
Negative information about politics is positively appealing, says author

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"It's primarily an incentive driven by journalists" ... Professor Shanto Iyengar. Photo: Wolter Peeters

HE MAY have written the book on negative political campaigning a little too early, for if Shanto Iyengar was dispirited about the standard of political discourse in 1995, he seems thoroughly depressed about it now.

Since publishing *Going Negative*, the Stanford University professor of communication and political science thinks matters have become more extreme, not just in the US, but Australia and most of the democratic world, where increasingly polarised populations are fed a political diet of interminable negativity.

"There's a huge incentive for candidates to go negative," he said yesterday after addressing US Studies Centre students in Sydney. "It's primarily an incentive that's driven by journalists. Negative information is ... more newsworthy."

He cites the phenomenon of the fake ad, designed as "bait" for the media. John Kerry's presidential bid was buffeted by claims about his swift boat commander record aired in one ad that was shown once in a small city for a comparatively tiny \$30,000.

The digital age has intensified the globalisation of negative politics, and he blames the twin factors of a 24-hour news cycle now relentlessly compressed, and the intense pressure to report things immediately.

He finds the same syndrome obvious in Australia. "There's all this talk about what's happening to the Prime Minister and whether or not she's going to be replaced, there might be another coup, all of that is a feeding frenzy."

Politicians are increasingly using new media to set the agenda, he said, by holding online forums they control, or putting a bait ad online, to win media coverage.

Republicans may have gone negative first in the US, but Democrats caught up fast, he says. Now everyone uses it, which he attributes as a factor to the increased polarisation evident from US studies like those which tracked how people would feel if a child married someone from the other party.

"In the 1960s, Americans would laugh when asked the question," Professor Iyengar said. Their answer was predominantly: I couldn't care less. Now, almost a third say they would be displeased."

He sees no relief in sight from negative politics. It would take a "pied piper" to change it - and some thought Barack Obama would do that in 2008. "The case of Obama is revealing because the novelty of an anti-establishment candidate can run out very rapidly."