Let Lying Dogs Sleep?

I T S ELECTION YEAR AGAIN AND ALL OVER America, media generals are laying plans to win the last war. Sick and tired of complaints that they favor the negative over the positive, sex over substance and personality over program, media people are determined to avoid the errors of the past.

We vow no more coverage of Gennifer Flowers or her look-alikes, unless of course state troopers vouchsafe the women’s testimony.

We promise rigorous coverage of the Larry King show so as not to miss Ross Perot’s declarations of temporary candidacy.

We will pay more attention to all MTV political coverage anchored by persons of voting age.

We will preserve the drama of the Republican primaries by featuring not the tiresome trot of the front-runner but whoever in each state manages to do “better than (we) expected.”

Since the nominating conventions will only ratify the primary winners, we will hold down major media staffs to the size of the California delegation and leave ample room for all the local TV stations that must prepare hometown interviews with delegates, alternates and guests.

We will defer talk of the Vice Presidency until after the New Hampshire primary on Feb. 20.

We will withhold reliable reports about General Powell’s Cabinet job until the morning after the Republican convention.

We will demand a debate between candidates for First Lady, hoping (respectively) to discover their investment strategies and views on abortion.

Finally, and most solemnly, we promise to ask ourselves whether it’s worth chasing down the lies and slanders in the candidates’ TV commercials. Our Ad Watch campaigns seem to be giving wide circulation to 30-second mendacities that the campaigns have paid us to air only once or twice. We will not ourselves make celebrities of Willie Hortons.

Like all election-year pledges, these resolutions are best read skeptically. But that last one, about our attacks on attack ads, should indeed engage the media’s serious attention. The now-routine policing of TV commercials, it turns out, often compounds the damage that those ads inflict on our democracy.

We are being urged to pass up the temptations of testing the ads for truth, to let lying dogs sleep.

The advice comes in a fascinating new book, “Going Negative,” describing experiments with 3,500 voters during six recent California campaigns for President, Senator and Governor. The research, employing actual and simulated TV spots, was led by the authors, Stephen Ansolabehere, associate professor of political science at M.I.T., and Shanto Iyengar, professor of political science at U.C.L.A.

The subtitle encapsulates the authors’ stunning discovery: “How Political Advertisements Shrink and Polarize the Electorate.” They found that negative ads that only attack opponents now constitute more than half of all political advertising. Yet instead of winning over supporters from a rival camp, the smears — and they are mostly smears — serve mainly to arouse loyal partisans. Moderate nonpartisans see the ads as confirmation of their cynicism about politics and turn away in disgust.

Ansolabehere and Iyengar found no redeeming value in the media’s attempts to critique and correct those negative ads. Indeed, they heard campaign managers celebrate the free and frequent repetition of the candidates’ aggressions. The professors were convinced that political strategists now design attack ads for the specific purpose of alienating independent voters and discouraging them from casting their unpredictable ballots.

S C U R R I L O U S T H O U G H T IT MAY BE, THE study concluded, hateful television advertising pays. The candidates may have to sell their souls to pay for the ads, and once in office they may have to live in terror of equally unfair counterattacks, but if winning is what matters, attack, attack, attack. And, the professors add, remember Roger Ailes’s advice to all campaign strategists: “If you get punched, punch back.”

The professors studied TV ads, both positive and negative, for three distinct qualities: their ability a) to inform the voters, b) to change their minds and c) to bring out their votes on Election Day.

The answers: a) the ads do; b) they don’t, and c) they do and they don’t, in unhealthy combination.
Information: We find that exposure to campaign advertising is, in fact, a significant learning experience. When advertisements reveal candidates' positions on the issues, voters become significantly more informed about these positions.

The study found negative and positive ads to be equally informative. They obviously can’t explore a public issue in 30 seconds, but they can arouse interest in an issue and can convey a candidate's dispositions. Unlike commercials for aspirin and Tylenol, however, political ads were found to tap into prior biases and beliefs. Therefore, Republicans and Independents, who tend to be mistrustful of government, seemed much more receptive to negative ads. Democrats, because they tend to favor positive measures to address social problems, seemed more responsive to positive messages.

Manipulation: Through their advertising, candidates can exploit favorable electoral circumstances and they can solidify the support of their own partisans, but they cannot convert nonpartisans and members of the opposite party and they cannot redirect the interests of most voters.

Voters exposed to campaign ads were found more likely than nonviewers to vote along partisan lines. But the ads failed to induce much crossover voting.

Mobilization: Just as negative advertising turns people away from the electoral process, positive advertising can bring them back.

But the closer the contest, the meaner the campaign.

Candidates favor attack ads to arouse special interests and the media and to fend off the attacks of opponents. Television news eagerly covers the clash of ads, rising to the bait of crisp sound bites, arresting visuals and sensational charges. Even when reporters try to act as referees, “viewers absorb not the journalists’ skepticism but the very messages from which reporters are trying to protect them.”

Like the professors, I see no easy escape from the coming barrage of negativity. If we banned political ads, like cigarette commercials, as dangerous to public health, that would only give incumbents a corrupting hold on power. If we give candidates the right to respond when attacked, that would just double the number of attacks. We could require the networks to screen out negative ads, but that would create a censorship industry. We could lower the price of positive ads, but that would free up more money for negative ads. That leaves only dreaming, with Professors Ansolabehere and Nygare, about the good old days when political parties mobilized the faithful without television’s pollution of the process.

There may be no good remedy at hand. Ultimately, the answer to bad talk has to be more talk, not less, and not just on new TV channels expressly reserved for public business. Meanwhile, media moguls need to absorb the findings of sociology and continue trying to outsmart the hucksters. Letting lying dogs snarl without any restraint will not improve the breed.