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"Consumer Journalism" in the Electronic Age: Instant Reaction to the "People's" Presidential Debate

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NOTE: At the time of publication, the author Michael X. Delli Carpini was affiliated with Columbia University. Currently, January 2008, he is a faculty member of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsyvlania.

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"Consumer Journalism" in the Electronic Age: Instant Reaction to the "People's" Presidential Debate

Abstract
During the second presidential debate at the University of Richmond, Va., on Oct. 15, an audience member remarked that the "amount of time the candidates have spent trashing their opponents' character is depressingly large." President Bush responded by noting that "character is part of being president," and he observed that "I think the first negative campaign run in this election was by Gov. Clinton, and I'm not going to sit there and be a punching bag."

As the president spoke, across town at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) a panel of 104 randomly selected undecided and weakly committed voters used hand-held electronic devices to dial in their response to this moment of the debate. A computer instantly processed the evaluations of each voter and plotted the average on a graph. The verdict: the panel did not like what the president was saying. As Bush tried to defend his conduct in the campaign, the summary graph dipped sharply below the neutral midpoint of the scale and remained there while he spoke on this topic.

Comments
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The Finish Line:
Covering the Campaign's Final Days

by the Research Group of The Freedom Forum Media Studies Center:
Everette E. Dennis, Wendy Zeligson Adler, Martha FitzSimon,
John Pavlik, Edward C. Pease, Deborah Rogers, Dirk Smillie
and Mark Thalhimer

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35 *The Debates: The Day After*
Coverage of the presidential and vice-presidential debates, while abundant and thorough, added little to what viewers themselves saw on their television screens those four nights in October. Debate coverage was a missed opportunity for the media to be reflective and interpretive.

47 *"Consumer Journalism" in the Electronic Age: Instant Reaction to the "People's" Presidential Debate*
Instant-reaction polling, which allows for the moment-by-moment gathering of people's responses to events, may be the wave of the future in political reporting. But political scientist Michael X. Delli Carpini of Barnard College and Virginia Commonwealth University's Robert D. Holsworth and Scott Keeter experimented with this latest technology during the second presidential debate, and found that instant-response polling raises as many questions as it answers.

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While the media have earned fairly good marks from the critics for their overall reporting of the 1992 campaign, their coverage of the polls has not been rated as highly. This study examines the coverage of front-page, poll-driven stories in four national newspapers, and concludes that "perhaps the real focus of coverage should be the analysis and interpretation of the dozen or so key, high-quality surveys conducted."

61 *Campaign Coverage by the Numbers, Indexing Change: Comparing Press Coverage of Issues Between the 1988 and 1992 Campaigns* and *Ethnic Press Coverage of Campaign '92*
In three studies, key issues, names, terms and phrases of the campaign are explored using bibliometrics—the science of word counting—in a large sample of the mainstream and ethnic press. Not surprisingly, the three issues to head the top-ten list of issues are jobs, "change" and the economy.

79 *Media Coverage of American Presidential Elections: A Historical Perspective*
Much has changed in campaign coverage from the first elections of George Washington in 1788 and 1792, when there was little electioneering by the candidates and therefore little coverage, to the election of Bill Clinton in 1992, when Americans "found themselves saturated in reportage about the race for the White House," writes David Stebenne, lecturer in history at Yale University. But it is not only the amount of campaign coverage that has changed; the very nature of coverage has undergone several transformations since the first days of the Republic.

95 *Reflections and Ruminations on Campaign '92: The Humorist's View*
Between alleged affairs with the J(G)ennifers, the rifling of passport files of candidates and their mothers and accusations of attempts to ruin a daughter's wedding, there was no shortage of raw material in the 1992 campaign for political humorists, cartoonists and columnists. Molly Ivins called this election season "just heaven" and Jeff Danziger said that "it couldn't have been any easier for me to come up with my material."

103 *Tracing the Trail of 1992's Political Consultants*
Political consultants, a little understood force in American politics today, played a vital role in the 1992 campaign, writes *National Journal* contributing editor Jerry Hagstrom. In the end, Hagstrom writes, "the best campaign had won, and the second best had come away with an unexpectedly fine showing."

111 *Insiders' Guide to Campaign Coverage*
In the third and final survey for this report series, the 19 news media "insiders"—directors of political coverage for many leading news organizations—generally agree that the press corps did a better job of covering the campaign in 1992 than in 1988. But one area in which the media did not shine this year, they say, is in the reporting of polls.

127 *Assessing Coverage: A Survey of Campaign Correspondents*
It is not only the "insiders" who agree that campaign coverage this season improved from 1988; 12 campaign correspondents also concur that the media learned their lessons from the last election. In a Center survey, these correspondents raised the average grade for 1988's coverage from a C- to a B- for 1992. However, fairness in the treatment of candidates is one area in which the correspondents say the media fell short.

137 *The Media Scoreboard, Final Round: Lessons of Campaign '92*
The role of the press as the conveyer and often the interpreter of events has been vastly altered by this campaign, agreed the panel of media and political experts, professionals and scholars who met at the Center 10 days after the election for the final round of discussions on "The Media and Campaign '92." But whether the candidates' fairly successful attempt at an end run around the news media through the use of TV and radio talk shows is a lasting change remains to be seen.

155 *Monitoring Campaign Coverage: A Week-by-Week Roundup of the Fall Season*
As the campaign heated up in its final phase, news reporters attempted to capture the day-by-day events and nuances of the three candidates' race for the presidency. This weekly roundup of the last three months of the election season provides the headlines and the essence of their coverage.

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"Consumer Journalism" in the Electronic Age: Instant Reaction to the "People's" Presidential Debate*

By Michael X. Delli Carpini, Barnard College, Columbia University;
Robert D. Holsworth and Scott Keeter, both of Virginia Commonwealth University

DURING the second presidential debate at the University of Richmond, Va., on Oct. 15, an audience member remarked that the "amount of time the candidates have spent trashing their opponents' character is depressingly large." President Bush responded by noting that "character is part of being president," and he observed that "I think the first negative campaign run in this election was by Gov. Clinton, and I'm not going to sit there and be a punching bag."

As the president spoke, across town at Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU) a panel of 104 randomly selected undecided and weakly committed voters used hand-held electronic devices to dial in their response to this moment of the debate. A computer instantly processed the evaluations of each voter and plotted the average on a graph. The verdict: the panel did not like what the president was saying. As Bush tried to defend his conduct in the campaign, the summary graph dipped sharply below the neutral midpoint of the scale and remained there while he spoke on this topic.

While the president had better moments during the debate, the eventual judgment of the panel—recorded electronically immediately following the event—was that Arkansas Gov. Bill Clinton and Texas businessman Ross Perot had done a much better job. Nearly half of the panelists said they changed or made up their minds regarding their vote intention during the debate. Over half of these changers said they would now vote for Clinton, and more than one-third moved into Perot's camp. In contrast, only 13 percent of them shifted to the president.

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"According to the voice-stress analyzer, he's not *going to lower taxes."*

Debate highlights, and the accompanying graphic representation of the panelists' reactions, were aired later in the evening by ABC News' "Nightline." A similar project had earlier been undertaken by CNN, using a national sample of 480 individuals punching their moment-by-moment reactions into their push-button phones as they watched the first presidential debate at home. CNN aired some of the results within a few minutes of the conclusion of the debates. And, as part of their "Rock the Vote" campaign, MTV reported on the electronic reactions of a group of college students to the third and final presidential debate.

"Continuous On-Line Audience Response"

*This study was conducted independently of the Center.

systems are the sophisticated stepchildren of the "Lazarsfeld-Stanton program analyzer," developed in the mid-1940s. Advances in computer technology and video graphics make it likely that the use of instant-response systems to evaluate political events will become increasingly common. These technologies can serve as a positive alternative to the usual sources journalists turn to for instant judgments on political events—pundits, spin doctors, "persons on the street" and "groups in a living room." But this technology—like all reportorial techniques—is subject to misuse. And its widespread utilization will raise troubling questions about the relationship between technology and political journalism. Indeed, instant-response technology may be a perfect example of the ambiguities inherent in the new teledemocracy.

The Virginia Commonwealth University Study

Our study of the second presidential debate was initiated and sponsored by the Norfolk *Virginian-Pilot* in cooperation with the local ABC-TV affiliate, "Nightline" and Virginia Commonwealth University (VCU). The project provides a good illustration of the technology and its journalistic uses. We used a large telephone survey of the Richmond metropolitan area to recruit voters who had not yet firmly decided which candidate they would support. The panel was well balanced politically and demographically and was generally representative of undecided voters in the metro area. Although no one on the panel was firmly committed to a candidate, tentative support for Clinton and Bush was nearly equal—29 percent for Bush and 25 percent for Clinton. Overall favorability ratings of the three candidates were very similar.

Our panel watched the debate in an auditorium equipped with a large-screen television. Each individual had a small "dial box" on which there was a knob and seven settings. The settings corresponded to a scale from 1 (strongly dislike) to 7 (strongly like), with 4 being neutral. During the debate, their second-by-second responses were summarized and plotted on a graph, which was superimposed on the television image of the debate and recorded on videotape (this graph was *not* visible to the panelists themselves). Excerpts from the videotape formed the basis for "Nightline's" coverage of citizen reaction to the event.

Newspaper reporters (along with "Nightline" personnel and reporters for the local TV sponsor) watched the debate on a monitor with the instant-response data superimposed. Academic experts who were experienced in the use of the technology and in the interpretation of the quantitative data were available for consultation with the reporters. The newspaper reporters constructed a running graphic of responses to the entire debate, annotated with excerpts of what was being said at the high and low points, and published the graph on their paper's front page the next morning. The following day, the data were used to identify individuals who had changed their minds during the debate. Newspaper reporters used interviews with several of these people as the basis for a follow-up story.

Benefits of Instant-Response Technology

Modern technologies have made the instant-reaction formats possible. But it has been a combination of public and journalistic frustration with campaigns and campaign coverage that has made these experiments appealing.

Almost everyone has recognized that the public is tired of watching political events and then listening to pundits and spin doctors tell them, as the common complaint goes, what they have just heard. In traditional campaign coverage, citizens are little more than passive recipients of a story line woven by media and campaign experts who never bother to consult them.

A principal virtue of the instant-reaction format is that it reverses the traditional order: it places the citizenry, or at least some clearly defined portion of it, at the center of the ensuing

discourse. Pundits are compelled, at a minimum, to take the audience response into consideration as they begin the process of interpreting the event.

Instant-reaction formats also make a useful contribution to a broader journalistic trend in the coverage of politics. As reporters have become increasingly disenchanted with the manner in which candidates have presented them with photo opportunities, managed information and spin control, they have increasingly experimented with other approaches to gathering and interpreting information.

Focus groups, knocking on doors, tracking panels of ordinary Americans, having "real people" ask questions at debates—all are efforts to develop what veteran political reporter David Broder has labeled a "consumer approach" to political reporting. The instant-reaction format provides a means for applying this approach to events such as presidential debates, major speeches and even important press conferences.

One of the most valuable aspects of instant-response technology is its ability to reveal the rich texture of citizens' reactions to the candidates and their rhetoric. For the most part, we saw in our study little evidence of an audience that was either uninterested, mesmerized into agreeing with candidate positions or unreflectively filtering candidate responses through their own immutable preconceptions. Rather we saw citizens who, while having opinions and attitudes, were willing and able to listen to and evaluate different, often subtle points of view. The audience's reactions to Bush's and Clinton's respective stands on term limitations illustrate this point.

About a half hour into the debate an audience member asked each of the candidates to "please state your position on term limits." Bush answered first, stating forcefully that "I strongly support term limits for members of the United States Congress." Reaction to the president's stance was positive, rising steadily to 5.48, a score well above average, as he remarked that "the president's terms are limited to two, a total of eight years. What's wrong with limiting the term of members of Congress to 12?"

Clinton followed the president, and began by saying "I know they're popular, but I'm against them." He then went on to summarize his opposition to term limits, and as he did so the graph superimposed on the television screen recorded the audience's displeasure. By the time he had completed his explanation, his support had dropped to an average of 3.17, more than two points below Bush's peak just moments before, and the lowest point recorded for the governor during the entire debate. However, after Clinton said, "Let me tell you what I favor instead," he then offered an alternative to term limits. Laying out a plan for strict limits on "how much you can spend running for Congress, strict limits on political action committees, requirements that people running for Congress appear in open public debates like we're doing now," Clinton argued for elections that would put incumbents and challengers on an equal footing. Thus, "the voters could make up their own mind without being subject to an unfair fight."

The audience reacted positively to this counterproposal, steadily increasing their favorable responses to a peak of 5.38—nearly that achieved by Bush on the same question. Taken as a whole, the pattern of rising and falling support as different points were made suggested an audience that was grappling with difficult issues and who, while having opinions that shaped its initial reactions, was open to reasonable counterarguments. We cannot say whether anyone's opinion on term limits was changed by this exchange, but it is clear that the audience actively followed Clinton's argument and saw both its merits and its relevance to the issues underlying recent calls for term limitations.

The Debate Pulse: Rapid-Response, Interactive Polling

DURING the first and last presidential debates, CNN added a new dimension to campaign coverage by monitoring the political pulse of 480 registered voters via instant interactive polling.

Using a push-button phone, the 480 randomly selected survey respondents were instructed to express their immediate like or dislike for what each of the presidential candidates said throughout the first debate, held on Oct. 11, and the last debate, held on Oct. 19.

Respondents registered their opinions by calling a toll-free 800 number and punching any number from one through nine on their telephone keypads—creating a scale that ranged from a highly negative to a highly positive reaction. Responses were collected in Omaha, Neb., by Call Interactive and fed to Decision Labs, a company based in Chapel Hill, N.C., that specializes in real-time response polling, who were set up for the debates in CNN's Atlanta newsroom.

The voters were classified as Clinton, Bush or Perot supporters or undecided. Their responses were plotted on a graph similar in appearance to a biofeedback chart on which the needle continuously moved as people registered their opinions to the candidates' words.

"This polling method provides the ability to understand much more clearly the way specific pieces of a speech affect people," said Jack Ludwig, vice president and chief methodologist of the Gallup Organization, which cosponsored the project, along with CNN, through the aid of a Markle Foundation grant.

The rapid-response survey found that voters liked Clinton's middle-class tax cut but were not so enthusiastic about his handling of the Arkansas budget. They supported Bush's proposal for allocating 10 percent of income tax revenues toward reducing the budget deficit, but gave mixed reviews for his attacks on Clinton's character. Nearly all voters reacted positively to Perot's performances (though the number of Perot supporters in the sample was so small that the results were not reported ultimately).

The pollsters instantly converted the polled data into a graph, with each candidate's group of supporters and the group of undecided respondents represented by a different colored line. They then superimposed the graph onto a videotape of the candidates being made during the debate so that, after each debate, viewers could see the instant reactions of respondents that occurred at different points during the program. (continued next page)

Problems and Pitfalls

Despite its benefits for providing a useful alternative view of voter response to political events, instant-response technology has significant limitations and, like many other reportorial methods, can be highly misleading when used improperly.

The conclusions one draws from the responses of a panel depend upon who is on the panel. This point is obvious to reporters seeking reactions to political issues from public officials or private citizens, but may be less apparent when working with large groups of voters participating in a study involving gadgets, computers and the lingo of "objective" science. Just as in the reporting of survey results, it is imperative that journalists clearly understand the composition of a panel before they report on its conclusions.

A larger issue is the question of just what is being measured by audience-response technolo-

During the CNN roundup a few minutes after each debate, public opinion analyst William Schneider interpreted several graphs measured at different points during the program. As Schneider analyzed the survey, the network broadcast a tape of the candidate speaking on one side of the screen while the graph of responses to what was being said played on the other side.

The debate reaction poll was the first time a presidential debate had been tracked using this instant-response, interactive method. While television networks, advertisers and political candidates have used these interactive survey methods in controlled laboratory settings to determine audience response to their programming in the past, those scientific methods have not been applied on a second-by-second basis to viewers across the country before.

In previous real-time television viewer surveys, respondents have participated voluntarily, either by calling a toll-free 800 or a toll 900 number. Such call-in surveys are unscientific, and therefore unreliable, because they do not use randomly selected samples. But pollsters for CNN and Gallup did a good job in selecting a random sample of registered voters for their survey, said Ludwig, because it reflected the demographics of other polls conducted at the time.

However, Ludwig cautioned against "projecting too far" with the polling results. Due to the nature of the poll, the sample was prone to a number of flaws. Its small sample size, for instance, which was reduced even further by dividing respondents into various groups, increased the margin of error well above an acceptable rate for a normal survey. Also a problem was the requirement that respondents have a push-button telephone located near a television, which may have excluded certain demographic groups.

There are also questions about what the poll actually measured. Survey instructions asked participants to react "positively or negatively to what you are hearing and seeing during the debate." But were voters deciding on what they saw or what they heard? Were they reacting to platform positions, rhetorical skill or the candidates' taste in ties? The method, Ludwig concluded, "doesn't make it clear what they are reacting to, and it's impossible to tease that out."

Despite the survey's shortcomings, voter preferences did seem to correspond with those in larger, more conventional surveys, Ludwig said. "The movement of the lines does appear to make sense."

According to Ludwig, the positive feedback to the survey indicates that interactive polling could become a permanent fixture in future political debates. "It's an aid that we don't have otherwise for looking at political messages," he said.

—Mark Thalhimer, with assistance from Josef Federman

gy. Instantaneous voter reaction to the specific messages in a debate, campaign speech or television advertisement is certainly informative, but it should not be equated with more general support for the candidate: voters may reach conclusions about a candidate that are very different from the "sum" of their reactions to particular bits of information. For example, in the VCU study, though Perot's favorability score while speaking was the highest of the three candidates, our postdebate survey indicated that more individuals shifted their support to Clinton.

Similarly, instant reactions to campaign events and the immediate impact of these reactions on voters' candidate preferences is certainly newsworthy. However, such short-term evaluations may not always be valid or reliable measures of the longer-term impact of these events. Upon personal reflection, after consultation with others, after seeing newspaper reports of factual

mistakes made by the candidates and so forth, voters may change their evaluations of what they saw and who they support. But having long since left the study site, their original judgment is the one that lives on in journalistic and academic analyses. The widespread shift in public opinion during the past year after the Clarence Thomas-Anita Hill confrontation is a relevant cautionary note.

Like polls, focus groups and other means of tapping public sentiment, the use of instant-response techniques raises fundamental questions about the practice of democracy. Besides giving the public a greater voice in public affairs, these approaches also make it easier for the public to be manipulated. Politicians can use them to develop themes, test rhetoric and plan campaigns. Prior to going public, well-funded campaigns often use these techniques to gauge citizen attitudes and to understand what sells. This may encourage oversimplification of complex issues or timidity when forthright moral leadership is needed.

Despite evidence that the VCU panelists were reflecting rationally on much of what was being said, some of their sharpest reactions were to mentions of "hot button" groups, institutions or policies. Favorable responses immediately followed Perot's comment that "we have become so preoccupied with the rights of the criminal that we've forgotten the rights of the innocent." A similar "spike" was seen in response to Bush's attack on Congress: "For 38 years one party has controlled the House of Representatives, and the result—a sorry little post office that can't do anything right and a bank that has more overdrafts than all the Chase Bank[s] and Citibank[s] put together." Another was seen after Bush's comments on rising health-care costs: "One thing to blame is these malpractice lawsuits. They're breaking the system."

Instant-reaction formats may thus exacerbate the trend by which politics has become less of an art and more an exercise in market research. The reliance on principled argument, the taking of a courageous stand and the effort to get out in front of public opinion could become increasingly anachronistic campaign tactics that are replaced by a scripted, routinized politics that sophisticatedly panders to sentiments identified through the detailed examination and probing of voter attitudes.

One might wonder, in this milieu, if the defining moments and great mistakes of previous campaigns could have ever occurred. Would John F. Kennedy have reached out and called Coretta Scott King after her husband was jailed in Georgia in the midst of the 1960 campaign? Would Barry Goldwater ever have told the Republican convention in 1964 that "extremism in the defense of liberty is no vice"?

The Future of Instant Response

The means of conveying the results of instant-response technologies have yet to be perfected. The graphics used by CNN, MTV and "Nightline" were not viewer friendly and people in their living rooms may not have known precisely what to make of the squiggly lines that were crossing their screens.

But these are merely problems of presentation. The increasing use of instant-reaction formats is inevitable. Indeed, we suspect that in the not-too-distant future instant response will be used in the "live" coverage of political debates. Imagine watching the candidates and how the public is reacting simultaneously on your television screen. Ostensibly, this is nothing more than providing voters with information about how their fellow citizens are responding to the debate. One might even argue that it could help transform the isolated act of watching television into a more communal experience, albeit an antiseptic one. On the other hand, it raises the very real specter of a forced consensus, of pressuring unsure or weakly committed citizens to

go along with the crowd, of equating the *majority* opinion with the *correct* opinion.

In an information society, the question is not whether we employ the techniques of teledemocracy, but what are the uses to which these are put and the ends to be served. In many ways the issues raised by continuous-response systems are part of a larger set of concerns about the increasing use of new technologies and formats—instant and 800-number polls, focus groups, in-depth interviews, talk show interviews, "people's debates" and so forth—to shape public discourse. Will these developments lead to greater public voice or simply to greater manipulation of the public? Do they offer the real possibility of an "electronic commonwealth" or are they gross caricatures of civic culture in which lines on a screen substitute for real public engagement? And finally, do they provide the means for a more democratic polity, or do they instead confirm republican fears of unchecked mass opinion? These concerns are not new, but in this *fin de siècle*, with its national and international political instability, it is perhaps not surprising that they loom larger than usual.