

Election 2008: The Advertising

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Tuesday, August 12, 2008; 12:00 PM

Stanford University Political Communications director **Shanto Iyengar** was online **Tuesday, Aug. 12 at noon ET** to examine and take questions on how advertising has been deployed so far in the 2008 presidential campaigns.

The transcript follows.

Iyengar is a professor of communications and politics at Stanford. He is the author and co-author of several books, most recently "[Media Politics: A Citizen's Guide](#)."

Shanto Iyengar: This is Shanto Iyengar. Pleasure to be here. Happy to answer your questions.

Lyme, Conn.: Is it true that, in general, advertising that attempts an emotional appeal works better than ads that attempt to connect on an intellectual, factual level? If so, have you seen any good emotional ads in this campaign season?

Shanto Iyengar: Great question; the conventional wisdom is that emotion-evoking ads have more impact, but there isn't much good research on the question. Most of the so-called "classics" from years past seem to fit the conv wisdom -- "morning in America," "Daisy," "White Hands" and various others.

This cycle doesn't seem to have produced any especially "hot" emotionally-laden ads.

Fairfax, Va.: Is there any way that political advertising can be required to meet national standards of truthfulness and integrity, given that the ads use the public's airways?

Shanto Iyengar: It will be difficult to establish "national standards of truthfulness." Most political claims are grey rather than black or white. But most importantly, the 1st Amendment guarantees pols the right to speak.

Olympics: Most advertisers seek a positive image to reflect the good feelings the Olympics generate. Barack Obama has produced new can-do spots that feel at home in that milieu. McCain on the other hand still is running his anti-Obama ads. In addition, the Olympics are prime HDTV territory. I've noticed Obama is in HD, but McCain isn't. What are McCain strategists thinking?

Shanto Iyengar: I agree that McCain seems stuck in a negative rut - running "Obama as celebrity" ads instead of defining some sort of vision or agenda for the nation. I don't think the celebrity label is particularly damaging. Better to be called a celebrity rather than a politician!

Southbury, Conn.: Senator McCain's latest ads are trivial, petty and designed to stir up a controversy, so that the press (especially cable TV) speaks only about the tenor of his ads and not about the issues. If the press speaks only on the issues, such as the Iraq war, home foreclosures, high gas prices etc., McCain loses. Do you therefore agree that McCain's ads are designed to steer conversation away from the issues, and shouldn't reputable persons like you call him on such cheap tactics?

Shanto Iyengar: This is clearly what they're hoping to accomplish. Put out some especially nasty attacks that focus on Obama's persona, and then get the press to recycle the message of those ads. As you suggest, McCain has a problem on the issues and the track record of the incumbent administration. If the campaign focuses on energy, the economy, the state of our foreign relations, he's at a huge disadvantage. So, he'd rather change the subject to questions of character, experience, etc

"Hot Chicks Dig Obama": Okay, so last time McCain said Obama was after our white women the media castigated Obama for "puling the race card from the bottom of the deck." I know this quote came from the McCain camp, but it was everywhere for three days. Now, the next round of "Obama getting our White Women" is out and it gets more explicit. How far does McCain get to take it before he gets called on this stuff?

Shanto Iyengar: The race card got played way before McCain emerged as the nominee. The Clinton campaign used a series of implicit racial appeals against Obama as early as NH. In one sense, those appeals could be said to have legitimized what McCain might do between now and the election. In another sense, they may have inoculated Obama from the use of coded racial attacks.

St. Paul, Minn: Thank you for taking questions today. Sen. Obama is out with his own "celebrity" ad, showing that Sen. McCain has himself sought the spotlight by appearing on "The Tonight Show," "The Daily Show," etc. It also has a number of images showing him cozying up (literally) to Bush. It's a clever ad, but it isn't a little late to be bringing this up, given that the whole celebrity business is a couple of weeks old? Why do you think Obama decided to roll this out now? And if he's trying to say McCain is the same as Bush, then why not just say that very clearly and not try to wrap it in this whole celebrity brouhaha, which voters probably are tired of?

washingtonpost.com: [The Fix: The Duality of Celebrity](#) (*washingtonpost.com*, Aug. 12)

Shanto Iyengar: Yes, I'm not sure this "celebrity" business is worth responding to. But consultants swear by the "punch back" rule and that's probably why they ran it. Your point is well taken - instead of calling McCain a Washington celebrity, they'd be much better off running ads suggesting McCain represents another 4 years of Bush. Just like in 1996 when Clinton repeatedly showed Dole next to Gingrich, Obama needs to emphasize Bush in his anti-McCain messages.

Coded racial attacks: So you are conceding that McCain's campaign is using "coded racial attacks"? Why do you think the media pretends they are anything different? Is it politeness or some other agenda?

Shanto Iyengar: No, I'm not suggesting the "he's a celebrity" line is a coded racial appeal. I'm saying that these appeals have been around in this cycle and that unlike previous campaigns, they've been used by a Dem running against a Dem. However, I fully expect the Republicans to use such appeals between now and Nov.

washingtonpost.com: How do you see advertising dollars being spent this year? With Obama having such a big lead in fundraising, will McCain focus on the cheaper markets in Western and Plains swing states?

Shanto Iyengar: The typical formula is to invest only in states where you have a chance. But there is evidence that in this cycle, Obama is going to enlarge the playing field because he is pretty competitive in traditionally red states. I expect we'll see big-time Democratic ad buys in Virginia, Colorado and even in North Carolina. McCain will probably stay with the script and concentrate on red-leaning states.

New York: Are John McCain's latest ads ("Celebrity" and "Hot Chicks") examples of "dog-whistle politics in action? Why or why not?

Shanto Iyengar: Both these ads aimed not at the public, but at journalists. Lets face it, McCain has not been as newsworthy as Obama over the past few weeks. For McCain to attract media coverage, he needs to lob a few "grenades" in BO's direction. The press loves conflict and controversy, so negative ads are much more likely to be front-page material. In that sense, those ads "worked." I very much doubt that McCain would have gotten any press had he run a boilerplate "this is what I stand for" ad.

Silver Spring, Md.: Any idea how many tens of millions of dollars the pair of four-day infomercials (er, conventions) are going to cost the U.S. taxpayer? I realize the parties will pay a large portion of the cost, but I believe that the taxpayer is going to be stuck with a bill (security, sanitation, promotions, etc). I also wonder how much it would cost the parties if they had to pay to broadcast these infomercials, rather than the networks donating that time.

Shanto Iyengar: The major networks have scaled back on their convention coverage over the past 3-4 decades. "Gavel-to-gavel" coverage is history. I don't blame the networks for scaling back their coverage, these conventions are hardly spontaneous expressions of political sentiment. Instead, they are carefully choreographed to create the appearance of party unity, enthusiasm over the nominee etc.

I don't know the exact formula for the financing of conventions, but I doubt the taxpayer cost is significant.

Chicago: I live in Chicago and recently have seen ads for both Obama and McCain. It seems crazy to me because Obama has a huge lead and McCain has no chance. Why would they waste their money here?

Shanto Iyengar: You might have seen ads that were part of a national buy, i.e. ads Obama is running during NBC's olympics coverage. No way Obama will purchase advertising time in Illinois.

Sara: I'm no fan of John McCain, but isn't the counter "Celebrity" ad exactly what Obama vowed to eschew? Where is the new brand of politics he promised? His descent into "politics as usual" is disheartening and I doubt this juvenile quid pro quo will win over any voters.

Shanto Iyengar: Yes, this is the problem Obama faces. By getting into the tit-for-tat cycle he runs the risk of being perceived as just another politician. But if he ignores attacks, he runs the risk of becoming another Dukakis who let a double-digit lead evaporate by not responding to the Willie Horton and Boston Harbor attacks in 1988. So its a difficult balancing act. I tend to agree with you that the celebrity messages aren't worth responding to. Obama would be better off running an ad suggesting that McCain doesn't have anything to say about energy, jobs, healthcare, that's why he's discussing celebrities.

Southbury, Conn.: If the Obama campaign were to consult with you, would you recommend that they go negative, ala McCain, or should their ads be about introducing Sen. Obama and speaking to the issues? (Sen. McCain's negative ads seem to be working.)

Shanto Iyengar: I would definitely recommend that they go positive. One thing we know about advertizing is that the ad campaign needs to fit voters' stereotypes about the candidate. Obama is sen as someone who won't play by the standard rules of the game, i.e. he represents a different way. If he were to run a bunch of attack ads, this would clearly raise doubts about his core message and image. But at the same time, he can't just sit back and allow himself to be attacked without rebutting. (I thought he did this pretty effectively with the "3 am" ad used by Hillary.)

Anonymous: Is quantity more important than quality? When a campaign runs a negative attack ad, the pedantic mainstream media plays it over and over again. This equates to free advertising for the candidate. But an ad that is noncontroversial -- an issues ad -- gets no free plays, so ignorant, bar-lowering ads become more effective from a saturation and cost perspective.

Shanto Iyengar: Yes, that's how ad strategy has evolved. Once the media got into the business of running "ad watches" and scrutinizing the ads for the accuracy and truthfulness of their content, consultants figured out that they could milk this type of coverage. There have been several instance of campaigns releasing ads to the press, but not purchasing a dime's worth of air time. In the end, this is a significant incentive to go negative since your positive ads will get no "recycling" whatsoever.

New York: Gotta disagree with your perspective a bit with regard to Obama's celebrity ad response. They might not say a lot, but there are quite a few photos of McCain hugging Bush like he's a life preserver on the Titanic or something. He doesn't have to say anything ... just keep showing those close-close photos. A thousand words, as they say.

Shanto Iyengar: I agree; Obama needs to make the Bush-McCain connection rather than the McCain-celebrity connection. Calling McCain a Washington celebrity is not as effective as calling him another Bush.

Southwest Nebraska: Campaigns have usually refrained from trying to capture the spotlight during the other party's convention -- at least until 2004. Will the Republicans try controversial ads or anything during the Democratic convention, or do they think that maybe the spineless Democrats actually might try to get back at them in September?

Shanto Iyengar: I doubt that they will try to do anything during the Dem convention. For one thing, the spectacle of a filled football stadium will suggest a level of public enthusiasm that will be hard to dismiss as "celebrity adulation."

Anonymous: Why do McCain's ads attacking Obama show massive crowds gathered to hear him speak and Obama's smiling face as the narrator slams him?

Shanto Iyengar: Good question. McCain's campaign seems to believe that the presence of massive crowds is a symptom of inexperience and style over substance. In the case of Obama's Berlin speech, they might have been trying to suggest that if foreigners like him so much, can he be good for America?

Greg: The last few weeks feels more like a war zone with all the negative ads McCain is throwing against Obama. Here we are trying to watch the Olympics, and what do we get from Sargent Schmitt? A cluster bomb on celebrities and the media. Welcome to America folks. It's election time, and the Republicans are bombing our senses because Republican pollsters say this is good for the voters. I didn't even know who Schmitt was a few weeks ago; now we get the picture. McCain is a puppet of Sargent Schmitt and his mentor, Karl Rove.

Shanto Iyengar: Hi Greg - I'm afraid campaigns are a form of contact sport and there will be lots more negativity once people start tuning in in late Sept and Oct. So far, its been pretty tame stuff at least in comparison with Swift Boats etc.

Southwest Nebraska: Are we about to see McCain ads portraying him as presidential in his statements about Georgia and Russia?

Shanto Iyengar: I wouldn't be surprised. Whenever there are national security-related issues in the news, candidates bend over backwards to show off their national defence, foreign policy credentials. If the crisis in Georgia is not immediately defused (and the reports today suggest that it might be winding down), I'd expect both candidates to posture on this subject.

Seattle: What's your take on the strategy -- I think mostly by McCain so far -- of "releasing" a new ad that plays once in a small and cheap TV market, but tricking the news networks into playing it endlessly on their programs and discuss it?

Shanto Iyengar: This is now a well-established strategy. The RNC ran the "Soldiers and Sailors Act" ad against Clinton in 96 but didn't spend 1 dollar of advertising time. They were happy to have NYT, Wash Post and others run front-page stories about the attacks on Clinton's character. 4 years ago, the Swift Boat ad did exactly the same thing and came away with thousands of front-page stories. That's probably why the McCain folks decided to go with the Paris Hilton ad a few weeks ago, they were starved for news coverage.

But at the same time, he can't just sit back and allow himself to be attacked without rebutting: Why don't we see more humor in campaign ads? By poking fun at an opponent in an intelligent and nuanced way as a response, gets the message across and doesn't put the responder in a negative light.

Shanto Iyengar: You're right and McCain will probably argue that his celebrity attacks are partly tongue in cheek. Humor is a great asset in ad campaigns, but given the state of our politics it is difficult to make light of the problems facing this country. But ads that take aim at a candidate's character can certainly be humorous and hence attention-getting.

Southwest Nebraska: Maybe Obama won't go negative, but will he allow 527s to? How much control does he have over them anyway? Do voters distinguish between the candidate's campaign and 527s?

Shanto Iyengar: Not much control. 527s are accountable to on one. MoveOn will probably run some pretty nasty ads against McCain. Great question about whether the audience can distinguish between a candidate ad and a 527 ad. Political junkies may know enough to recognize that the "I'm John McCain and I approved this message" didn't air during a 527 ad, but most of us will be clueless and make no distinction at all.

Portland, Ore.: The McCain camp seems intent on portraying Obama as a light-eight celebrity unfit to lead. Is this really a bright strategy? When the two candidates finally do share the same stage, if Obama comes across as knowledgeable in the debates, McCain could have serious problems.

Shanto Iyengar: You're right. Calling him a celebrity is one thing, but if he's a celebrity who seems to know more about the issues facing the country, you've got a problem. I really don't understand why they've stayed with this celebrity theme for as long as they have.

Washington State: I don't know if it's being done as effectively elsewhere, but the Democratic Party here is running some effective ads comparing Republicans to Bush, going as far as calling them "Bush-style Republicans." Is this a strategy that will get more and more play the closer to November we get?

Shanto Iyengar: It should. Lots of research shows that people vote according to their assessments of how well the incumbent administration has performed. Obama needs to beat that drum constantly - McCain is a continuation of the last 8 years.

Arlington, Va.: with all of the great parody artists out there, do you think either campaign would hire some to inject that bit of humor into the ads? Would being too over-the-top be too dangerous? Or is that the way we are headed even without parodies? "The Daily Show" et al crank out hysterical ads that point out how bankrupt and ridiculous the current system is.

Shanto Iyengar: There's the risk that people will discount stuff that's off the wall. But done in a subtle way, parody and other means of injecting humor would strengthen whether people tune in and remember the message.

Washington: The "punch back" rule is generically known as "tit-for-tat." Its most famous use is in the nuclear doctrine of mutually assured destruction. It is by all agreement an ineffective response, except for all the others. Massive retaliation causes the responder to become unpopular as a negative campaigner. No response means the attack upon one's campaign is not mitigated in any way. Rapid response is the only way to minimize the damage.

Dynamics when there are multiple candidates, such as in a primary, are more complex, but sometimes negative is the only choice regardless of how costly it can become. Voters reject the mud-slinger and the target of the attack, and choose among the alternatives. In that case, the mud-slinger is seeking to win as the tallest of the seven dwarves, so to speak. Of course, no one ever talks about use of negative attacks to discourage turnout because that sounds so undemocratic, but it too can work under some circumstances.

Shanto Iyengar: The MAD reference is quite appropriate. Another tragedy of the commons. The spiral of negativity does demobilize. Steve Ansolabehere and I ran a series of experiments way back in 1990-1992-1994 cycles in which we manipulated the tone of the ad campaign. We generally found that people - especially independents - were turned off by negative messages. Most consultants will acknowledge in private that trying to keep people from voting is one of the goals of negative campaigns.

Kansas City, Mo.: Not sure if there is way to measure this, but I've always wondered what the value to the GOP is of the numerous talk radio shows, FOX News and so forth. If you had to buy that much airtime, what would it have cost?

Shanto Iyengar: "Free" media aka news coverage is invaluable. No way a candidate could afford the length of exposure they get in news reports as paid advertising. The problem is that except for presidential candidates, the media provide very little coverage. So if you're running for congress or attorney general or whatever, you're only means of communication with the public is advertising.

Pittsburgh: How do you think the medium of online advertising (banners, search, but also social and video sites) are transforming the campaign, particularly as it relates to positive/negative messages?

Shanto Iyengar: The problem with online ads is that they reach a relatively small audience and one that is politically engaged. People surfing the web looking for political stuff are people with strong opinions - you're going to persuade any of them. People watching the olympics, on the other hand, are just the opposite. They have no interest in politics and if you say "Obama is bad for America," they're more likely to believe it. That's the kind of audience politicians crave; the online audience is somewhat different.

McCain's strategy: You've said a lot about what Obama should be doing to highlight a perceived McCain weakness (four more years of Bush). What do you see as Obama's weaknesses, and how should McCain exploit them?

Shanto Iyengar: Yes, there are several lines of argument McCain could push. Most notably, Obama's lack of experience especially in the national security arena. McCain has been mentioning the lack of sub-committee hearings etc, but he will probably run some version of Hillary's "3 am" ad in the near future. In general, Republicans are seen as tougher on issues like terrorism, and McCain needs to make that the major theme of his candidacy.

Negative Messages: In your research, did people tell you they were turned off by negative ads, or did their actions tell you that? Because I think that people don't "like" them, but they believe parts of them, and the neg ads can affect their actions -- thus why they work and keep coming back year after year.

Shanto Iyengar: No, we looked at whether they said they would vote and we corroborated that by looking at actual turnout in areas that were exposed to more neg vs positive campaigns.

New York: "In another sense, they may have inoculated Obama from the use of coded racial attacks." Interesting. How so? Thanks.

Shanto Iyengar: In this sense - when McCain runs an ad suggesting Obama is a celebrity with no substance, people will say, "oh. there they go again." In this sense Hillary helped him out by running coded racial appeals. In a sense she confirmed the stereotype that a white candidate running against a black would attempt to take advantage of race. McCain now has the problem that even some race-neutral message is interpreted as a racial attack. The NYT, for instance, editorialized that the celebrity ads were of that ilk.

Southbury, Conn.: Do you think the stereotypes (Rev. Wright, Michelle Obama being proud of her country for the first time etc., etc.) are in the past, or do you see the GOP bringing these sound bites out again? And do you think that the American public (outside Fox news viewers) have an appetite for these sound bites, or will they just switch off? I know I will.

Shanto Iyengar: I'm sure we haven't heard the last of those sound bites. McCain probably won't use them, but the

party committees and the 527s surely will. My take is that the people who might respond to those appeals are already unlikely to have a preference for Obama, so I don't see them as having much "net" impact. This election is so much about substance and issues - that's what most people are concerned about - that the side-show of patriotism, family values etc will produce much less bang for the buck for those who seek to use it.

I really don't understand why they've stayed with this celebrity theme for as long as they have.: You mean you think they actually have something else?

Shanto Iyengar: Ha Ha. Sure, they can trot out the standard boilerplate about "tax and spend liberal," soft on terrorists, in favor of socialized medicine etc

Re: Hot chicks dig Obama: Will John McCain's tactic of associating Barack Obama with oversexed and/or promiscuous young white women in his ads end up like the Harold Ford ads in 2006 (i.e., a matter of deep dispute during the campaign that later was treated as transparent and obvious once the campaign is concluded)? Personally, I've not seen so much unreported racist dog-whistling in my life! How about you, Shanto?

Shanto Iyengar: The Ford "Playboy" ad was one thing - an explicit racial appeal, but the "Celebrity" stuff strikes me as quite something else. I don't see any racial appeal in the latter. In comparison with the stuff that the HC campaign tossed around at will, the celebrity theme is almost angelic!

washingtonpost.com: How has the emergence of online video outlets like YouTube impacted campaign advertising? Do campaigns mostly use them to test messages (including perhaps more controversial ones that they don't really intend to put on the air), or could increased use become a real replacement for a chunk of ad spending?

Shanto Iyengar: Sure, once the online audience grows and attracts more than political junkies, it will become the next platform for campaigns. right now, tv is still #1, but by 2012 and 2016 I'd guess that online buys will begin to rival tv buys.

One Last Question: If negative ads do in fact reduce turnout, then isn't it in Obama's favor to run as positive campaign as possible, especially in nontraditional battleground states? I get the feeling that his grassroots campaign could make some real progress there.

Shanto Iyengar: Absolutely. The higher the level of turnout, the better off he will be. He dominates McCain with younger and low-income groups who are not known for their high turnout. So mobilization rather than demobilization should be front and center for the Obama campaign.

Shanto Iyengar: I've really enjoyed participating in this chat session. Questions were all on-point and interesting. I didn't notice that I'm already late for a meeting! Thanks for having me, Shanto

washingtonpost.com: P.S. -- for those of you interested in watching the ads as they come out, they're all available at <http://pcl.stanford.edu>.