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See Spot Run:

How the 30-Second Television Ad Works for
The Contemporary Presidential Campaign

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No other force has dramatically changed political campaigns quite like television. “In America,” Neil Postman (1985) asserts, “the fundamental metaphor for political discourse is the television commercial” (p. 126). A self-professed McLuhanite, Postman declares that the medium is the message, which is to say that television advertising is the most peculiar and pervasive form of contemporary political communication. Indeed there is something captivating about 30 seconds of television advertising that can encapsulate the animating spirit and the essential strategy of political affairs in contemporary America. However, because commercials have become “an important paradigm for the structure of every type of public discourse” (Postman, 1985, p. 126) and because television is the prevailing source of information about American politics (see Payne, 1989), it is imperative to understand the 30-second political spot. This essay examines how spot ads communicate in a political campaign.

Definition & Mission

As I refer to it hereafter, a “polispot” is a paid political television advertisement that is 30 seconds in length.¹ Polispots assemble “all of the arts of show business – music, drama, imagery, humor, celebrity” (Postman, 1985, p. 126) to shape broad narratives of American politics, which are discerned in the shifting generic references of campaign spots (see Richardson, 2001).

Benoit, Pier and Blaney (1997) conclude that ads generally acclaim, attack, and defend.

¹ An exception to this general rule occurred in an election as recent as 1992, when several 30-minute infomercials aired on national networks. Ross Perot ran these and 60-second “colors ads.” That same year Bill Clinton aired with 15-second spots.

Candidates use such polispsots with three goals in mind: to create a positive image, to inform about pertinent issues, and to motivate voters.

The first task of polispsots is introducing candidates and making them known to constituents. In this sense, spots work to create or – in the case of already familiar candidates – recreate a public image (Richardson, 2001). To establish and sustain a candidate's identity over the course of a campaign, advertisers must construct an extended, cohesive visual message with a succession of spot ads. This way, spots convey the image of a candidate whose story unfolds like a documentary in the context of eight or nine weeks (Johnston & Kaid, 2002; West, 1997; Diamond & Bates, 1984).

The second task of polispsots is informing. Candidates reveal important aspects of their vision and substantive positions in spot commercials (e.g., Atkin, Bowen, Nayman & Sheinkopf, 1973). Political advertising is educational insofar as it communicates pertinent campaign issues and a candidate's policy agenda (see e.g., Johnston, & Kaid, 2002); Laczniak & Caywood, 1987; Just, Crigler & Buhr, 1999; Just, Crigler & Wallach, 1990).

The third task of polispsots is motivating voters. Because every political campaign ultimately faces the same victory-or-death scenario, spots work to persuade the electorate and influence electoral outcomes (see e.g., Goldstein & Freedman, 2002; Diamond & Bates, 1984; Maarek, 1995). Polispsots get exploited as a communication tool to engage voters.

To represent and magnify the candidate in a compelling manner, advertisers focus on essential aspects of the political contender. Richardson (2001) maintains that successful candidates pivot from their understanding of the public voice to communicate something basic that Americans believe. Spot ads also define the nature of the presidency by stipulating the attributes a president should have (Jamieson, 1996). Just, Crigler, and Buhr (1999) claim that

television advertisements convey emotions or evoke those feelings in viewers better than print media or even television news (see also Brian & Wattenberg, 1996). Sophisticated advertising enables viewers to perceive qualities in candidates they really want in themselves, which forms a “television personality” (Nimmo, 2001, p. 170). Altercasting techniques often convey that a candidate is in control and competent (Payne, 1989).

History

Communication devices have always been a central component in political campaigns, so it is no real surprise that political spot ads descend from messages in song, on banners, and off broadsides (see e.g., Davies, 2000a). Jamieson (1986) maintains that “presidential advertising has always been an adaptable art that used whatever means it could muster, from touch parades to roadblocking, to invite the attention of an intended audience” (p. 20.) But even so, Diamond & Bates delineate: “In the beginning, there were no commercials at all” (1984, p. 35). When the first radio station (KDKA in Pittsburg) went on air in 1920, no direct advertising was allowed or demanded. At that time, sponsors and candidates alike were content with “the goodwill that results from their contribution of good programs” (Diamond & Bates, 1984, p. 35). In 1924, for example, both presidential candidates Democrat John Davis and Republican Calvin Coolidge bought radio time for speeches, but not spot advertisements per se. Nevertheless, the auditory medium communicated political messages by transporting public speeches into American homes (see Jamieson, 1996).

Radio remained a vehicle for political advertising in the 1920s and 1930s, but newsreels and film soon captured the attention of political operatives who intuitively understood the power of a visual, moving image. Republican newsreels served as a model for television spot

advertising (Diamond & Bates, 1984), but campaign strategies hinged on public speaking tours and extensive traveling to meet with voters in person as late as 1948.

Television advertising revolutionized political campaign communication in the 1950s. While some political ads for state office had scattered across the airwaves in 1950, the 1952 presidential election marked the first television advertising campaign. These first polispots featured General Dwight Eisenhower, who ran against Governor Adlai Stevenson. In his campaign, Eisenhower ran a sequence of 20-second spots called “Eisenhower Answers America” though most of his other spots were 30 or 60 seconds long.² Meanwhile, in 1952, Stevenson clung to an advertising strategy suited for the radio age. When he finally adopted a television strategy in 1956, Stevenson’s eighteen half-hour talks about campaign issues made him an overnight “star” with twice as many voters tuning in to television than in 1952 to radio (Troy, 1996). But even so, Stevenson is ultimately remembered for his oratory, whereas Eisenhower is remembered for his television commercials (Troy, 1996; Diamond & Bates, 1984). The rise of living-room politics soon began to phase out front porch campaigning.

As the 1960s progressed, so too did the character of the 30-second campaign. In a time when Americans were beginning to value television as their most important source of ideas (apart from interpersonal contact), mastering the art of television advertising proved the best vehicle for campaigning votes.³ In 1964, Democrats promoted Lyndon Johnson by reinforcing fears of Barry Goldwater. The “Daisy” spot ran only once, but forever changed how political advertisements were viewed. In this spot there is no explicit reference to Goldwater, although

² Neither the 1952 nor the 1956 campaigns produced many ads that exceeded 5 minutes (Diamond & Bates, 1984).

³ Troy (1996) explains that by 1960 polls indicated that two out of three Americans believed that commercials used untruthful arguments. They were beginning to doubt the medium as truth but, by a ratio of five to four, they preferred a campaign of televised speeches to stumping tours.

that is what the audience perceived. The spot is also important because it received so much free news play. In a PBS interview (Bissen, 1998), Kathleen Hall Jamieson noted that “there was no intent – and you see this in the strategy memos from ‘64 – to air that [spot] repeatedly. It aired once. The intent was to get news play. And it got it.” The Daisy ad had enormous impact because it was thought-provoking, and the controversy about the polispot called attention to political advertising and effective campaign tactics.

Innovation in advertising embraced the 30-second candidate in the 1970s and 1980s. Polling operations had emerged in the 1960s and so political advertisers subsequently capitalized on attitudinal surveys, pre-tested campaign themes and commercials, and sampled focus groups. Polispot advertisers also adopted commercial advertising techniques (Diamond & Bates, 1984). Diamond and Bates note that the 30-second spot remains the staple of political television time buys because that is how commercial insertions are organized for broadcast and cable television. In the 1976 and 1980 campaigns, timed spots were predominantly 30 seconds long with a few 60-second exceptions; any shorter (15-second) spots and longer (2-minute) spots were rare (Jamieson, 1996). Jamieson goes on to mention that living room politics thus faced the increased role that consultants and outside groups imposed on advertising. The enhanced advertising production techniques, marketing methods, and survey polls had two profound effects. First, television campaigning required more money because high-tech communication is expensive. And second, television campaigning demanded that political advisors collaborate ideas and share power and authority with media specialists.

Political spot advertising has grown to be an accepted form of political argument and public debate; technology allows candidates to engage in dialogue through their spots. The dramatic increase in political spot advertising during the 1988 election was especially

newsworthy during that time, and televised news coverage of polispots conferred status to legitimize ads as a communication tool (Kaid, Gobetz, Garner, Leland & Scott, 1993). Since the advent of television advertising, political campaigns have been increasingly dependent on 30-second polispots.

Strategy

Spot ads are a pervasive and purposeful device in the communications plan of a political campaign. Politicians must adapt their styles to the changing political, cultural, and technological environment in which they campaign. After all, they compete in the market for public attention against rival politicians and in the face of commercial, entertainment, and news messages that are also projected. So, for the sake of their careers and the pursuit of their ideas, candidates seek innovative materials, designs, and techniques to infuse excitement into their campaigns.

Television is unique and effective for delivering a message because its “real-life visual effects” make it a dramatic medium (Reggie, 1997). Consequently, production techniques for political spot ads have considerable, aesthetic impact. Technological advancements and sophisticated editing techniques mean that contemporary spots are visually exciting and compelling. West (1997) explains that images can be spliced together to link visuals, and animated images can transpose or “morph” one person into another. There are a variety of ways in which catchy visuals, music, and color capture viewer attention and convey political messages.

The evolution of polispot advertising strategies parallels the evolution of commercial advertising spots. In its infancy, the basic dilemma of advertisers was how to distinguish products that do not differ from their competition in any significant way (Maarek, 1995; Nimmo, 2001). Attempting to prove the superiority of one, Rosser Reeves developed the concept of the

Unique Selling Proposition (U.S.P). This “Reason-Why” advertising approach concerned itself with rational (albeit hyper-enthusiastic) appeals to consumer self-interest (Gold, 1987). The U.S.P. theory suggests that a consumer (i.e., voter) tends to remember just one thing from an advertisement; so, what the consumer ought to take away from the ad is one best impression of the product. Interviewed in *The 30-Second President* (1984), Reeves explained that politics is “a one day sale in which you have to sell a majority or plurality, or else you are out of business.... The commercial is an instrument to get people to remember [your candidate].” As Reeves researched the idea for his most famous product, Dwight Eisenhower, the advertising guru evinced that “we always remember (the sound bite); so if that’s what democracy is all about, why not give that to more people?” Political spots of the 1950s and early 1960s adhered to the Unique Selling Proposition whereby jingles, superlatives, and slogans more memorable for inflection than for content.

As television developed as a mass medium, political marketing experienced its period of adolescence, the time when advertisers explored a range of techniques at its disposal and their limitations. The 1960s marked a “Creative Revolution” in advertising (see Gold, 1987; Warlaumont, 2001). Specifically, the political advertising by media specialist Tony Schwartz marked a dramatic shift in the way that candidates constructed their spot messages (Maarek, 1995). Whereas Reeves made an impact with the hard sell by bombarding airwaves with simple messages that were easily remembered, Schwartz capitalized on the deep sell by aiming for the seed of human emotion, by inviting viewers to engage the messages and to infer their meanings. Schwartz conceived of viewers (i.e., voters) as an active workforce, not a passive audience. In this stage, the assumption that the public has opinions about policy issues meant that candidates needed to convey their own ideas about the issues to educate voters and subsequently to evoke

life experience or rouse latent ideas so that people react. In 1964, Schwartz' Daisy spot accomplished this; the (in)famous spot had controversial impact overnight (see e.g., Jamieson, 1996). Anymore, it was not enough to expose a television audience to a polispot; candidates must communicate a message that the audience can believe in.

Political advertising strategies reached proverbial adulthood in the 1980s. Maarek (1995) claims the "shackles on political advertising were removed" (p. 17) in 1976, signaling the end of the adolescent stage. Additionally, he cites two spots to illustrate sophisticated advertising strategies (p. 17-18). First, a spot for Ronald Reagan portrayed him as a candidate with the same style of images as the news; it was an imitation of what can be seen on television everyday, and the spot ran immediately before or after the evening news to uphold the confusion. Second, a spot for Malcolm Wallop used less credible images (of television commercials) and constructed an image that resembled the Marlboro Man. By imitating the most believable images shot for television – even though viewers knew them to be contrived – political advertising strategies came "full circle" (p. 18).

Effective political advertising demands attention for not only how the candidate communicates in terms of content, but also for how spot ads find viewers/voters in terms of media placement. The end goal for a candidate is winning on Election Day, and so a modern campaign must provide an opportunity for as many voters as possible to receive its message to capture supporters, while preventing existing supporters from defecting. Mass communication and marketing strategies are thus sought to expose as many people as possible to the image of the candidate (e.g., Maarek, 1995; West, 1997; Diamond & Bates, 1984), and voter targeting plays an important role in designing a campaign's marketing strategy (Maarek, 1995).

Though television is a mass medium, commercials have targeting possibilities. With 80 percent of adults watching television on any given day (Reggie, 1997), polispots are the most effective and efficient way to communicate intrusively to the greatest number of likely voters in the shortest time period (see e.g., Hutchens, 1999). Today Nielson ratings monitor viewership to track levels, shifts, and patterns of television use. For example, broadcast television reaches a broader audience, but cable television reaches viewers who are more likely to be politically active (Reggie, 1997). Additionally, public opinion polls and sources like Simmons, MRI, and Media Audit provide geographic, demographic, and psychographic data about voters to help determine media advertising plans. Digital ad insertions, high speed spot delivery, geographic zoning, and fiber interconnection have also expanded marketing opportunities on cable networks (Maarek, 1995).

Because television monitoring techniques are advancing, political advertising media purchases get planned in a more sophisticated manner. Prior (2001) explains that, in the first decades of television advertising, national ad buys were common and media plans involved a stream of broadcast spots. However, now candidates can save money by segmenting their ads and targeting voters by categories. Media buyers bypass national networks to buy directly from local stations (West, 1997). And new marketing technology by Campaign Media Analysis Group (CMAG), for instance, facilitates such localized advertising efforts. CMAG monitors national and cable networks for clients to track what polispots run, when they air, and the viewer response to those spots. Such a monitoring service helped candidates plan advertising more strategically in the 2000 election (Goldstein and Freedman, 2002).

Spot advertising is at once a cost-efficient and costly means of reaching a mass of voters. The introduction of paid electronic media marked the beginning of rapid inflation in campaign

costs, and costs continue to rise for political candidates (Davies, 2000a, 2000b; Farrey, 2001; Electronic Media, 2000). Early money is increasingly common and necessary to invest in the strategic work that comprises a spot advertising campaign. And the high costs of television time get coupled with increased front-loading of the primary season, which has consequences (Davies, 2000b; Kendall, 2000). The campaigning period advantages candidates with early campaign resources (Kendall, 2000); the contemporary reliance on the spot means that “those who cannot afford to purchase them, with rare exceptions, are denied the ability to have their ideas either heard or taken seriously” (Jamieson, 1996, p. 522). Ironically, campaign strategies are determined largely by the media planning and purchasing patterns, so costly ads will run in 17 or 20 states, and most people will not experience campaign messages unless they are in battleground areas. Interest groups significantly relieve the financial burden of polisspots by contributing large sums of money, but those third-party groups can exert influence on the content of the aired spots in turn.

Spot advertising strategies unfold in predictable stages. Although they assure this routinization is common in every art form after a time, Diamond and Bates (1984) offer that spot advertisements fit in four discrete categories: identification, argument, attack, and resolution. *The Spot* identifies these four rhetorical types that conform to a campaign chronology. First, *ID* spots are designed simply to create name recognition and familiarity. Next, *argument* spots get infused with emotion and tell viewers where candidates stand on issues. Then, *attack* spots refer to negative advertising and appeal with name-calling, direct personal attacks, man-on-the-street set-ups, and symbolic acts to disparage the opponent. Finally, *resolution* spots finish off the campaign with attempts to appear thoughtful, dignified, and reflective without overpowering the viewer; they represent a return to a more positive and optimistic outlook. When Goldstein and

Freedman (2002) analyzed the 2000 election, they confirmed this typology. The researchers found that spots airing before August were predominantly positive, primarily working to establish candidate identity and impose optimistic images. During August, contrast and attack ads aired more frequently, though promotional spots came back into rotation by the beginning of September and lasted throughout that month. In October, comparison ads were increasingly replaced with attack ads, but there was a late media blitz that attempted to leave viewers with positive reinforcing spots before Election Day.

Impact

Although there is literature that explores the media's general role in political learning, there was little research on citizens' awareness of issue opinions from individual media sources prior to the 1970s. Then, the common argument was that the significance of paid advertising was quite small because only unpaid advertising (news coverage) was thought to have a real impact on voters (Diamond & Bates, 1984). Atkin, Nayman and Sheinkopf (1973) go further to explain that, despite little empirical evidence, conventional wisdom suspended the ideas of selective exposure, message frequency, and familiarity breeding positive evaluations.

In recent years, researchers have found that television polispots indeed have cognitive, affective, and behavioral effects on voters (see e.g., Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 1995). In 1976, Patterson and McClure were among the first to assert the informational importance of television advertising when they found that viewers learn more from political advertising spots than television news. Twenty years later, Brian and Wattenberg (1996) confirmed that television ads help inform voters in more accurate, issue-oriented terms than television news; plus, newspaper readers fare no better than television news watchers in issue-based recall and evaluation. There is also evidence to suggest that polispots are better sources for accurate information recall than

televised debates, although viewers may recall preferred candidate ad information more readily than opponent ad information (Just, Crigler & Wallach, 1990). Polispsots indeed have a strong effect on candidate image and voter information (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 1995). Evidence (e. g., Just, Crigler & Buhr, 1999; Just, Crigler & Wallach, 1990) suggests that ads inform specifically on policy positions and personal qualities.

It is important to note, however, that the extent to which polispsots are effective is hotly debated. On the one hand, few may actually change their voting behavior based on political advertising. There is research that suggests people pay attention to messages that reflect their pre-existing views (see Diamond & Bates, 1984). Additionally, as people attend to advertisements that extol what they already believe, voters will also project their own views onto advertisements (Christ & Thorson, 1994). Even though conversion is an obvious goal for a political campaign, spots may affect viewers who already have salient political beliefs in terms of reinforcement and activation, prodding the already committed to vote on the basis of their commitments.

On the other hand, polispsots may have dramatic impact on voting behavior. West (1997) explains how political advertising makes a significant difference in the margin, when the advertising information is either one-sided (un-rebutted) or directed to undecided, impressionable voters. Hutchens (1999) notes that maintaining market share and sustaining candidate awareness requires three to four ad exposures weekly. For political advertisers in a relatively uncluttered ad environment (usually early in the campaign), six to seven weekly exposures ensure that a campaign's messages are being retained. When the message environment is cluttered and competitive during the campaign, ten to twelve weekly ad exposures produce effects.

The way attack ads work is especially contested (see e.g., Laczniaak & Caywood, 1987) insofar as they generate attention and contribute to accurate information on issues. Although scholars like Jamieson (1992) argue that negative ads perpetuate political cynicism, elicit negative emotions, and reduce voter interest, content-based analyses find that these spots have informational potential (e.g., Brian & Wattenberg, 1996). One account for this phenomenon is that political ads were becoming more factual by 1972, and negative ads emphasized policy-based themes and performance in the 1980s (Jamieson, 1996). Another take is that negative spot ads are particularly effective for public debate over airwaves, thus stimulating campaign participation (Kaid, Gobetz, Garner, Leland & Scott, 1993; Atkin, Nayman & Sheinkopf, 1973; Johnston & Kaid, 2002).

Political advertising spots have impact beyond the direct vote-inducing campaign and affect the broader meta-campaigning process too. Diamond and Bates (1984) review a number of political advertising outcomes on the election process: the rise of campaign costs, the diminished role of parties, the rise of the hired gun, the rise of the special interest “outsider”, the drop in political participation, the debasement of political argument, and the perception of politics as entertainment (see also Laczniaak & Caywood, 1987).

As with any prevailing force, the impact of television in politics is hotly contested. Postman (1985) laments the political advertising spot. To him, television displaces a print-based, substantively rational democracy in America with an empty, manipulative spectacle. The political advertising campaign costs America the modern dream of individual and communal self-determination that was developed in tandem with the medium of print. “By substituting imagery for claims,” he argues, “the pictorial commercial made the emotional appeal, not tests of truth, the basis of consumer decision” (pp. 127-128). Jamieson (1992) condemns polisspots in

campaign discourse for reducing political arguments and skirting civic duty to substantiate claims. For her, spots are less about the political character of candidates than they are about the personal, private, psychological needs of citizens. Richardson (2001) even argues that 30-second advertisements in modern political campaigns is linked to the decline of deliberative ethos in Congress and low voter turnout, which feeds the cynicism that pervades the public about the political process these days.

Despite the skepticism and negativity, contemporary politics is notably characterized by a political-ad paradigm and so the polispot is an exemplar for understanding the politics of our time. Books like *Campaign Talk* (Hart, 2000) and *Everything You Think You Know About Politics... And Why You're Wrong* (Jamieson, 2000) work to overcome contemporary cynicism and voter disengagement by showing how to interpret political messages because our campaigns indeed matter. Hart and Jamieson submit that while the 30-second spot does not undermine politics, it can trivialize its conversation. They also submit that the power and control that gets wielded over television airwaves is complicated. On the one hand, candidates control the image they project in their ads; yet on the other hand, a 30-second spot gets mediated over the airwaves and is subject to individual interpretation, news media scrutiny, and counter attack by a political opponent (Jamieson, 1989). With the rising cost of campaigns, lobbyists and political action committees also wield influence in the process.

Conclusion

The brevity, complexity, and prominence of 30-second political advertising spots attract scholarly investigation. The socio-political context of elections means that the content of political ads is often a sign of the times. Moreover, because “the spot ad is the most used and most viewed of all available forms of advertising” (Jamieson, 1996, 517), the holistic impact of

political spots is increasingly important to comprehend. Understanding the functions and strategies of the 30-second spot also means understanding how the television medium works to inform and influence.

From the “I Like Ike” days to the contemporary influence of outside groups, television has shaped the course of American politics for over 50 years. Ultimately, as Jamieson (1996) insists, “political advertising legitimizes our political institutions by affirming that change is possible within the political system, that the president can effect change, that votes can make a difference” (p. 523). Citizenship requires that people get engaged in public affairs, which demands voters be in tune with politics and appreciate campaigns as a way to participate in democracy and enact freedoms. Communication spurs this political involvement, and media channels like television help politics find its audience. The polispot underscores the power of the ballot.

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