

Talking Head Advertisements

Elizabeth Marvin

In 1952, the first political advertisements appeared on American television. At that time, television was still a new and experimental medium, and no one was sure quite how to incorporate the cutting-edge technology into presidential campaigns. By today's standards, the first ads were crude and primitive; Madison Avenue and Hollywood advertising moguls tried to market the candidates with the same techniques used to sell soap and promote movies. Thus, American voters were bombarded with ads that featured a narrators with a booming voices extolling candidates' virtues in a superhero-like fashion, cute cartoon characters singing catchy jingles, and candidates speaking directly to the camera in an attempt to sell their wares to the average American voter.

Of course, much has changed within politics, American political culture, and particularly within the television industry in the nearly 60 years since those first ads aired. Advances in technology allow for the affordable production of ads with myriad visual and audio effects. Increased viewership and channel/audience specialization stemming from the advent of cable television allows for the creation and dissemination of highly targeted ads to specific audiences. Additionally, whereas in 1952 the American public was not well versed in media literacy, voters today are not only accustomed to, but are in fact expecting to be stimulated and amazed by televised political ads.

Therefore, as the medium and audience has evolved, so has the message. Although talking head advertisements are perhaps the oldest type of political ad, current spots often bear little resemblance to the talking head ads of the 1950s and 1960s. However, no matter what the variation, the purpose and effect are the same today as over fifty years ago.

Description and Definition

In their most basic form, talking head advertisements are those spots that feature a candidate speaking directly to the camera—or rather, directly to the television audience (Kern 48). Although the exact form of this type of spot has varied greatly over the years, the basic purpose has remained the same: to demonstrate to voters that the candidate is not only able to speak coherently about the issues, but is also able to do so in an appropriately “presidential” manner (Devlin “Analysis” 26). In an ideal political environment, voters would have the opportunity to judge these characteristics in person. However, given the geographic and time constraints impacting modern presidential campaigns, it is impossible for a candidate to visit every community in every state. Moreover, even if a candidate could deliver enough speeches so that every voter has an opportunity to see him speak live, not every voter would make use of the opportunity. Thus candidates must find other means of communicating “directly” with voters. Televised debates fulfill part of this need, but are problematic in that their effectiveness and scope are again dependent on the initiative of each individual voter. Talking head advertisements, therefore, have perhaps become one of the few ways a candidate can communicate directly with voters interference from the media. Although their style and utility has changed since the early days of television, the talking head advertisements found in current campaigns follow a similar formula and serve a nearly identical purpose to those used in the earliest televised campaigns.

Because talking head spots are one of the oldest and most basic types of campaign advertising, the spots that fall within this category vary greatly in production techniques and presentation. Traditionally, talking head ads are devoid of any music or stimulating visual effects, relying only on the candidate’s personality and communication skills to attract and

persuade voters (Kern 48). However, as advertisements in general have become increasingly complex and reliant on stimulating moving images and sounds, so have traditional talking head spots become increasingly scarce. Today one rarely sees an advertisement that does not utilize additional production techniques such as music, on-screen text, or moving images to attract viewers' attention and reinforce the candidate's message (Kern 80). The inclusion of these techniques has caused some blurring the lines that in the past separated talking head spots from other types; it is now possible to locate elements of talking head spots within nearly every other category of advertising, particularly the biographical spot.

Purpose

Although they may not be the ideal, talking head spots nonetheless serve as adequate and important substitutes for "direct" communication; and because voters often perceive these ads as direct communication, the purpose of talking head ads as part of a larger campaign is two-fold. First, they inform voters about the candidate's policies and position on important issues; and second, talking head advertisements contribute much to a candidate's overall image as a strong and capable leader (Jamieson *The :30 Second President*). Thus, talking head spots straddle the line between issue and image advertising (Kern 48-9).

Although candidates can supply voters with this information by a number of other means, ads in which the candidate appears in person have proven most effective (Devlin "Analysis" 26). In fact, talking head spots are the only pure issue ads, where the primary purpose is to clearly convey information about the candidate's ideas and policies (Kern 48-9). However, issue advertising is a difficult subject to navigate in the modern campaign. First, as elections have become more and more dependent on candidate image, both the press and academics have lamented the "dumbing down" of American politics and identify issues as the "correct" criteria

for selecting a president. Thus, at least for pundits and academics, issues and policies have become all important (Kern 78). Although they do care about candidate positions on the issues, by and large the voting public is not interested in paying attention to lengthy discussions on the intricate details of public policy. Rather, the increasing dominance of television as a source of political information has led to the emergence of personality politics; TV has changed both “how we treat political information (by emphasizing personality) and thus how we make political decisions” (Hart 67). According to Roderick Hart in *Seducing America*:

“television’s political training therefore ‘homogenizes’ voters in two ways: (1) it make them prize the same limited number of qualities in political candidates, regardless of the candidates’ politics, and (2) it encourages ‘crossover’ effects so that viewers evaluate political candidates just as they evaluate all other television personalities” (68).

Therefore, political advertisements need to involve voters in the “total experience” of a candidate’s personality and character, tying in political and cultural myths to make voters “feel good” about a certain party or candidate (Kern 80).

Understandably, talking head ads, with their simple style and often unexciting visuals and sounds, are not particularly useful in creating feel good emotions about a candidate. However, advertisements in which a candidate directly addresses the audience consistently receive positive ratings from viewers. A study conducted on a sample of television spots from the 1984 election revealed that within the sample of talking head ads in which the candidate himself appeared, over ninety-six percent of the spots coded positively. When compared to the sixty-five percent positive coding for talking head ads featuring surrogates, the importance of that “direct” candidate communication with voters becomes exceedingly evident. Moreover, the predominant emotions coded for talking head ads were “hope” and “reassurance”; in the 1984 study talking head ads accounted for over fifty percent of all ads coded for these emotions. What is important

to note is that these are two very important components of the key image characteristic “trust” (Kern 79, 80, 85).

But these feelings cannot be aroused through simple candidate-to-camera communication; viewers accustomed to fast-moving images and exciting sounds may be easily bored by plain talking heads. Therefore, campaigns rely on stimulating visuals that both reinforce both the candidate’s verbal message about the issue and the candidate’s image as a strong, trustworthy and capable leader. As previously demonstrated, a candidate’s image can be greatly helped by simply engaging in candidate-to-camera communication, but the use of specific visuals and locations can contribute even further to a positive image. Therefore, talking head ads will often be carefully constructed so as to associate the candidate with key political myths, such as the “log cabin,” “common man” and “war hero” ideals. Additionally, the location of the ad can target a specific audience and emotion. A candidate speaking about the issue of education while sitting in his living room surrounded by family reinforces his image as a caring, well-grounded and loyal candidate who is truly invested in education concerns. In 1988, for example, Dukakis’ campaign used talking head ads for just this purpose. Following numerous attacks from the Bush campaign, Dukakis cut two 4-minute and three 60-second ads. Although some advisors did not like them, several felt that they were good for Dukakis’ image because “we lost women dramatically. They didn’t see him as a father. They didn’t see any warmth from him at all...So we gave them a concerned father. The face-the-camera stuff allowed him to bounce back” (Devlin 1988 400). A candidate filmed while surrounded by the trappings of political office, a particularly effective tool for incumbent presidents, reifies the image characteristics of leadership, trust, and experience. Though intended to serve as a means of educating voters about a candidate’s issues and positions, talking head ads “may simply present

the candidate as a ‘talking head’ expounding on his commitment to the nations’ ‘civil religion’” (Combs 336).

Hence, talking head ads emerge as truly paradoxical. By fulfilling the first goal of educating voters about a candidate’s position on the important issues, these television spots simultaneously serve to develop a significant candidate image. In 1972, research by Patterson and McClure found that talking head issue ads act more favorably upon candidate image than those spots specifically designed to create a favorable candidate image. This surprising argument makes sense when one considers the “golden rule” of the political advertising industry: “Commercials that attempt to *tell* the listeners something are inherently not as effective as those that attach to something that is already in [the voter]” (Alger 82). Thus, talking head ads cannot hope to be effective by simply presenting viewers with straight information about a candidate’s positions; the spots must make viewers *feel* something about that position at the same time they are learning about it.

History

As previously noted, the 1952 and 1956 presidential campaigns were the first to use television as an advertising medium. In the 1952 presidential race between General Dwight D. Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson, the Eisenhower campaign ran a number of advertisements titled “Ask General Eisenhower.” The ad series, created by Madison Avenue advertising mogul Rosser Reeves, consisted of three 60-second spots and more than twenty 20-second spots. Each ad featured Eisenhower sitting on a stool, facing directly into the camera, fielding questions from voters gathered in the studio. In reality, the questions and Eisenhower’s responses were taped in separate studios on separate days. The “audience” members were ordinary tourists pulled from tours of Radio City Music Hall (Reeves); once in the studio they were given questions to ask

about taxes, cost of living, corruption, communism, and the Korean War. After a little practice, the audience member was filmed, and then sent on their way (Jamieson *Packaging* 85).

Eisenhower's responses, on the other hand, were scripted well ahead of filming, written on large cue cards, and read by the General on camera. Effective and ground-breaking in 1952 by their sheer novelty, within a few years even their own creator was calling them "crude and rudimentary" (Reeves). The General was unable to mask the fact that he was reading from cue cards, and was clearly uncomfortable in front of the camera. But in 1952 television was still a new and experimental medium; no one, particularly politicians, was skilled at its performance. Nor were they sure quite sure how to best utilize this new medium to a candidate's advantage (Reeves).

Though the 1956 presidential campaigns made more use of television than the 1952 campaigns, most candidates aired "long-format" talking head spots. As opposed to the Eisenhower campaign's use of quick 20-second ads four years earlier, the candidates in 1956 bought blocks of airtime lasting anywhere from 5 to 30 minutes, during which they spoke at length on various policy issues and positions. Though these true talking head spots provided candidates with an excellent opportunity for in-depth discussion of their policies and positions, and though these spots did expose voters to some semblance of direct communication from the candidates, television audiences did not respond well to the long ads. Viewers were reportedly bored by the long format, and more often than not switched off both mentally and literally. Thus, after 1956 the length of political advertisements shrunk dramatically, as did the amount of airtime for candidate-to-camera communication (McNair 108).

In 1960, candidates John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon both relied heavily on short talking head spots. Having had the opportunity to participate in a lengthy televised debate,

neither candidate needed to purchase large blocks of airtime in order to speak at length on-air about the issues. Instead, both campaigns aired ads that typically ran 60 seconds or less (Devlin “Analysis” 25).

As technology and production capabilities grew throughout the late 1960s and 1970s, pure talking head ads became increasingly rare (Kern 80). Although numerous campaign ads still featured candidates speaking directly to the camera, more often than not this direct communication was used in combination with inspiring music and stimulating visuals. Often ads featured positive candidate-to-camera communication as a contrast to negative images of problems plaguing the common American voter. Another common device used to increase visual stimuli was to have candidates talk to “common man” voters, rather than directly to the camera. That is, the candidate was still speaking directly to voters about an issue, but the ad producers then had more to work with in terms of interesting visuals and camera angles. An example of this type of talking head variation was aired by George McGovern’s 1972 campaign. The ad featured the Senator listening and responding to questions posed by workers about the future of Medicare. The workers asked a total of two questions; the rest of the airtime was occupied by McGovern’s reply, essentially a speech about the importance of saving Medicare (Devlin “Analysis” 44). And although the ad showed McGovern speaking only to the workers, he could have just as easily directly addressed the camera. Thus, despite a significant variation in form from true talking head ads, the content and purpose of the McGovern spot were the same as that of a traditional talking head spot.

During the presidential races of the 1980s, talking head advertisements became increasingly scarce. This was partly a result of improved production techniques; but in large part this dearth of talking head spots was a direct reaction to the communication skills of Ronald

Reagan. Although candidates had become more adept at projecting the proper image on television in the years since the first televised campaign, it was nearly impossible to out “image” the former actor (Kern 79). However, in spite of candidates’ reluctance to engage in candidate-to-camera communication, Congress several times attempted to pass legislation which required candidates to appear in person in each of their ads. The legislation came in response to public concerns that politics, and campaigns in particular, had become too negative. Since it was (and still is) rare for a candidate to appear in person in a negative ad—no candidate wants to be directly linked to a negative message—it was assumed that requiring candidates to appear in person in every campaign ad would necessarily limit the number and reduce the intensity of negative ads. However, the legislation never passed, and though this hypothesis was never tested it remains an essential assumption (McNair 108).

In 1988, Democratic presidential nominee Michael Dukakis’ campaign made the rare move of breaking this unwritten rule, using the talking head format in what was essentially a negative advertisement. Dukakis was running a very unsuccessful campaign against George H. W. Bush; the Republican nominee’s campaign had aired a number of particularly harsh and effective attack advertisements, including the now infamous “Tank” ad. The Dukakis campaign responded with “Counterpunch,” a talking head style spot specifically created to respond to Bush’s attacks, and to the tank ad in particular (Devlin 1988 400). “Counterpunch” featured Dukakis watching as a television set played “Tank.” After a brief moment Dukakis turns off the television, faces the camera, and states:

I’m fed up with it. Never have seen anything like this in twenty-five years in public life—George Bush’s Bush’s negative TV ads distorting my record, full of lies and he knows it. I’m on the record for the very weapons systems his ads say I’m against...This isn’t about defense issues. It’s about dragging the truth into the gutter. And I’m not going to let them do it...The real question is will we have a president who fights for the privileged few, or will we have a president who fights for you? George Bush wants to

give the wealthiest 1% of the people in this country a new tax break worth \$30,000 a year...What I'm fighting for is our future. (*The Living Room Candidate Online*)

Although it did not present a direct attack on Bush, "Counterpunch" certainly fit into the *comparison* category of negative advertising. The Dukakis ad alone was considered somewhat effective, as the candidate did see modest gains in the polls. However, it was too late in the campaign for anything to help. The Bush campaign had been airing attack ads for quite a while but Dukakis had refused to respond, arguing that the voters would find Bush's ads unfair and therefore a response was not necessary. "Counterpunch," although partly a defense against Bush's attacks (the theme of the majority of Dukakis ads), demonstrates one of the few times Dukakis issued pointed criticism of a specific Bush policy (*The Living Room Candidate Online*).

The most recent incidence of a talking head ad having a major impact on a campaign came in 1992, one of the few times in American politics a third party played a major role in a presidential election. Texas billionaire H. Ross Perot, running a one-issue campaign funded by his own personal money, at several points during the campaign placed ahead of Governor Bill Clinton and President George Bush in the polls. Whereas both Clinton and Bush ran traditional campaigns that employed a variety of shorter 60- and 30-second spots, Perot bought half hour blocks of airtime in markets across the US, and proceeded to use the airtime to engage in long explanations of how he would fix the country's economic problems. These extended talking head spots became quite popular amongst voters, averaging 9 million viewers per spot. One particularly popular spot was watched by nearly 15 million viewers (Devlin 1996 1074).

According to Perot's media advisor Tom Jones, the decision to run long format talking head ads "was a question of form following function. Ross had a long and complicated message to tell..." (Devlin 1996 1074). In November, Perot finished with nearly twenty percent of the vote, the highest draw for a third party, and although Perot's success could not be directly attributed to his

choice of television message and format, his unique approach certainly made an impact on the American public (*The Living Room Candidate*)

Possible Implications for the 2004 Election

Even with the advent of the Internet, television continues to be the source from which most voters gain information about the candidates and issues, and it is unlikely that this will change anytime soon (Kendall 136). This poses a distinct challenge to political consultants and advertisers. They must continue to produce ads that focus on a candidate's issues and positions, and yet the ads must be able to reach an audience that is increasingly cynical, experienced, media savvy, and expectant of receiving information on candidates' personalities and images. Consequently, talking head spots—those ads featuring simple candidate-to-camera communication devoid of any stimulating audio or visual effects—should remain rare. But at the same time it will be necessary for presidential campaigns to find replacement means of addressing those areas formerly reinforced by talking head ads. Candidates will have to find a way to demonstrate that they can handle the responsibilities of the office of the president, both in experience and in character. But they also must do so in a way that stimulates those important good feelings and emotional ties within voters.

Complicating this process in the 2004 election will be the new campaign reform laws requiring that candidates appear in person in every ad.¹ In the past, though negative ads have served as effective means of reaching voters, candidates have rarely appeared in person in attack ads. Rather, candidates have tried to place as much distance between themselves and negative advertising as possible, often relying on political action committees and special interest groups not directly involved with the campaign to fund and produce negative ads. However, beginning with the 2004 election the campaign finance regulations provided by the McCain-Feingold Act

¹ For more information, go to the Campaign Finance section of this website.

will take effect, requiring that all political advertisements contain truthful sponsorship information; any television advertisement paid for by a candidate's campaign must feature a disclaimer in which the candidate clearly identifies themselves (both visually and aurally) and their approval of the message (The Campaign Legal Center 30).

Conclusion

Despite their changing format over the years, talking head advertisements have remained one of the constant staples of campaign advertising. Though tradition dictates that talking head spots function to inform voters about candidate policies and positions, the ads now function more often to address and reinforce specific characteristics of candidate image. By showing that they can explain and discuss the important issues, candidates identify themselves as competent and capable leaders, up to the challenge of dealing with the complex details of public policy. This image is best reinforced through direct candidate-to-camera communication, without the interference of stimulating visuals or music. However, the current mediated state of American politics requires that campaigns aim to make voters feel like part of the experience. Thus, the definition of talking head advertisements has expanded to include spots with visual and audio effects, as long as the primary message is delivered by the candidate. Certainly this will not be the permanent definition of a talking head advertisement. As the medium of television, as well as the nature of American politics, is continually transformed, talking head ads are certain to change as well, perpetually adapting to the parameters of the medium.

Talking Head Advertisements

Elizabeth Marvin

Works Cited

- Alger, Dean. "Constructing Campaign Messages and Public Understanding: the 1990 Wellstone-Boschwitz Senate Race in Minnesota." *The Psychology of Political Communication*. Ed. Ann N. Crigler. Ann Arbor: The University of Michigan Press, 1996. 65-88.
- The Campaign Legal Center. *The Campaign Media Guide*. Washington, DC: The Campaign Legal Center, 2004.
- Combs, James E. "Political Advertising as a Popular Mythmaking Form." *Journal of American Culture* 2 (1992): 331-40.
- Devlin, L. Patrick. "An Analysis of Presidential Television Commercials." *New Perspectives on Political Advertising*. Ed. Lynda Lee Kaid, Dan Nimmo, and Keith R. Sanders. Carbondale: Southern Illinois University Press, 1986. 21-54.
- , "Contrasts in Presidential Campaign Commercials of 1988." *American Behavioral Scientist* 32 (1989): 389-414.
- , "Contrasts in Presidential Campaign Commercials of 1996." *The American Behavioral Scientist* 40 (1997): 1058-1084.
- Hart, Roderick P. *Seducing America: How Television Charms the Modern Voter*. New York: Oxford University Press, 1994.
- Hughes, Elizabeth M.B.G. *The Logical Choice: How Political Commercials Use Logic to Win Votes*. Lanham: University Press of America, 1994.
- Jamieson, Kathleen Hall. Interview. *The :30 Second President*. PBS Democracy Project and Wisconsin Public Television. Oct. 1999. 14 March 2004. <http://www.pbs.org/30secondcandidate/q_and_a/jamieson1.html>

---, *Packaging the Presidency: A History and Criticism of Presidential Campaign Advertising.*

3rd ed. New York: Oxford University Press, 1996.

Kendall, Kathleen. *Communication in the Presidential Primaries: Candidates and the Media,*

1912-2000. Praeger Series in Political Communication. Westport, CT: Praeger, 2000.

Kern, Montague. *30-Second Politics: Political advertising in the Eighties.* New York:

Praeger, 1989.

McNair, Brian. *An Introduction to Political Communication.* London: Routledge, 1995.

Patterson, Thomas E., and Robert D. McClure. *The Unseeing Eye: The Myth of Television*

Power in National Politics. New York: G.P. Putnam's Sons, 1976.

Reeves, Rosser. Interview. "The 30-Second President." *A Walk Through the 20th Century with*

Bill Moyers. With Bill Moyers. PBS. 1984.

The Living Room Candidate Online. The American Museum of the Moving Image. 5 April

2004. <<http://www.ammi.org/livingroomcandidate/>>