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The Media Game: New Moves, Old Strategies

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Abstract

Campaigns are strategic contests between candidates and reporters. While candidates have proven to be adept at gaming news coverage of their campaign advertisements, journalists have maintained their autonomy by curtailing coverage of the candidates' stump speeches. The advent of online media, however, advantages the candidates by permitting direct communication between candidates and voters.

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Ever since primary elections replaced conventions as the principal means of nominating candidates, the relationship between journalists and candidates has been critical to understanding the conduct of American political campaigns. Each side has clearly defined and conflicting objectives. Candidates covet the free and “objective” publicity provided by news reports. Reporters, for their part, are motivated to maintain their autonomy by debunking campaign rhetoric and “spin.” In the ensuing tussle over whose voice is to be heard, which side comes out ahead?

Writing in 1993, well before the dawn of modern, technology-driven campaigns, Ansolabehere, Iyengar, and Behr gave the nod to the candidates and their handlers.

The relationship between political figures and the media has changed dramatically since the advent of television. Politicians have been much quicker to adjust to these changes than the media. Elected officials, candidates, and their consultants have developed intricate strategies for using or evading the media to their advantage. The media, on the other hand, have only just begun to develop counterstrategies for protecting their independence. Elected officials are adept at inducing reporters to cover their activities in the best possible light. Reporters don’t always know how they’re being manipulated, and if they do, they don’t always know how to stop it. (234)

If candidates had the superior game in the 1980s, there is a compelling case to be made that recent changes in the campaign environment have only strengthened their hand. In this essay, I update the strategic dance between candidates and the press in the area of the two main forms of campaign communication: paid advertising and “free” news coverage.

Advertising as News

Candidates spend millions on televised advertising. Journalists, not surprisingly, have increasingly adopted an adversarial posture towards campaign ads. The “ah ha” moment was the 1988 presidential campaign and the realization by all concerned that “Willie Horton,” a third-party ad produced by the National Security Political Action Committee, had suckered the press into covering crime, an issue on which the public prefers Republicans. The ad in question featured the

prison-furlough program in Massachusetts and the actions of one furloughed prisoner, an African-American named William Horton.¹

As Kathleen Jamieson has pointed out, the Horton story-line systematically distorted the facts about the Massachusetts furlough program. Yet the story became the standard prop in Bush campaign rhetoric and remained newsworthy for the entire campaign. As Jamieson (1993) put it, “Abetted by news reports, amplified by Republican ads, assimilated through the cognitive quirks of audiences, William Horton came to incarnate liberalism’s failures and voters’ fears.” (p. 42)

In the aftermath of the 1988 campaign, distinguished journalists and scholars of campaign journalism suggested that the time had come for the press to push back against misleading campaign ads. By 1992, a new genre of campaign reporting known as the adwatch – in which the reporter dissects the claims made in televised ads – was in full display in all mainstream news outlets. Even in non-presidential contests, adwatches made up more than fifteen percent of all campaign news reports (Ridout & Smith 2008).

Not surprisingly, candidates responded to adwatches by developing ads that would deliberately elicit adwatch coverage. The theory underlying this behavior was that voters would fail to recall the analysis provided by the reporter, but would remember the more outrageous visuals replayed in the adwatch. (For some evidence corroborating the candidates’ expectations, see Ansolabehere & Iyengar 1996).² During the 1996 presidential campaign, Republican candidate Robert Dole’s only hope of making up a wide gap in the polls was to highlight the “character issue.” The Republican National Committee produced the “Soldiers and Sailors Act” ad that recounted President Clinton’s legal efforts to postpone the sexual harassment case brought by Ms. Paula Jones until he left office on the grounds that the Soldiers and Sailors Act protects active-duty service members from having to respond to civil suits during their service. This ad attracted front-page coverage across the nation.

An even clearer case of reporters granting headline status to advertising occurred in 2004 when a little-known group – Swift Boat Veterans for Truth – released a sixty-second ad attacking Senator Kerry for misrepresenting his Vietnam service. The Swift Boat ad, which was full of distortions and outright

¹ While denying any coordination with NSPAC, the Bush 1988 campaign released its “revolving door” version of the furlough ad, but made no reference to Horton.

² The theory that visuals trump the spoken word dates back to the 1984 Reagan campaign and an incident involving the CBS correspondent Lesley Stahl. Ms. Stahl produced what she believed was an especially hard-hitting piece on a campaign event staged by the Reagan campaign. She believed the story was so critical it might damage her standing with Reagan operatives. She was surprised the next day when a high-ranking Reagan operative called to thank her for airing the piece and replaying the various visuals from the staged event.

lies, elicited saturation coverage during the 2004 campaign, despite the fact that it only aired in a small media market in West Virginia. As Geer has noted, the media's fixation with the Swift Boat Ad amounted to something akin to hysteria. In the period preceding the election, there were more news reports on the ad than on the war in Iraq (Geer 2010).

Ironically, these recent iterations in the media game bear a striking resemblance to the early days of televised advertising. The Johnson campaign aired the notorious Daisy Ad on September 7, 1964 (during NBC's Monday Night at the Movies) and the ad was replayed in its entirety the following day on the ABC and CBS Evening News, thus reaching a massive audience. The LBJ campaign agreed to "pull" the ad in response to criticism from a variety of sources, but their point about Goldwater and the risks of nuclear war had already reached the vast majority of the electorate.

Who Needs the News? The Possibility of Unmediated Campaigns

As noted above, candidates have been able to exploit the media's interest in conflict to elicit news coverage of their ads. Yet in other, more extensive forms of campaign communication, most notably the stump speech, the press has successfully stifled candidate voices. Patterson (1993) and others have documented the sea-change in campaign journalism that occurred during the 1970s and 1980s. Old-fashioned descriptive reporting on the daily events on the campaign trail gave way to reports interpreting and analyzing the candidates' strategies.

As Cappella and Jamieson describe the shift, "the Seventies and Eighties were a time of fundamental change in the distribution of media coverage from issue-based stories to ones that emphasize who is ahead and behind, and the strategies and tactics of campaigning necessary to position a candidate to get ahead or stay ahead" (1997, 33). Today, by any standard, analysis of the candidates' strategies and reports on the state of the horserace are the dominant themes in news coverage of campaigns.

The standard explanations for the rise of interpretive journalism include the built-in conflict between journalists and campaign operatives, and the pressures of the market. Journalists prefer to rely on the voices of analysts rather than the candidates, since the latter are seen as self-serving. Given the pressures of the competitive market, stories that "sell" are inevitably preferred over those that may be more substantive but lacking in audience appeal. (For evidence that horse-race stories do sell well, see Iyengar, Norpoth & Hahn 2004).

The most visible symptom of interpretive journalism is the disappearance of candidate speech from the news cycle. In the 1970s, presidential candidates could count on at least a minute's worth of unmediated coverage on the evening

news, typically in the form of a clip from the daily stump speech. However, as the relationship between campaigns and the press became more adversarial, news organizations began to ration the daily sound-bite. Candidates were relegated to minor speakers, while analysts and commentators were granted larger allocations of news time (Patterson 1993). Today, the sound-bite granted the presidential candidates amounts to no more than a few words. (The classic study on the evolution of the televised sound bite is Hallin 1992). Since speeches are primarily about policy and performance, suppression of this form of campaign communication is especially costly to voters.

Although candidates can do little to persuade reporters to cover their speeches at length, they are in position today to accomplish an end-run: information technology provides them with a means of bypassing the media and reaching voters directly. At trivial cost, candidates can deposit their speeches, press releases, campaign ads, testimonials, and anything else they consider relevant on their websites (Druckman et al. 2009). As bandwidth has become more plentiful and video-compression technology more advanced, the content of these websites features a rich array of multi-media presentations designed to attract and hold the user's attention.

The advent of video sharing technology and the rapid growth in the reach of social networking sites thus opened up vast new possibilities for direct candidate to voter communication. Moreover, new media platforms often provide the campaigns with precise data concerning the background and interests of their users, making it possible for the candidates to "target" pre-defined groups of voters with messages designed to resonate with their interests and policy preferences. As technology has diffused and more Americans spend significant amounts of time online, the audience for online news gradually approaches the audience for television news.

Barack Obama was the first campaigner to recognize and maximally exploit the advantages of unmediated candidate-to-voter communication. The website barackobama.com, designed for a general audience, attracted more than 2.6 million unique visitors, while visitors to the McCain website numbered fewer than half that number (Rhoads 2008). Another site, my.barackobama.com, was designed to provide resources (scheduling, call lists, fundraising scripts) to volunteers and to encourage blogging. Eventually, more than 2 million users posted user profiles there.

But where the Obama campaign broke new ground was in its systematic use of online campaign communication. The video sharing site YouTube played a pivotal role in the dissemination of campaign messages. The campaign used their online presence to counteract or rebut critical media commentary, a capability that proved especially useful in the aftermath of the controversy surrounding Obama's friendship with the Reverend Jeremiah Wright.

The Rev. Wright story prompted a typical media “feeding frenzy” that threatened to derail Obama’s candidacy. Fox and other news organizations continually replayed excerpts from Wright’s incendiary comments to his congregation. Hillary Clinton pointedly commented that “You don’t choose your family, but you choose what church you want to attend.”

Faced with an impending political crisis, the Obama campaign decided to meet the uproar head-on by scheduling a prime-time speech on the subject of race relations. In the speech, Obama not only distanced himself from Wright, but also went on to call for racial understanding and reconciliation. The campaign posted the speech on YouTube where it was immediately viewed by more than a million people. By the end of the campaign, 7 million people had watched the entire speech online (Hill, 2009).

The Obama campaign went on to produce more than 1,000 online videos which were watched for over 14 million hours. A television advertising buy on this massive scale would have cost the candidate some \$50 million. In addition to the official campaign videos, Obama supporters created their own messages. Two of the most popular were “I Got a Crush... on Obama” and “Yes We Can.” “I Got a Crush...” was posted on June 13, 2007, and within 24 hours had become a major news item. By Election Day, it had been seen 12,000,000 times. “Yes We Can,” posted on February 2, 2008, proved even more popular. It was viewed 22,000,000 times by Election Day and eventually received an Emmy for “Best New Approaches in Daytime Entertainment.”

Implications

The possibility of unmediated campaigns means a dramatic lowering of the stakes in the media game played by candidates and reporters. As emphasized in this essay, one of the consequences of the game is that substantive questions of public policy are relegated to back-stage status. In place of candidate positions and past performance on the issues, reporters gravitate toward the more entertaining facets of the campaign: the horse race, the advertising, the strategy, and whenever possible, instances of scandalous or unethical behavior.

Against this backdrop, technology at least makes it possible for voters to bypass or supplement media treatment of the campaign and access information about the issues that affect them. Rather than waiting for news organizations to report on the policies they might care about, voters can take matters into their own hands and visit candidate websites to examine their positions on the issues. This form of motivated exposure is hardly an impediment to deliberation: paying attention to what the candidates have to say on the issues facilitates issue-oriented voting; paying attention to the media circus does not. Thus, there is some reason to hope that the spread of new forms of unmediated communication will eventually provide a better way to inform and engage voters.

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