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Are There Lessons for the Future of News From the 2008 Presidential Campaign?

Abstract

When news does its job, attentive citizens are better able to understand both the challenges facing the country and the competing visions of those seeking to lead it. Indeed, some argue that “the purpose of journalism is to provide people with the information they need to be free and self-governing.” In years past, those studying media have reliably found that consumers of traditional news were better informed about issues of national concern. However, the growth of a new media culture in which partisans are able to envelop themselves in like-minded content raises a question: in the world of ideologically tinged cable news, opinion- talk radio, and viral email, does news in any of its various incarnations still sift fact from fabrication and, in the process, heighten a voter’s knowledge about those aspiring to lead?

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When news does its job, attentive citizens are better able to understand both the challenges facing the country and the competing visions of those seeking to lead it. Indeed, some argue that “the purpose of journalism is to provide people with the information they need to be free and self-governing.”¹ In years past, those studying media have reliably found that consumers of traditional news were better informed about issues of national concern.² However, the growth of a new media culture in which partisans are able to envelop themselves in like-minded content raises a question: in the world of ideologically tinged cable news, opinion-talk radio, and viral email, does news in any of its various incarnations still sift fact from fabrication and, in the process, heighten a voter’s knowledge about those aspiring to lead?

Our study of the presidential general election campaign of 2008 suggests that traditional news sources are not the custodians of fact that they once were. At the same time, sources that blend discussion of news with what we call opinion-talk are at least occasional purveyors of unbalanced issue coverage and misinformation. In this transformed media envi-

ronment, presidential debates hold up as one of the only venues, if not the sole source, that heightens citizens’ campaign knowledge. These conclusions arise from our study of how newspapers, national and local broadcast and cable news, Internet, talk radio, and debate audiences responded to questions about the central deceptions advanced by the major party candidates.

In the general presidential election of 2008, viewers in battleground states were assaulted by deceptive claims, among them that Arizona Senator and Republican Party nominee John McCain wanted to cut Social Security and stay in Iraq for one hundred years and that Illinois Senator and Democratic Party nominee Barack Obama did not take Iran seriously and had a close relationship with former Weather Underground leader William Ayers.³ The two most prevalent distortions, each backed by multimillion dollar ad buys, involved taxation. Specifically, the Democrats alleged that McCain would impose a net tax on health care benefits, and the Republicans insisted that Obama would raise taxes on working families including “yours.” Where the Obama campaign spent \$43 million on broadcast ads asserting the first claim, the

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McCain campaign devoted \$53 million to spots alleging the second.⁴

The Democratic nominee's rhetoric failed the truth test by suggesting that the Republican would tax employer-provided health benefits, a statement that sins by omission because the tax would have been offset with a credit of \$2,500 per individual or \$5,000 per family. "It could all unravel," said one of the Obama ads. "Your health care under John McCain. McCain would tax health benefits for the first time ever, meaning higher income taxes for millions." On the other side, McCain trafficked in the false conclusion that Obama planned on raising middle-class taxes. "Times are tough. Obama voted to raise taxes on people making just \$42,000," noted one McCain ad. "He promises more taxes on small businesses, seniors, your life savings, your family." Obama had forecast raising taxes, but only on those households making over \$250,000.⁵ Each side rebutted the false charges: Obama in counter-advertising, debates, and speeches; McCain in the latter two. In a moment, we will argue that McCain's decision not to rebut using advertising was consequential.

An Annenberg Public Policy Center post-election survey found widespread public ignorance about the facts underlying the nominees' exchanges on taxes.⁶ When respondents were asked which candidate(s) they thought would raise middle-class taxes, one in five (22 percent) answered correctly that neither planned on doing so; four in five (78 percent) either did not know the answer or answered incorrectly, including one in six (17 percent) who embraced the deception that Obama would raise taxes. When asked about McCain's health care plan, four in ten (42 percent) knew that his tax on health care benefits would be offset, while six in ten (58 percent) did not know

the correct answer, including 15 percent of the sample that believed that benefits would be taxed without the offsetting credit.⁷

The questions we address here are: how effectively did the candidates, news media, and debates blunt these central deceptions and increase audiences' knowledge? And did embracing either of the false beliefs affect the way people voted?

Our first finding is straightforward. Exposure to ads increased the impact of the deception, but only when it was not rebutted. By counter-advertising, Obama negated the effect of McCain's attack. When his campaign decided not to do the same, McCain left audiences vulnerable to the false inference invited by Obama's ads.

Because candidates most often reach voters with ads in slots surrounding local news, news-viewing is a rough indicator of ad exposure. Further, because local news focuses not on presidential campaigns but, rather, on crime, sports, and weather,⁸ unless the other side rebuts an attack, higher local news consumption should predict embracing the rhetoric in the ads. Unsurprisingly then, we find that the more that people relied on local news, the more they believed that McCain would tax health benefits without the offsetting credit, but the less likely they were to hold that Obama would raise middle-class taxes.⁹ Specifically, those who watched local news every day were one-and-a-half times more prone to believe the deception about McCain than those who watched no local news, but were 1.7 times less likely to believe the deception about Obama.

When covering politics, broadcast and cable media tend to engage in tactical assessments and "he said/she said" reporting, failing in the process to cor-

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rect the deceptions offered by either or both sides.¹⁰ Consistent with this supposition, broadcast and cable news more often than not restated the suspect allegations without challenging the misinformation they contained. This excerpt from *NBC Nightly News* is illustrative:

Brian Williams: I mentioned we have more new poll numbers tonight, and our NBC News political director Chuck Todd is here with those.

Chuck Todd: [...] [L]ook at [his] advantages on the issues, Brian. This sort of underscores the 10-point lead for Obama. He leads by 39 on handling health care. He leads by 21 points on handling the economy, by far and away the biggest issue in [the] poll. Fourteen points on taxes. This is happening because Obama has been pounding McCain on the airwaves on health care and taxes, saying he's going to tax your health care benefits. And that's why he's got a lead now on that. All that's left for McCain is Iraq.¹¹

From this segment's focus on tactics, audiences could learn that Obama was advantaged by his assault on McCain's plan. Because the Democratic nominee's allegation was presented without correction, the deception was reinforced. Still, as the following excerpt from *CBS Evening News* suggests, broadcast journalists occasionally debunked the fabricated claims:

Wyatt Andrews: John McCain wants a multitrillion-dollar tax on the middle class? Here are the facts. Obama has the tax part correct, but the impact on the middle class is exaggerated. Most people will see tax cuts. McCain does want to tax the health insurance benefits that 60 million Americans now buy through their employers tax free. However, McCain also proposes to give the money back as a tax credit, \$2,500 for individuals, \$5,000 for families.¹²

Although we find no evidence that watching broadcast network news increased the likelihood of embracing either deception, neither did we find that those news viewers were more likely to know the candidates' position on either issue. In other words, we cannot say that network news did any harm, but it also did not do any good.

Because partisans seek reinforcement from like-minded media outlets, the rise of partisan media has increased the likelihood that those of one ideological bent will be protected from information that might challenge their presuppositions. The ideological dispositions of the audiences of cable news channels differ. Those calling themselves moderates and liberals are more likely to watch CNN, and those wearing the conservative label are more likely to tune to FOX News. In our sample, liberals and moderates were two-and-a-half times more prone to watch CNN as their primary cable news channel, and conservatives were over three-and-a-half times more likely to watch FOX News. Our survey contained too few MSNBC viewers to permit reliable estimates for that network.

Research conducted in 2004 found that cable news networks debunk false claims about the candidate closer to their ideology and embrace falsehoods being floated about the other candidate. By so doing, conservative media (for example, FOX News and Rush Limbaugh) "create a self-protective enclave hospitable to conservative beliefs... [and enwrap audiences] in a world in which facts supportive of Democratic claims are contested and those consistent with conservative ones are championed."¹³ Some research has found that this pattern is characteristic of both conservative and liberal media:

“Conservative assumptions are more likely to go unchallenged on FOX’s talk shows than on CNN’s, and liberals are more likely to be required to defend their premises. The opposite is true on CNN.”¹⁴

Contrary to the finding from the 2004 presidential election, in 2008 we do not find a pro-Obama effect for CNN. CNN neither increased belief in the deception nor increased the accuracy of respondents’ answer to either issue. Similar to network news, CNN neither did harm nor good.

However, we do find a pro-McCain effect for FOX. Specifically, that channel fortified the deception that Obama would raise middle-class taxes. On FOX, both pundits and invited guests alleged that the middle class had much to fear from the Democrat at tax time.

Scott Rasmusen: But Sean, what’s happening is Barack Obama is running a great ad campaign in battleground states. He keeps talking about cutting taxes for 95% of Americans. I know you’d argue about that.

Sean Hannity: It’s not true.¹⁵

In another FOX piece, an invited guest uncritically repeats the deceptive claim:

Martha MacCallum: I know that you mentioned you are fearful about an Obama presidency because you think that this tax – raising taxes on so many people in this country would sort of throw a cold blanket over this – or a wet blanket, I should say – onto any recovery that we might have.

Stephen Moore: [...] It’s those small businessmen who may be hiring five or 10 or 20 workers, that are going to be facing a higher income tax burden under this plan. And this is the one question, by the way, that Barack Obama has never been able to answer: How do you create more jobs

for this economy if you’re levying higher taxes on the small businesses that create 80 percent of those new jobs?¹⁶

Consistent with this analysis, watching FOX News increased the belief that Obama would raise middle-class taxes; viewers reliant on that outlet were roughly three times more likely to believe the deception and 1.4 times less likely to know that neither candidate proposed raising such taxes.

Similarly, regular listeners of conservative talk radio host Rush Limbaugh were 1.7 times more likely to believe the deception about Obama. Like FOX News, Limbaugh reinforced deceptions about Obama’s plans. Unlike FOX, though, listeners to Rush Limbaugh were more likely – indeed, one-and-a-half times more likely – to know the correct answer about McCain’s health care plan.

Neither the newest medium on the scene, the Internet, nor the oldest, the newspaper, enabled those who relied on them to make sense of either claim. Knowledge of the facts behind the fabrications wasn’t increased by using the Internet for information about the presidential election or by reading major city or national newspapers. Importantly, however, neither medium increased audiences’ embrace of the deceptions. Put simply, these two outlets also neither helped voters nor harmed them.

Our findings up to this point are disappointing. The news media did not serve as effective custodians of fact in 2008; instead, some outlets performed a function one would expect of campaign surrogates. However, the citizen seeking political substance did have a recourse. For almost five decades, studies have confirmed the power of presidential debates to increase voter knowledge,¹⁷ and 2008 was no exception.

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The debates' two-sided clash of competing ideas, unmediated by interpretation from reporters, spiked voter knowledge. In these often disparaged encounters, the presidential and vice presidential nominees took on the deceptions perpetrated by the other side, including those on health care and taxing proposals. On no fewer than ten occasions across three debates, Barack Obama insisted either that he would not raise taxes on households making less than \$250,000 a year or that 95 percent of Americans would get a tax cut. When McCain made the charge, Obama responded:

John McCain: Senator Obama's secret that you don't know is that his tax increases will increase taxes on 50 percent of small business revenue.... I've got some news, Senator Obama, the news is bad. So let's not raise anybody's taxes, my friends, and make it be very clear that I am not in favor of tax cuts for the wealthy. I am in favor of leaving the tax rates alone and reducing the tax burden of middle-income Americans.

Barack Obama: [...] [L]et's be clear about my tax plan and Senator McCain's.... I want to provide a tax cut for 95 percent of Americans, 95 percent. If you make less than a quarter of a million dollars a year, you will not see a single dime of your taxes go up. If you make \$200,000 a year or less, your taxes will go down. Now, Senator McCain talks about small businesses. Only a few percent of small businesses make more than \$250,000 a year. So the vast majority of small businesses would get a tax cut under my plan.¹⁸

The debates afforded McCain the same opportunity. So, for example, the third debate included this exchange:

Barack Obama: Here's the problem – that for about 20 million people, you may find

yourselves no longer having employer-based health insurance [with Senator McCain's plan].... And once you're out on your own with this \$5,000 credit, Senator McCain, for the first time, is going to be taxing the health care benefits that you have from your employer. And this is your plan, John. For the first time in history, you will be taxing people's health care benefits.

John McCain: [...] Now, 95 percent of the people in America will receive more money under my plan because they will receive not only their present benefits, which may be taxed, which will be taxed, but then you add \$5,000 onto it.¹⁹

As this Obama example illustrates, the candidates were occasionally more accurate in characterizing their opponents' plans in the debates than they were in ads. Still, the Arizona senator regularly suggested that the Democratic nominee would raise taxes, especially on small businesses while he supported "reducing the tax burden" of the middle class. At the same time, his Illinois counterpart repeatedly implied that McCain's health care plan would raise taxes on many.

However, because each side had the opportunity to correct the other's misstatements, watching the debates increased knowledge. In the presence of a robust list of controls, including political ideology, party identification, political knowledge, and news consumption, those who tuned into all four debates were one-and-a-half times less likely than non-viewers to believe the deception that Obama would raise middle-class taxes, and were one-and-a-half times more likely to know that neither candidate had proposed upping them on the middle-class. Those who watched all four debates were not only not more likely to believe Obama's deception about McCain, but were 3.8

times more likely than non-viewers to know that a credit would offset the tax.

All of this matters because, even in the presence of a robust list of controls, being misled about these issues affected vote choice.²⁰ Voters who were convinced that McCain would impose a net tax on health care benefits were 2.8 times more likely to cast their ballot for Obama. Similarly, those who believed that Obama would raise middle-class taxes were 7.8 times more likely to vote for McCain. To calibrate the importance of these findings, note that embracing deception is almost as strong a predictor of vote as party identification.²¹ When they reinforced deceptions, news outlets had the same distorting effect on voting behavior.

In short, with the exception of Rush Limbaugh's correction of distortions of McCain's health care plan, other media we studied failed to increase citizens' understanding of the facts underlying the charges and counter-charges from the campaigns. In some cases, news exposure actually magnified belief in a deception: viewers of FOX and listeners to Rush Limbaugh were more likely to endorse McCain's contortion of Obama's position. Candidate advertising was successful in correcting misstatements by the other side. However, the hero in our story is not a traditional news outlet, a partisan news source, or paid advertising. It was not reliance on any of these sources, but rather viewing presidential debates that increased voter knowledge and undercut the power of the deceptions from both sides.

Still, the new media environment carries with it an increased capacity to locate accurate campaign information. In 2008, the *St. Petersburg Times* added PolitiFact to a menu of existing sources dedicated to making politicians account-

able for their assertions. Similarly, *The Washington Post's* Michael Dobbs regularly unmasked the deceptions in candidate ads. And FactCheck.org (run by the Annenberg Public Policy Center) continued to play the role it introduced in the 2004 election.²²

All three sites devoted space to challenging distortions in broadcast and cable advertising and suspect content in cyberspace. Of course, the disposition of news outlets to replicate the effort of these sites is dampened by a commercial environment in which one-newspaper towns are giving way to no-newspaper towns; surviving news outlets are laying off staff; and audiences for traditional news are scattering to a wide range of alternative sources.²³ Although we assume that exposure to sites debunking fabrication will increase knowledge, our survey contained too few respondents to test that hypothesis.

In his 1805 inaugural address, Thomas Jefferson expressed confidence that "[t]he public judgment will correct false reasoning and opinions on a full hearing of all parties."²⁴ In 2008, news failed to help the public perform the role Jefferson envisioned for it, and citizens did not live up to the expectations Jefferson set for them either. Still, the debates served the public well.

As the audience for traditional news erodes, as cable and websites proliferate, and as audiences increasingly gravitate to sources that reinforce their beliefs, the concerns that Jefferson's statement invites raise at least three questions. To what sources can the public turn in order to gain a "full hearing of all parties"? How does a democracy motivate citizens to select such sources? And, finally, are there alternative ways in which "public judgment" can be adequately informed?

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ENDNOTES

- ¹ Bill Kovach and Tom Rosensteel, *The Elements of Journalism: What Newspeople Should Know and the Public Should Expect* (New York: Crown, 2001), 17.
- ² For example, see Steven H. Chaffee, Xinshu Zhau, and Glenn Leshner, "Political Knowledge and the Campaign Media of 1992," *Communication Research* 21 (1994).
- ³ For a more in-depth look at the major deceptions throughout the 2008 presidential election, see Joe Miller, "The Whoppers of 2008," September 25, 2008, http://www.factcheck.org/elections-2008/the_whoppers_of_2008.html; Viveca Novak, "The Whoppers of 2008 – the Sequel," October 31, 2008, http://www.factcheck.org/elections-2008/the_whoppers_of_2008_-_the_sequel.html.
- ⁴ The two deceptions of focus in this paper were chosen because they had the most advertising expenditure of all the deceptive claims during the election; all advertising spot counts, estimated expenditures, and ad transcripts were provided by Campaign Media Analysis Group (CMAG).
- ⁵ For a more in-depth look at both deceptions, see Lori Robertson, "Health Care Spin," October 14, 2008, http://www.factcheck.org/elections-2008/health_care_spin.html; Brooks Jackson, "More Tax Deceptions," August 8, 2008, http://www.factcheck.org/elections-2008/more_tax_deceptions.html.
- ⁶ The 2008 Annenberg Claims/Deception Survey was conducted by Princeton Survey Research Associates International for the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania. A total of 3,008 adults 18 years and older were surveyed by phone between November 5 and November 18, 2008. The survey has a margin of error equal to 2.3 percent for results based on a full sample.
- ⁷ Wording of the question regarding middle-class taxes is "Which candidate or candidates would have raised taxes on middle-class households?"; for the question regarding McCain's health care plan the wording is "As best you know, if a family has health insurance provided by an employer . . . would Senator McCain's plan have taxed those health benefits but given the family \$5,000 that would have covered the tax, or would Senator's McCain's plan have taxed those health benefits and given the family no help to pay the taxes, or would Senator McCain's plan NOT have taxed those health benefits at all?"
- ⁸ See Martin Kaplan, Ken Goldstein, and Matthew Hale, "Local News Coverage of the 2004 Campaigns: An Analysis of Nightly Broadcasts in 11 Markets," February 15, 2008, <https://www.policyarchive.org/bitstream/handle/10207/6408/LCLNAFinal2004.pdf?sequence=1>. This focus on local crime, sports, and weather instead of presidential campaign coverage and analysis of the accuracy of presidential ads is consistent with the public's expectations of local news as a "good neighbor" instead of a watchdog; see Don Heider, Maxwell McCombs, and Paula M. Poindexter, "What the Public Expects of Local News: Views of Public and Traditional Journalism," *Journalism and Mass Communication Quarterly* 82 (2005).
- ⁹ The analysis consists of two logistic regression models each for both issues; one predicts knowing the correct answer and the other predicts believing the deception. Each model controls for age, gender, race, education, income, religion, living in the South, party identification, political ideology, general political knowledge, and whether the person voted in the election.
- ¹⁰ For a more in-depth look at "he said/she said" reporting, see Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Paul Waldman, *The Press Effect: Politicians, Journalists, and the Stories that Shape the Political World* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2003); Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Bruce W. Hardy, "Unmasking Deception: The Capacity, Disposition, and Challenges Facing the Press," in *The Politics of News: The News of Politics*, 2nd ed., ed. Doris A. Graber, Dennis McQuail, and Pippa Norris (Washington, D.C.: CQ Press, 2007), 117–138.

- 11 "Obama Leads in Polls," *NBC Nightly News*, NBC, October 21, 2008, <http://www.lexis-nexis.com/>.
- 12 "Reality Check ; Truth about McCain and Obama on Who Will Raise Your Taxes," *CBS Evening News*, CBS, September 15, 2008, <http://www.lexis-nexis.com/>.
- 13 Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Joseph N. Cappella, *Echo Chamber: Rush Limbaugh and the Conservative Media Establishment* (New York: Oxford University Press, 2008), x.
- 14 *Ibid.*, 49.
- 15 "Pollster Discusses Shift in Polls," *Hannity & Colmes*, FOX News, October 20, 2008, <http://www.lexis-nexis.com/>.
- 16 "Obama Warns Dems on Overconfidence ; Campaign Continues," *America's Election Headquarters*, FOX News, October 17, 2008, <http://www.lexis-nexis.com/>.
- 17 For example, see Alan I. Abramowitz, "The Impact of a Presidential Debate on Voter Rationality," *American Journal of Political Science* 22 (1978); Lee B. Becker, Idowu A. Sobowale, Robin E. Cobbey, and Chaim H. Eyal, "Debates' Effects on Voters' Understanding of Candidates and Issues," in *The Presidential Debates: Media, Electoral, and Policy Perspectives*, ed. George F. Bishop, Robert G. Meadow, and Marilyn Jackson-Beeck (New York: Praeger Special Studies, 1978), 126 – 139; Dan Drew and David Weaver, "Voter Learning in the 1988 Presidential Election: Did the Debates and Media Matter?" *Journalism Quarterly* 68 (1991); Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Chris Adasiewicz, "What Can Voters Learn from Election Debates?" in *Televised Election Debates: International Perspectives*, ed. Stephen Coleman (New York: St. Martin's Press, 2000); Kate Kenski and Kathleen Hall Jamieson, "Issue Knowledge and Perceptions of Agreement in the 2004 Presidential General Election," *Presidential Studies Quarterly* 36 (2006).
- 18 "The Second Presidential Debate," [nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/president/debates/transcripts/second-presidential-debate.html), October 8, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/president/debates/transcripts/second-presidential-debate.html>.
- 19 "The Third Presidential Debate," [nytimes.com](http://www.nytimes.com/2008/president/debates/transcripts/third-presidential-debate.html), October 15, 2008, <http://www.nytimes.com/2008/president/debates/transcripts/third-presidential-debate.html>.
- 20 The basis of the vote choice analysis is a logistic regression. The dependent variable is a dichotomous item indicating whether the respondent voted for Barack Obama or John McCain. The independent variables of theoretical interest are two dichotomous items indicating whether an individual believed either of the deceptions. The model controls for age, gender, race, education, income, religion, living in the South, party identification, political knowledge, political ideology, news consumption (newspaper, local news, national nightly news, cable news, talk radio, Internet), and debate viewership.
- 21 It should be noted that in our sample, Democrats were 7.2 times more likely to vote for Obama and Republicans were 9.2 times more likely to vote for McCain. Within the previous analyses that predict belief in either deception, Republicans were 1.7 times less likely to believe the deception against McCain and 1.6 times more likely to believe the deception against Obama; being a Democrat did not predict belief in either deception.
- 22 Kathleen Hall Jamieson is director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center.
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- 24 Thomas Jefferson, "Inaugural Address," March 4, 1805, from The American Presidency Project, <http://www.presidency.ucsb.edu/ws/index.php?pid=25804>.