or stop. What frustrated me the most, which I will never understand, is why they became more protective and not less, as it went on. I’ll never really get that.”

Axelrod was bit more charitable. He and others in the Obama press operation readily admitted that Romney, who wasn’t exactly Mr. Access, was a difficult figure to cover. And as a veteran of the long 2008 race, Axelrod also knew that close bonds could be forged between reporters and campaign staffers in the crucible of a national traveling campaign.

But Axelrod pointedly blamed the Romney press for too-eagerly regurgitating Romney spin in their stories without appropriate context, beyond an obligatory “response quote” from the Obama campaign. And when a rare press conference did appear on the agenda, he said, reporters were more interested in getting him to react to news of the day rather than pressing him on the inconsistencies of his proposals.

“Our constant challenge was to try and get the Romney press corps to challenge Romney,” Axelrod says. “There is this Stockholm Syndrome element with the traveling press corps ... I guarantee that if you ask the Romney traveling press corps the night before the election, more than a few of them thought he was going to win. They would have thought that because that’s what they’ve been told over and over again by people who they’ve now come to trust.”

This mirrors a major grievance of Romney’s advisers, who thought the press corps was just too green to be covering a presidential campaign.

To both Axelrod and Stuart Stevens, there was just not enough institutional knowledge in the press cabin about the basics of politics—campaign mechanics, a sense of history, and the basic contours of the policy proposals on the table.

One Obama press official remembers being annoyed in September when no one in the traveling press appeared to realize that the GOP nominee was sharing a stage in Virginia with Pat Robertson, the conservative televangelist who has a history of inflammatory statements.

The press shop had to point out Robertson to several reporters, who promptly made note of his presence in their stories and tweets.

Maggie Haberman of Politico, who has covered politics since 1997, was more forgiving than other reporters about the experience-level of the Romney press corps but said they were sometimes too quick to buy what Romney campaign aides were selling.

"I think there was too much listening on the Romney side to talk about crowd size," said Haberman, recalling the large Ohio crowds John Kerry was drawing down the home stretch in 2004 before losing the state and the race. "It doesn't matter, you know what I mean? There was a tendency in this campaign for tremendous groupthink."

Most of the Romney reporters interviewed for this piece laughed at the suggestion they were in the tank for the GOP nominee.

So did Republicans.

"The Obama campaign complaining about reporters being in the tank for Romney is so absurd it doesn't merit debate in a Harvard paper," said Tim Miller, the former Republican National Committee spokesman.

Among the words the Romney reporters used to describe their relationship with the campaign they covered: "toxic," "poisonous," "shitty," "sad," "spiteful" and "a joke."

"Most of the time the press corps that travels with you wants you to win, because they get better jobs covering the White House and doing well," said one print reporter who traveled full-time with the Romney campaign. "I would be hard pressed to name a reporter on that plane who really wanted to see Romney win the White House and spend the next four years working with those people and covering that term. Not because of Romney, but because of the people working with him."

Adapting

The Obama campaign was not exactly thrilled with the work of the "Romney Ramblers." But unlike officials in the Romney campaign communications office who were openly contemptuous of the traveling press and viewed them a single, hostile entity, the Obama campaign buckled down and worked with the reporters while also treating them as just one piece of a larger media puzzle.

They kept in constant contact and even courted many of the plane reporters on an individual basis, especially Kasie Hunt and Steve Peoples of the Associated Press, an organization that delivered news to thousands of local and regional newspapers every day.

The Obama campaign obsessed over targeted local news coverage in swing states. The Romney team also cared about good local press, said two of the campaign's state-level press officials, but their main goal was ensuring that local coverage dovetailed with whatever national message was being pushed out of Boston.

"We always took the AP more seriously," said one Obama strategist. "I wake up every morning and the first thing I do is I go to the Newseum website and look at the front

pages in every paper in every important state. As newspapers, especially regional papers, cut down on staff, you'd be amazed if you looked at it. Everyone's got the AP wire on their front page."

The other wire services, Reuters and Bloomberg, were "totally irrelevant," this strategist argued, because the campaign saw them as financial wires geared toward business elites.

Nor did the Obama campaign care much about the web stories posted by the TV embeds or correspondents, short wire-style blurbs that often just re-hashed stump speeches everyone in politics could watch on live-stream anyway. By the time these stories were eventually posted online, Romney's remarks had already been parsed in real-time on Twitter.

But the Obama team did consider television packages to be important elements of the campaign dialogue, and the rapid response team in Chicago worked closely with the network and cable correspondents as they crafted their television packages, either pitching ideas or trying to add context when they were playing defense.

Operatives in Chicago also came to realize the potency of BuzzFeed to shape narratives or get attention from other reporters on Twitter.

"I don't think BuzzFeed deserves a Pulitzer Prize at all," said an Obama press staffer. "I have a lot of respect for those guys, though. When McKay [Coppins] or Zeke [Miller] were on the plane, they would still write stories that were a little different than just the 'Here's what Romney said at a speech today' story. They would take different angles from the plane."

One Romney reporter remembers peeling off the campaign to spend a few days covering President Obama. This reporter was stunned at how the White House press operation—admittedly a more sophisticated machine than the campaign of a challenger could hope to be—made it so easy for their reporters to file their stories.

"I got a schedule that was like, 'Here is where we are going to be between 6 and 8, and here's where you can file for your morning shows, and then we are going to be in the air for these hours and then we are going to be wheels down by 4:00, so you can track, and here's what your stand up location will look like at 6:30, here's how big the crowd is going to be, the president is going to finish either before you go on the air or start after,'" the reporter said. "And it's all laid out every morning. The Romney campaign could have cared less about that shit."

'Welcome to Stockholm'

Despite the bad blood on the Republican campaign, there were still a handful of instances that raised questions about how close Romney's reporters got to the people they were covering.

In October in Florida, the Romney campaign organized a game of flag football on Delray Beach between campaign staffers and reporters. Romney himself came out to join in the fun—on the record—with smiling reporters pulling out their iPhones to snap pictures of the moment.

A top Romney adviser called the game "cheesy but effective."

"The flag football game was cheesy, but with that crew that's how we could try to put Mitt in a setting where he could actually interact with some folks and make people feel happy about the back and forth between the press corps and the campaign," the adviser said.

Among senior members of the Obama campaign, the reaction was different. "It was outrage," said one Obama press official. "Fury. People were shocked by it. People have selective memories, but most press wouldn't participate in such events in the past."

Asked for his opinion on the game, Axelrod said he did not "want to be too terribly judgmental" but he couldn't resist a sly jab.

"I don't mind them playing flag football as long as they're allowed to tackle every once and a while," he said. "That's what we didn't see."

LaBolt, Obama's press secretary, said the game "crossed the level of incestuousness that was inappropriate."

"Ultimately the goal of the campaign reporter is to scrutinize the candidate and the campaign," LaBolt said. "When you have reporters shouting the campaign slogan on a beach playing flag football with the campaign and the candidate and staff then that crosses the line."

In fairness to the press, two reporters tried to ask Romney questions about the campaign as he joined the game. He ignored them.

The criticism from Chicago rings somewhat hollow considering that Obama sat down for beers with his embeds, off the record, in the early days of his 2008 campaign. Later in that campaign, Obama sauntered to the back of his plane to play a light-hearted game of Taboo with his traveling reporters who later wrote web stories about the game, angering Obama aides.

The reality is that campaigns often try to soothe relations with their reporters using such tactics, and the press is usually willing to play along.

Over on the vice presidential beat, Youngman remembers covering a Paul Ryan event in Florida and witnessing a reporter greet another, newly arrived colleague with the words, “Welcome to Stockholm.”

The Ryan entourage, a smaller and younger crew than their Romney counterparts, tried to ingratiate themselves with the campaign even though Ryan barely interacted with the press, Youngman said.

Ryan did plenty of local media interviews, but he did not do a single press conference with his traveling reporters during the entire course of the campaign. His predecessor on the GOP vice presidential ticket, Sarah Palin, is no friend of the media. But she took far more questions from her 2008 press entourage than Ryan ever did.

Despite that, Ryan’s reporters still agreed to at least two separate off-the-record question-and-answer sessions with the candidate.

“Everything was off the record, because everything was about being friends with Paul Ryan,” Youngman said of the reporters covering Ryan. “Because they didn’t have the experience, or maybe because they didn’t have the confidence that comes with being kicked in the nuts too many times, there was a never a moment of like, ‘Fuck you people! I don’t want to be off the record!’”

Then there was election night in Boston, when a group of Romney reporters, including a few television embeds, stood stone-faced and, according to two people who witnessed the moment, seemed on the verge of tears after Romney delivered his concession speech.

Eric Fehrstrom, who later confirmed the account, walked over to console the reporters.

“Guys, don’t look so sad,” said Fehrstrom, who had been one of Romney’s most loyal deputies for a decade and was himself heartbroken. “It’s going to be alright.”

TO 2016, AND BEYOND

“Well, I was disappointed again this year in our inability to come to grasp the issues on the daily broadcasts, on the evening news,” the network anchor admitted. “We say this every four years, and every four years we determine that it’s not going to happen again—that we’re not going to be swept up by the panoply of campaigning and stick to the substance. I think we made a greater effort this time. Each time we come a little closer to it, but don’t quite bring it off.”

The newsman uttering those sad words was Walter Cronkite. The year was 1976.

Every race for the White House ends with some hand wringing by the political media, a few half-hearted admissions that the coverage was flawed and frivolous, and solemn promises to be more substantive and rigorous the next time around.

Sometimes the lessons are adhered to.

The 1988 race between George H.W. Bush and Michael Dukakis is remembered for reporting that centered on tactics, negativity and the arrival of the TV “sound bite.” The coverage was savaged by academics, politicians and reporters alike for elevating process and conflict over context, accountability and thoughtful storytelling.

“The emphasis on mechanics became an obsession, as if the daily parry and thrust was really more significant to voters than the overall condition of the country,” Jonathan Alter wrote in *Newsweek* after that campaign. “Somehow, it is acceptable for reporters to say who is making hay, but not who is making sense. Time after time, the real question—how the candidates might govern as president—was lost amid discussion of who had a better day playing to the cameras on the hustings.”

It wasn’t completely the media’s fault. Dukakis later conceded “a failure to understand” and adjust to the incentives of media in the television era.

“It was about phraseology,” Dukakis said in a 1990 speech. “It was about 10-second sound bites. And made-for-TV backdrops. And going negative.”

Mitt Romney and his diminutive predecessor in the Massachusetts state house, then, had something in common besides once holding the same office on Beacon Hill: Neither proved capable of adapting to the Freak Show of their moment. Romney at least had the excuse of running against an incumbent president.

The post-mortems of 1988 did lead to some improvements in political reporting four years later.

The Center for Media and Public Affairs found that while gaffes and tactics grabbed roughly the same amount of media attention in 1992 as they did in 1988, policy issues were the most heavily covered aspect of the 1992 campaign.

Journalists disagree on whether the press did an effective job uncovering deep truths about the candidates of 2012 and their plans for the country.

Some of those interviewed for this piece said the tidal wave of news and information about the campaign ultimately gave voters a meaningful sense of who the candidates were, and what they wanted to do.

“I do think, as a crucible, that it is obviously a very blunt and inexact process,” said David Carr of The New York Times. “But I think people got to know these guys better, sort of, in the broad texture.”

Others said Romney faced a tougher standard than the president because there was a widespread sense among journalists that the Obama story had already been told.

“As a general criticism, I don’t think the media did a terrific job of explaining Obama and his presidency,” said Marcus Brauchli. “I don’t think that we the media did a good job of presenting how Obama governed in his first four years or in telling people about the people Obama relies on and how decisions were made, what decisions were made for what reasons and even some of the fall out of some of the decisions. I think actually we were too much on the surface. We assumed that we had written the stories because at the time of big events we had covered them.”

There are countless opinions online about the conduct of the media in 2012, but in the course of researching this piece, it was impossible to find a single reporter or politico who felt warm and fuzzy about the up-tempo nature of last year’s election coverage.

Perhaps we can do better next time—but the next time has already arrived.

Unlike 1988 and 1992, election cycles today begin earlier than they ever have. With the endless churn of the modern news cycle, reporters are already hurrying to cover the early, behind-the-scenes machinations of the 2016 race, an open contest that’s likely to attract a parade of big political names like Clinton, Cuomo, Bush or Rubio.

Aides to potential presidential candidates, eager for their shot at the big time, are happily indulging in buzzy speculation about their bosses, scheduling trips to Iowa and South Carolina and G-chatting reporters with blind quotes and gossip about hypothetical rivals.

Technology, and its disruptive potential, makes it even harder to game out 2016 coverage.

It’s impossible to know what new advancements will be in play in the next cycle, how they will impact newsgathering values, and how candidates might react to them—especially on the bus. The iPhone did not exist when Barack Obama announced his candidacy in 2007, and Twitter was only a blip on the Washington media radar.

“When you look at something like Google Glass, these things have the ability to broadcast live,” said Kasie Hunt, who covered Romney for the AP and now reports for NBC News. “You have a plane full of people wearing Google Glasses, and any one of them is providing a live feed to the Internet of what’s going on. How do we deal with that? At some point, these guys might say, ‘This is ridiculous. I can’t live like this.’”

Richard Stevenson of The New York Times acknowledged the diminishing value of reporting from the bubble in the face of new technologies and guarded campaign operatives. He even suggested that concept of putting reporters on the plane or bus full-time might be dying off.

“I don’t know how sustainable that model is in the future, but I am glad we were able to have the resources to do that for at least one more cycle,” Stevenson said.

So what can the media and campaigns do better as the 2016 creeps into gear? A variety of journalists and political professionals offered their advice.

What follows is not a set of hard-and-fast guidelines, but rather some ideas and suggestions for news organizations and campaigns, culled from some of the smartest minds in politics, about what might be improved upon for next time.

Some of these proposals focus on the traveling press corps, and some focus on broader issues. Some of them may seem obvious, naïve or impractical in a political news culture grappling with financial strain and technological disruption. But they are, hopefully, worth considering.

DEAR CAMPAIGNS ...

Return phone calls. Be helpful. Be nice—if you can stand it.

A campaign that treats reporters with hostility and indifference is usually rewarded with negative coverage.

“It never works,” according to Chuck Todd of NBC News. “When has it ever worked? I don’t think it’s ever worked.”

That may seem obvious or intuitive, but the Romney media strategy often seemed like it was specifically concocted in some Cambridge laboratory to anger reporters.

“I think a successful campaign treats their press corps with a tiny bit of respect,” Todd said. “The truth of the matter was that neither the Obama nor the Romney press corps respected their press corps. Obama doesn’t respect the press corps. He treats it like crap.”

The White House, generally, can afford to disrespect the press because they are operating from the ultimate position of power and authority in American politics. The atomized state of the media and the declining relevance of the Washington press corps only bolsters their cause.

But a campaign, even a front-running one, doesn't have the same luxury. A national candidate must pass a smell test, both with the media and the voters they are increasingly trying to reach directly through their own channels.

Of the more than two dozen reporters interviewed for this piece, every one of them could recall a time when they were yelled at on the phone by a Romney press official in Boston, sent a nasty late night email about a tweet or story, or just ignored when they asked someone on the campaign for a comment or interview.

The campaign's communications director Gail Gitcho was often named as a top offender in this regard. Gitcho is frequently blamed for the campaign's screw-the-press attitude—not just by reporters but also by a good number of Washington Republicans.

"There was a tremendous ingrained hostility for the reporters covering this race from the press shop," said Maggie Haberman of Politico. "The perspective was 'they are out to get us,' and while that is often the latent perspective of any campaign, it's not usually expressed so openly ... To some degree the nature of a press campaign relationship is always going to be adversarial. I don't think it needs to be that nasty. Most reporters are just trying to do their job."

When they traveled with the campaign, Romney advisers like Stuart Stevens, Eric Fehrnstrom, Kevin Madden and Ron Kaufman would sometimes try to massage relationships with reporters over drinks at hotel bars or swing-state watering holes. But the next morning, if a reporter needed a comment or had a simple request for the team back in Boston, their queries would often go unanswered.

A handful of Romney aides interviewed for this piece said they tried to freelance and repair the broken trust with reporters, but were usually shut down by their bosses in Boston.

Hillary Clinton's 2008 presidential campaign was famously paranoid and standoffish, too, Haberman said, but "you could go out and have lunch with the majority of Clinton people and have a normal conversation with them."

"You often could not get phone calls returned from Romney's people, and that was unusual," said Haberman. "A lot of this starts with the candidate. But I do think it is the job of the campaign to impress upon the candidate the importance of having these relationships."

Mike Murphy, a onetime Romney adviser and an old rival of Stevens in the political guru orbit, said there weren't enough staffers in Romney-world with deep experience in national campaigns. He said a lot of them were just "knuckleheads."

“I wouldn’t hire anybody in the old days who hadn’t done a couple cycles, and I’d like them more if they’d never been to Washington, if they were out doing campaigns,” said Murphy.

“But now we have a lot of guys in Washington running around snapping suspenders and fist bumping each other like it’s a junior bond room at Salomon Brothers. It’s a dumb culture and it affects our campaigns and the Romney press operation is a good example. The unexperienced kid problem is not just a media problem, it’s an operative problem, too. The Romney guys had a horrible press operation. Their press strategy was to have Gail Gitcho yell at people. Their press tactic was not to talk to anyone.”

Empower somebody on the road

The Romney campaign had a traveling press wrangler, Rick Gorka, who spent much of 2012 on the road with the press. Depending on which reporter you talked to, Gorka was either feckless or outright hostile.

“The problem with having Gorka as the camp counselor was, for whatever reason, he did not get along with the media,” said one traveling reporter. “He did not really like us, and he immediately lost all of our respect.”

He could be ornery, yes, but more importantly, Gorka wasn’t empowered by his bosses in Boston to provide information and quotes to campaign reporters whose entire job was to collect information and quotes. When reporters arrived at, say, a hydraulic fracturing business in Pennsylvania, they were not briefed on basic details, like the history of the company or the impact of fracking on the state’s economy.

Gorka was also the same age or younger than many of the reporters on the campaign, and commanded little respect as a consequence. Despite his title of traveling press secretary, Gorka’s primary role seemed to be to herd the reporters from plane to bus to event and back again.

“The Romney aides on the bus were almost always low-level and not informed, or authorized, to speak,” said Jeff Zeleny of ABC News.

The Romney campaign had been aware of “the Gorka thing” for many months during the spring and summer of 2012, but officials in Boston decided not to send a more senior figure, veteran GOP communications hand Kevin Madden, out on the road with reporters until late summer, many months after the troublesome dynamics within the bubble had calcified.

In a time when presidential campaigns are protracted, multi-year affairs, it was a baffling delay.

Even campaign veterans watching the Romney bubble from the safe remove of Washington noticed the rapidly deteriorating relationships on the plane.

“They needed some staff who could mix and mingle and be comfortable and more integrate with the traveling press,” said Michael Feldman, who was Al Gore’s traveling chief of staff in the 2000 campaign. “It just seemed like a negative dynamic developed, and sometimes that can be helped at the staff level. It just didn’t feel like they addressed it until it was probably pretty late in the game.”

Looking back, senior-level Romney officials agreed.

“I don’t think we had enough top people out on the plane,” said one Romney confidante. “I would make sure that you have an experienced person to wrangle the press, someone that the press views as a senior operations or policy-making person on the plane. I think you can head off a lot of press dissatisfaction if you give them access to top people.”

Though it sounds counter-intuitive, Gorka said he would advise 2016 traveling press secretaries to be strong advocates for the reporters, even if top officials in the campaign bristle at their coverage.

“Be assertive to your bosses; it’s going to make your life easier on the road,” Gorka said. “It will put you in a better position to deal with the frayed nerves that come on the road if the traveling press can see that you’re fighting for them. I don’t think I did a good enough job fighting on behalf of the traveling press corps. I could have done more.”

Free your mind, and your candidate

This is a tough one. But in response to the transparent era of Twitter, Instagram and YouTube, campaigns can either run and hide, or they can dive in headfirst. Trying to navigate a middle ground is a path fraught with danger.

Karen Hughes said “the biggest mistake” made by the Romney campaign was not putting their candidate, foibles and all, in front of the traveling press on a regular basis. Beneath the awkward exterior was a likeable, goofy guy with a compelling personal story and lovely family, Hughes said.

“They were afraid to show that to anyone,” Hughes said. “And so, they were never able to define him, as who I think he really is, as a good and decent person. Perhaps had the press had greater access to him they would have seen that.”

Even though some reporters might not have agreed to it—and Romney aides might have feared some rogue tweets—Feldman said Romney could have helped himself by interacting with his reporters more in off-the-record situations.

“You cultivate relationships,” said Feldman, who, as a veteran of the Gore campaign, knows something about working with stiff candidates and antagonistic reporters. “You build some level of trust.”

“There is a lot communicated even when you’re off the record,” he said. “There is tone, there is body language. A lot of what’s covered during political campaigns is less the substance of what’s being communicated and more so things like, ‘How confident is the candidate? How at ease is the candidate? How human is the candidate? How likeable is the candidate?’ A lot of the stuff is communicated off the record, and better than in the context of a campaign event or a speech.”

But is it even possible to convene lengthy bull sessions, either on the record or off, with today’s no-filter political press?

Dan Balz put that very question to John McCain, the pioneer of the Straight Talk Express in 2000, during a 2011 panel discussion in New Hampshire. McCain said no way.

“I regret to say it would be much more difficult today,” McCain said. “I regret saying that. I have to say that if you remember the people that were on that bus, with all due respect to today’s media, were pretty seasoned, pretty experienced, pretty mature judgment members of the media. Lets face it, the top people were assigned to presidential campaigns. I have to say I don’t think that’s the case today.”

Matt Rhoades would probably agree with him.

But according to Chuck Todd, it’s all but certain that some candidate in 2016 will find a way to harness the social media beast and run with it.

“Some candidate is going to say, ‘I’m going to make this my advantage. I’m going to take the fact that the news cycle is 24 one-hour news cycles,’” Todd said. “So why not be totally unfiltered and take the McCain a la 2000, and take it to the next level, and just say everything is on the record, everything is open-sourced. The first candidate that cracks that code and does it will get rewarded. The public will reward them, the media will reward them, a whole bunch of people will reward them.”

Unlike the buttoned-up Romney, this hypothetical 2016 candidate would probably have to be a natural, at ease with both a new generation of reporters and the modern tools they use.

Maybe that person is Rick Santorum. Despite being a sweater-vest wearing social conservative, he proved to be comfortable having lengthy question-and-answer sessions with his young, Twitter-savvy press corps during his Republican primary slugfest against Romney.

Maybe it's John Hickenlooper, the Democratic governor of Colorado who also happens to be a crypto-hipster—a brewpub founder, bicycle enthusiast and connoisseur of folk-pop bands like the Avett Brothers and the Lumineers. Or Martin O'Malley, the guitar-playing governor of Maryland who is comfortable talking to reporters over a freshly-poured Guinness.

Or it could be Marco Rubio, the Florida Senator who was ambushed this year by a camera phone-wielding TMZ reporter at Reagan National Airport and asked to contrast the styles of rappers Tupac and Lil' Wayne. Rubio rified comfortably on camera about Tupac's lyrical superiority as he strolled through the airport. The TMZ reporter was pleased with the exchange, and so were Rubio's advisers.

Granted, delivering an impromptu taxonomy of West Coast hip-hop isn't nearly as serious as discussing whether to send troops into Syria, but the moment was emblematic of what national politicians must deal with in today's web-oriented landscape.

Go where the reporters are

Younger Republican operatives were dumbfounded throughout the 2012 campaign that Romney's senior staff largely avoided Twitter to weigh in on the issues of the day and engage with their rivals in Chicago.

From senior decision-makers like David Axelrod and Stephanie Cutter to press operatives like Ben LaBolt and Lis Smith, it sometimes seemed like the entire Obama campaign was on Twitter all the time, bashing heads and selling their message in the process.

The Romney team, meanwhile, mostly left the Twitter warfare to younger staffers like spokesman Ryan Williams or Tim Miller at the Republican National Committee. Fehrnstrom was one Romney adviser who sparred with Axelrod on occasion, but his Twitter presence faded as the campaign went on.

The Obama campaign knew that Twitter was the gathering place for the political press, and that they had to be there with them.

"Honest to God, it was sort of half mischief-making," Axelrod said of his Twitter battles with Fehrnstrom. "It was in some of those exchanges I realized just how pervasive Twitter was. There is no doubt that our little exchanges, which stated my wise alec impulses, were an easy and fun thing to write about."

There was little downside. Obama aides could present their message on their own terms, from the comfort of their offices, without having to face a pesky reporter or TV interviewer.

The Romney campaign was not completely tone deaf to the opportunity.

Last April, when the Washington media was debating the “war on women” and Democratic strategist Hillary Rosen’s remark that Ann Romney “has never actually worked a day in her life,” the Romney campaign signed Ann up for Twitter and had her tweet: “I made a choice to stay home and raise five boys. Believe me, it was hard work.”

The tweet ginned up even more coverage of a story that the Romney campaign wanted to talk about. It was surprising that they didn’t employ the tactic more often.

DEAR MEDIA ...

Hire smart or train ‘em up

If the stories Romney and Obama aides tell are true—the ones about reporters not knowing how to read polls or discern the identity of a former presidential candidate like Pat Robertson—that’s a big problem.

It’s a problem for savvy readers and viewers in the digital age who, to paraphrase Ben Smith, are seeking information and guidance from people who are smarter, not dumber, than they are.

“It struck me that the people covering the campaign were generally a little younger and little less experienced than in the past,” said Adam Nagourney. “That’s not necessarily a bad thing, but experience is really, really helpful in covering a campaign. You learn what matters and what doesn’t, you learn what’s important and what isn’t, you know the state that you’re in, you know the issues that matter, you know you kind of get insight into what the candidate is doing, you can observe and understand how candidate is evolving.”

Beyond the editorial advantages of experience, said John Dickerson of Slate and CBS News, there’s also a take-no-bull attitude that comes with having a few campaigns under your belt.

“If you’re older, you know when to say cut the crap, stop treating us like shit and say let’s have a real exchange here,” said John Dickerson. “We’re adults and this is serious enterprise. That isn’t to say that the younger kids weren’t tough, plenty of them were tough, but it came from a different place. It came from a constant pushback, which is different than a kind of like, ‘Hey, I’ve done this a couple times, I know you’re out of line here.’ You have a little more perspective to be confident about yourself to pick your fights.”

The open 2016 race already seems likely to attract a dynamic set of candidates and could prove to be a more compelling race to cover than the last year’s, a prospect that might

pull more seasoned journalists into the traveling press (and render many of this paper's themes moot).

But given the personal sacrifices required for the job, the financial strains of the media industry and the declining amount of news in the bubble, it doesn't seem likely that sage veterans of political journalism will be flocking to the bus.

"I'm pretty confident that the toxic and ridiculous aspects of the whole thing are just going to keep growing exponentially, and I want no part of that as an adult human," said one national reporter who has already written more than a dozen stories about 2016 presidential maneuvering.

If the traveling press is going to be even younger next time, media organizations should be as selective as possible when assigning new reporters to the beat, an array of 2012 campaign staffers and reporters said.

Television embeds and younger print reporters traveling on a campaign have an enormous portfolio today. They are expected to file stories for the web, tweet all day, shoot video, take pictures and talk about politics on national television networks.

American consumers are increasingly abandoning print outlets and television as a source for news and getting their information from digital and mobile platforms, and a decisive shift in consumer habits is well underway. Instead of letting the news come to them, people interested in niche topics like politics are seeking out the smartest, freshest, and most provocative reporting online, on their phones or on their tablets.

The reporters who are feeding those platforms from the campaign trail in 2016 should be prepared to deliver. They must be deeply fluent in the language of politics—its history, culture, traditions, values and tactics.

Murphy said that if he were miraculously handed control over a newsroom, he'd require his reporters take and pass a crash course in Politics 101.

"I'd send them to goddamn boot camp," he said. "I'd teach them what polling really is, what media points are, how a campaign works, so I'd make them smarter consumers."

Television networks might also consider hiring embeds from outside their own ranks, something CBS News came close to doing in 2012 by partnering with the National Journal, the Washington-based publication devoted to covering the ins-and-outs of the White House, Congress, K Street and campaigns.

Several of the CBS embeds were young print reporters hired out of the ranks of political geekdom at National Journal, but trained up in the skills of television production. The two news organizations had competing values and deadlines, and each side had to give

up some measure of control, but people involved in the arrangement said they had no major regrets.

NBC had a similar partnership with National Journal in 2008, but decided against it four years later, according to Chuck Todd, because the network had a larger election budget and wanted more control over their embeds.

Another idea for editors and bureau chiefs: consider poaching talented young statehouse reporters or enterprising bloggers from out in the hinterlands to be cover the campaign. Murphy, echoing a longtime Republican frustration about cultural bias in the media, said these reporters would be more in tune with the voting electorate than ambitious young Manhattanites who fly out to Iowa and tweet about the exotic “fat guys, flags, guns and fried food” they see at GOP campaign events.

This is an especially sharp idea for covering the primaries. In the run-up to the 2008 primary season, CNN placed embeds in the key early primary states to play “zone defense” instead of assigning embeds to follow specific candidates. NBC mimicked the idea in 2012, and ABC re-located an experienced reporter, Shushannah Walshe, to live in Iowa full-time for the final few months before the caucuses.

The gameplan worked well: Instead of being cooped up in a campaign bubble, these embeds broke news from the ground in key states by developing local sources and covering the candidates as they passed through town. Hiring local reporters who already know the terrain in Iowa, New Hampshire and South Carolina could improve on the embed model for 2016.

Political professionals will never think reporters are as smart or sophisticated as they are, but media organizations could go a long way to bridging the widening trust gap with campaigns by investing in the talent they’re putting on the road.

Rotate your reporters ...

Many news organizations rotated reporters in and out of the bubble throughout the campaign, an ideal scenario for both the press and the campaigns. This isn’t a new strategy, but reporters consider it an effective and rewarding one.

In 2000, Dickerson said he would spent a week on the Bush campaign plane and then swap out with his Time colleague Jay Carney, who is now spending his days yelling at Chuck Todd and company at the White House.

Dickerson would spend a week in Austin, reporting and hanging around with campaign staffers where they lived and work. Then it was back on the plane. If there was ever a flare-up between one of the reporters and staff on the plane, his teammate would be

there to step in for a cooling-off period while the other went to Texas to sip margaritas with Bush advisers like Mark McKinnon.

“It was the best possible way to cover the campaign,” Dickerson said. “It would be like if you had two reporters, one in Chicago and one with the president.” (He said he pitched that idea to CBS, but it did not come to fruition.)

Most of the newspapers and wire services rotated their people on and off the Romney campaign, to some benefit. One reporter could go to a swing state, or to Boston, or to Washington, where he or she could make phone calls and work on longer pieces while the other kept an eye on the candidate.

It seems certain that the television networks will remain tethered to the bubble at all times, given the physical need to have cameras at most events.

But once they dispatch full-time camera crews to cover the campaign—this often happens in the run-up to the conventions—it stands to reason that the television networks might try the rotation dynamic with their embeds, who are taking on increasing level of editorial responsibility and might use the extra space to do some reporting or source development. Or at least do laundry somewhere outside of Stockholm.

CNN employed a rotation with their embeds covering John McCain for long stretches of the 2008 campaign, and the network did the same with their Romney embeds for part of the 2012 race.

In 2008, Fox News even swapped their Obama and McCain embeds into the opposing bubble for a week during the summer, just to give them a taste of what the other side was up to. In 2016, without an incumbent president and the protocols of a White House travel office to deal with, this could become a workable embed model as well.

... Or get off the bus entirely

Matt Viser of The Boston Globe barely left Romney’s side throughout the Republican primaries and the early stages of the general election. Viser, a mop-topped Tennessean, was the tip of the spear for the Globe’s coverage of the Republican nominee, a heady assignment considering the paper had covered the man for almost two decades.

But by the spring of 2012, Viser and his editors began to wonder about the value of traveling in the Romney bubble. For one, there was increasingly little news on the bus or on the plane. Romney was barely talking to reporters.

Viser was already well-sourced inside the campaign, so spending a few days on the road for the chance to possibly grab a few moments with a senior aide he already knew didn’t

seem worth it. Plus, he could watch most of the campaign speeches online and follow the campaign's maneuvers on Twitter.

By the time the conventions rolled around, Viser was wandering around swing states talking to voters, far from the scripted pageantry of the campaign. He and his bosses at the cash-strapped Globe were gambling that they wouldn't miss any news on the Romney plane. They made the right bet.

"We didn't necessarily cover Romney every single day and what he was saying every single day," Viser said. "Part of that was a concerted decision to use our resources in a different and more targeted way—to cover big events and be there for those. But after a while, there didn't seem to be a need to be there every single moment and in the bubble every single day. It was easy to monitor what he was doing but you could kind of catch up if something major happened."

The Globe was not The New York Times or The Washington Post or Politico, all publications with a fleet of reporters devoted to the campaign beat. And of course, they lacked the robust budgets of the TV networks.

At the end of the day, the Globe was a well-regarded regional paper with shaky finances and about five or six experienced political reporters at their disposal on any given day.

So instead of wasting time and money on a newsless beat, the Globe sent their reporters off to do some reporting. They delivered expansive, detailed pieces on Romney's religion, his relationship with his father, and his investments in China. They uncovered details of his tenure at the asset management firm Bain Capital that ended up at the center of the campaign narrative for a good week.

That's in addition to reporting on President Obama, Congress and the troubled economy's impact in states like Florida and Ohio. Another editor, campaign trail veteran Glen Johnson, stayed back at the bureau to stay on top of breaking news and keep the Boston.com political blog populated throughout the day.

"With limited resources, it didn't seem like a good place to put our chips because we would be spending a lot of money on the plane, in the hotels, in the bubble, without getting a lot of payoff in enterprising, interesting news," said Christopher Rowland, the paper's Washington bureau chief.

Granted, the paper had a leg up over its competitors in other respects. Reporters there had a deep bank of institutional knowledge about Romney given his ties to Massachusetts, and the paper even published a book about the candidate—"The Real Romney"—before the 2012 campaign took off.

"It would be hard for us to distinguish ourselves and make our reporting unique, which is something we really felt from the beginning was something we had to do," Rowland

said. “We had to have a report that offered something that everybody else was not going to have. We didn’t want to be matching AP and the Times and all these national organizations and having the exact same thing as everybody else on a daily basis. It wasn’t going to be cost effective for us.”

The Globe’s 2012 playbook serves as a blueprint for others news organizations considering whether or not to pay for reporters to travel with a candidate.

If a campaign has the resources to keep a reporter inside the campaign for a general election, more power to them. Richard Stevenson of The New York Times called their bubble reporting a “vital part of the coverage.”

But given the absence of information available inside the Romney apparatus, no budget-conscious editor should be faulted in 2016 for pulling a reporter off the plane, and letting the wire services and television networks capture what happens on the plane or at campaign rallies.

“I can’t think of a major thing that happened during that time where Romney made some big news,” Viser said of the decision to abandon the plane in the summer and fall. “It was just Romney giving the same speech in each place.”

With so many aspects of the campaign hiding in plain sight, news organizations should unleash fresh sets of eyes to cover aspects of the race that don’t involve the hourly back-and-forth between candidates.

Think deeper, write longer

As this piece has documented, so much of the 2012 campaign coverage felt like it centered on whatever the Twitter controversy of the day happened to be (see: “Women, War On”).

But there were any number of textured, long-form pieces about Romney, in newspapers and magazines, that made a splash during campaign season.

In 2011, Ryan Lizza of The New Yorker had an important, early examination of Romney’s troubled relationship with the health care law he passed in Massachusetts. Jason Horowitz’s look at Romney’s prep school years for The Washington Post found that the candidate was thought to be a bully by some of his old classmates in Michigan. Benjamin Wallace-Wells explored Romney’s private equity background in rich detail for New York Magazine. Sheryl Gay Stolberg of The New York Times examined Romney’s time as a Mormon lay leader in Boston, and revealed a human side of the candidate that the campaign was loathe to discuss.

All of these stories were “talkers” throughout the race, proving that even in a frenzied Twitter news culture, there is still very much room for thoughtful, in-depth, textured reporting.

“I do think that with tablet reading, we could experience another renaissance of long-form campaign reporting,” said David Carr. “There have been examples in the last few years where books and magazine stories have done the stories that day-to-day reporting hasn’t. I think people should pay attention to that.”

Nor does long-form writing have to be limited to books or magazines. Plenty of websites delivered “deep dives” during the campaign that were rewarded with plenty of clicks.

A 10,000-word piece by the historian Jack Bohrer about George Romney that ran last October on BuzzFeed, a site that shouldn’t be read without a bottle of Adderall handy, generated almost 136,000 page views and went viral: Six times as many people saw the story on a social media platform as saw it on BuzzFeed’s website.

Even the 83-year old editor of The New York Review of Books, Robert Silvers, understands that the web’s limitless space makes it an obvious home for longer, thoughtful writing.

“Much of the material on the Internet can be long, very long,” Silvers said in a recent interview with New York Magazine. “And should be.”

The brand of campaign journalism that faces extinction in the scatter-brained social media era is not long-form writing, said BuzzFeed’s editor Ben Smith—it’s the daily wrap story.

“The kind of content that people want to read on the Internet is either typically a short item that has one idea, one piece of information, or one joke that is engaging or funny,” Smith said.

“And then there is this gradual float down to the 1,000-word day story that is this totally wooden form that was created to fill newspaper columns. This isn’t a form that’s really made for readers on the other hand. And that is something that enormous amounts of time are spent doing, and nobody wants to read. And then you do climb out the other side where there is more reporting and more writing, like in a 10,000-word historical re-evaluation of Mitt Romney’s father’s career that is incredibly rich and deeply reported and lots of people want to read it.”

It was tough to find anyone who quibbled with Smith’s suggestion the old-fashioned general interest day story is dying, even among the daily newspaper reporters surveyed for this piece. They just wouldn’t say so on the record.

One reporter who did stand up for the day story happened to work for The Huffington Post.

“It’s important to have general-interest type writing that goes a layer beyond what just happened,” said Jon Ward. “A good day story is actually a pretty helpful important element of good journalism. The day stories are the property of a lot of older, dying news organizations. I do hope that new media picks up the banner and carries it.”

Try some new beats on for size

On Nov. 2, with the campaign entering its final week, ABC News correspondent David Muir went on television and set the scene for Romney’s final push.

“Tonight, the campaign is telling me their ground game in the swing states is far ahead of where John McCain’s was four years ago,” Muir reported. “And here in Ohio, they believe Romney’s strength among independents will fuel a win here.”

Like many reporters covering the race, Muir was just reporting what the Romney campaign was telling him about their field operation and turnout model. The problem was that the Romney campaign’s field operation and turnout model were obsolete and broken. But only a few people in the press knew that and were reporting otherwise. Instead, Romney campaign talking points about their stellar ground game found their way, unchallenged, into stories.

Any reporter who bothered venturing into the battleground states to investigate and learn about the voter contact strategies of the two campaigns could see plainly that the Obama machine was vastly superior ahead of Republicans.

Sasha Issenberg, a reporter for Slate, had been covering advancements in statistical modeling, analytics, voter targeting, persuasion and turnout for more than a year. He published a book on the subject, “The Victory Lab,” during the heat of the campaign. His reporting on the subject was so tenacious that that the Obama officials issued a directive to campaign staffers warning them against talking to Issenberg about their secretive data efforts.

Issenberg’s journalism was impressive, but he also had the campaign science beat mostly to himself. Aside from a handful of reporters like Lizza of The New Yorker, Molly Ball of The Atlantic, Michael Scherer of Time, Rosalind Helderman of The Washington Post, few members of the establishment media were looking into what the data nerds and field marshals of the campaigns were actually doing to get their supporters to the polls.

Surprised, Issenberg published an op-ed in The New York Times taunting the rest of the political press about their failure to cover an issue of great significance: “Over the last

decade, almost entirely out of view, campaigns have modernized their techniques in such a way that nearly every member of the political press now lacks the specialized expertise to interpret what's going on."

"The truth is that we aren't even that good at covering the horse race," Issenberg wrote. "If the 2012 campaign has been any indication, journalists remain unable to keep up with the machinations of modern campaigns, and things are likely only to get worse."

His point, if it wasn't clear, was that much of the press was simply ignoring an enormous component of the campaign that was far more crucial in the final month than any television ad or stump speech.

Issenberg's reporting was another reminder that the news coming out of the Romney bubble was barely news.

When the Washington media was focusing on the gaffes and one-liners being filtered through the Twitter churn, it could have been sending reporters out to explore a myriad of topics that were barely being covered.

The few political beats that did exist were being covered well: Nicholas Confessore of The New York Times and Ken Vogel of Politico detailed the worlds of campaign finance and Super PACs, for instance.

But other political-watchers were left wanting more.

"My goodness, be more creative about campaigns," Jonathan Martin of The New York Times urged editors. "It's not just what the candidate says on the stump every day, it's so much more than that."

While campaign hands and media critics like to deride stories about "process," a well-reported story about the inner mechanics of a campaign can illuminate for readers how political professionals are trying to bend the will of millions of American voters. Good process stories are important.

Here, then, are a handful of new beat ideas for upcoming election cycles that emerged in interviews with journalists and political tacticians:

- **Voter contact:** As detailed above, not many reporters understood the basics of voter contact, registration and mobilization, let alone the science behind it all. "This is the campaign as it exists as far away from the candidate as possible," Issenberg said. "It is impossible to cover data or analytics without an understanding of targeting, and it is impossible to understand targeting without an appreciation for what happens at phone banks and doorsteps."

- **Media tactics:** As campaigns increasingly seek ways to make end-runs around the Washington media filter, reporters should track their activities in niche media platforms, on radio, on the web or in social networks. Axelrod said the Obama campaign was “just fishing where the fish are.” Where, how and why? Is a campaign pushing their message in a popular video game, on Pandora radio, on the Big Ten Network? In the pages of *Us Weekly* or the Spanish-speaking press? What local TV stations are top targets for campaign advertising?
- **Downballot races:** Remember those? National media organizations largely ignore Senate and House races during a presidential year, unless there’s a gaffe or scandal that thrusts them into the spotlight. Reporters don’t have to cover every one; that would be impossible. But pick a few intriguing ones and use them to illuminate some broader themes about the mood of the country. Better yet: Find a few contests in swing-y House or Senate districts on the state level— races that are barely covered anymore, even by local media, despite the colorful characters involved— and check in every few weeks.
- **Political movements, new and old:** For years now, Dave Weigel of *Slate* has been sniffing out new trends percolating among grassroots activists on both the left and the right. He was covering Tea Party groups early and often, and he knows the libertarian movement inside and out. He doesn’t have to be the only one. Go to any county political convention and you’ll find someone ranting about a forwarded email he or she just received from a neighbor or fellow activist. Do these people have anything insightful to say anything about the mood of the country, or are they just tinfoil hat loonies?

And what about the existing movements that are so firmly entrenched in our culture? “The *New York Times* has a labor reporter and environmental reporters, but as best I know, no gay-politics reporter or gun-culture reporter,” said Issenberg. “Is it clear that one is necessarily more influential on our campaigns than the other?”

- **Polling:** This probably does not merit a new beat beyond the kind of sorting and explaining that Nate Silver of *The New York Times* and Nate Cohn of *The New Republic* were doing, but the manner in which polls were covered in 2012 was a deep source of frustration for Axelrod and others in the Obama campaign who knew the strength of their internal numbers but kept seeing bad polls make news. Of course, they would not share their own private data, based not only on traditional polling but also thousands of weekly opinion research calls. But to them, reporters were just rushing to report the latest poll regardless of its source or methodology.

“There was a day in the spring of 2012 when we were up by double digits in a

Bloomberg poll and down by seven in a Gallup poll,” Axelrod said. “You can’t be up by double digits and down by seven on the same day. And the truth is, neither was right. We were probably ahead by three or four points. But both got covered as if they were equally legitimate.”

Many news organizations have serious pollsters, on full-time staff or on contract, with the knowledge to separate good polls from bad. They should be a regular source of caution for reporters and editors.

- **Political science:** Campaign strategists roll their eyes when they read quotes from attention-hungry political science professors in press stories. They have a point. But quoting political scientists is one thing; actually digging into their research is another. Plenty of academics are publishing smart, counterintuitive work or documenting trends that often go unnoticed in the press. We should pay attention.
- **The money trail and the political industry:** The press did an admirable job in 2012 covering the money beat, examining candidate fundraising, big donors, outside money and the new political organizations that popped up in the aftermath of the Supreme Court’s Citizens United ruling. We know, at least in broad strokes, a lot about where all this money comes from—but where does it go?

Issenberg suggests assigning a reporter to figure it out. “This reporter would have sources among consultants and vendors, like phone and mail guys, who get typically ignored because reporters don’t think of them as message strategists, but also ad-sales people at local TV stations and niche networks and outdoor-advertising agencies, et cetera,” he said. “Reporting here should generate hypotheses that will shed light on targeting decisions, and by extension tactics and strategy.”

Jeff Smith, a former Missouri state legislator and urban policy professor at The New School, proposed a beat covering the shadier side of the political money game—the act of “paying” for endorsements using technically legal means, or the fishy practice of handing out “walking around money” in urban elections.

“The 2014 cycle will likely see a wholesale return to the era in which Democratic candidates pay sometimes-shadowy street operatives for unspecified activities in the name of getting out the minority vote,” Smith said. “Perhaps because few journalists actually live in areas targeted by street players, this phenomenon has been largely ignored.”

Put down Twitter and slowly back away

Reporters are not exactly a humble bunch. But most of the journalists interviewed for this piece expressed some form of regret about how they used Twitter during the campaign. It was, by far, the biggest source of dismay and angst in discussions with reporters about the current state of political journalism.

No one is complaining about the revolutionary gateway to news and information that Twitter provides. But plenty of people in politics are anxious about the way the Twitter conversation thrives on incrementalism, self-involvement and snark.

“It made me think smaller when I should have been thinking bigger,” said Sam Youngman.

“Twitter just gives you an outlet for when you’re bored,” said another reporter who traveled on the Romney plane. “It’s just stupid shit you are not thinking about the ramifications of.”

John Dickerson, hardly a new media curmudgeon, called Twitter “a mess for campaign coverage.”

“It makes us small and it makes us pissed off and mean, because Twitter as a conversation is incredibly acerbic and cynical and we don’t need more of that in coverage of politics, we need less,” he said.

Dickerson’s assertion is backed up by Pew, which monitored the tone the campaign conversation on various media platforms during the race. Twitter was far and away “the most negative” of all the platforms studied, the study found—more than cable news, blogs, newspapers or Facebook.

“The overall negativity on Twitter over the course of the campaign stood out,” Pew noted in a subsequent study. “For both candidates, negative comments exceeded positive comments by a wide margin throughout the fall campaign season.”

Political journalism has become more sarcastic and cynical over the years, according to Time’s Joe Klein, but Twitter has accelerated the trend.

“The biggest change I have seen in our business over the last 40 years has been that journalism has slid from skepticism, which should be our natural state, but we have slipped from there toward cynicism,” Klein said. “It’s gotten to the point where the toughest story for a young reporter to write about a politician is a positive story.”

Some reporters wish they had just closed Twitter at various points and observed the campaign more closely. Many said they remember sitting in the press file centers at

various debates and watching Twitter more than the actual debate unfolding on the television screens in front of them.

"I still don't know how reporters sit and watch a speech, and live tweet a speech, and also have the bandwidth to listen to what candidates are saying, and actually think about it and absorb it so they can right a comprehensive story afterwards," said Liz Sidoti of the Associated Press.

It depends on the reporter. Some can shift from tweet-mode to writing mode seamlessly. For others, trying to write something thoughtful after staring at Twitter chatter is like trying to fall asleep after downing a shot of espresso.

"You feel compelled to be on Twitter during big events, so you know what everyone's talking about," said Scott Conroy of RealClearPolitics. "But often what everyone's talking about is either completely inane or something that's only relevant to the Washington bubble. Twitter warps not only your sense of perspective but the whole process by which your brain works. It provides all of this instantaneous information that makes our jobs much easier, but I often feel like my critical thinking skills have diminished since the day I signed up for it."

The self-centered nature of the service—and the pointless tweets about operations and access—did little to foster a healthy relationship inside the Romney campaign bubble, a truth now admitted by nearly everyone involved in the process, on both sides of the ball.

"I don't think the Twitter culture helps anybody create great journalism," said Garrett Haake. "If you're trying to be the first person that put it out at 140 characters, you're probably not thinking about the broader context in which you want to present something."

Maggie Haberman, a veteran of New York politics, said she recently was digging through some old paperwork at her home in Brooklyn and uncovered some light-hearted photographs of herself with other reporters who covered Hillary Clinton's Senate campaign in 2000.

"It was just to remember this journey that we had all been through together. It had nothing to do with news we were covering," she said. "But that picture went into my scrapbook, it didn't go into my Twitter. Twitter is a news platform. When embeds were tweeting around pictures of each other and things like that, it was a weird meshing of these two things. And I don't really know how you solve that, but I think it's something that journalists need to bear in mind. We're not the story."

Jonathan Martin said that reporters traveling with candidates in 2016 should develop a set of Twitter ground rules that might make campaigns less reluctant to put their candidates before the press.

"I know what the staff says, 'You guys can't handle it because you're just going to tweet out every other stupid thing, and it's not the old days because you guys will put up a blog post instantly or tweet instantly, and there is just no judgment anymore,'" Martin said.

"That's a fair point to a certain extent, but I think more broadly it's a disservice to the American public and to the voters for us to only see these guys through press releases, through the most carefully managed press conference and interviews. It would make some sense for the traveling press to come up with some kind of unwritten rules to stand by so we are not going to tolerate just having no access to these guys."

And should editors exercise more control over what their reporters are tweeting? For those on the receiving end of press coverage, the answer is an unequivocal yes.

"At a time of increased production of content, there is a decrease of editorial control," said Stuart Stevens of the Romney campaign.

Murphy said if he were running a news desk, he would monitor his reporters' tweets like a Cold War spy.

"I'd follow 'em all, and I'd fine them for stupid tweets," he said.

If that sounds unrealistic, check out Dickerson's take: "If I were running an actual news division, I would probably ban people from Twitter in some way."

That Dickerson, one of the more forward-thinking and tech-savvy reporters in the business, would even consider such an idea speaks to how frustrated many campaign veterans are with today's shoot-first-and-update-later style of political journalism.

David Carr of The New York Times said he would enact a curt but elegant Twitter policy if he were running campaign coverage: "Tweet less, dear colleagues."

"I unfollowed a lot of political reporters, because you are tweeting for your colleagues, you are not tweeting for me," Carr said. "I would say, put the phone in your pocket. Start focusing on the people that are in front of you. Don't worry about so much what the other guy is doing. Be willing to play off the ball."