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Watching the Adwatches

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Chapter 4

Watching the Adwatches

*Kathleen Hall Jamieson and Paul A. Waldman*

Adwatches have the potential to enhance the quality of campaigns by creating disincentives for candidates to make dubious claims and by inviting a backlash from the knowledgeable citizenry if the ads overstep the line. Adwatches can have undesirable consequences in both areas as well. When adwatches carefully examine the accuracy and fairness of ads, they provide a powerful disincentive for campaigns to lie or launch unfair attacks. When adwatches are performed regularly, they help citizens evaluate not only specific candidate claims but the persuasive process in general.

Adwatching emerged in large part as a response on the part of the journalistic community to the 1988 presidential election. Among the reasons that that general election campaign was noteworthy is the fact that for the first time in the television age, ads for one major party presidential candidate lied blatantly. Specifically, Bush’s “tank” ad charged falsely that Dukakis had opposed “virtually every defense system we have developed.” Among others, the Democrat favored the Trident II submarine and the D5 missile and SSN21 Seawolf attack submarine. “He opposed the Stealth bomber” said the ad, when, in fact, Dukakis supported that project. Another of the Bush ads invited the false inference that Dukakis freed 268 first-degree murderers to rape and kidnap. In fact, four were furloughed and then only after their sentences had been downgraded from “first-degree murder not eligible for parole.” And of these convicts, only one, William Horton, kidnapped and raped (Jamieson 1992).

Nor were the Democrats above reproach in 1988. An ad for Dukakis claimed that Bush had cast the “tie-breaking Senate vote to cut Social Security benefits” when instead, the Republican had voted to eliminate a cost-of-living adjustment in benefits, thus eroding purchasing power but not diminishing the actual level of benefits. Many reporters and editors felt that the Bush campaign successfully focused coverage on distracting issues. By repeating Bush’s ads’ claims without an accompanying assessment of their accuracy and relevance to governance, the press allowed the campaign to center on the Horton case, the Pledge of Allegiance, and Boston Harbor
rather than the emerging savings and loan crisis or the demise of the Soviet Union. Consequently, the door was opened for a news format that would critique candidate advertising with two goals in mind: keeping candidates and consultants honest and creating a more informed electorate.

In an effort to address this issue, CNN worked with Kathleen Hall Jamieson and a research team at the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg School for Communication to devise a broadcast format for critiquing ads. The primary challenge was to focus viewers’ attention on the recontextualization offered by the reporter as opposed to the dynamic visual, verbal, and musical elements of the ad itself. Tests indicated that the most effective format had four basic elements. First, when a portion of the ad was shown, it would be placed in a mock television screen moved to the background and set at an angle to the viewer. Second, a news logo and a notice that this was a political ad for a candidate would be present on screen when the ad was being shown. Third, relevant portions of the ad would be shown with the screen frozen when the reporter commented on a portion of the ad. Finally, print correctors such as the words correct, false, or misleading would be placed across the screen when the reporter evaluated an ad’s claim. These elements were designed to increase the likelihood that viewers would focus on the reporter’s reframing.

Adwatching in 1992

As adwatches became common in 1992, consultants surmised that clearly false ads would run the risk of exposure by the press and of subsequent negative effects at the ballot box. Although the level of attack in the 1992 presidential ads was high, so too was the level of accuracy. When distortions occurred, they fell into the category of failing to tell the whole story. So, for example, while a Clinton ad claimed, Bush did “sign the second biggest tax increase in American history,” that act required the complicity of the Democratic Congress. And yes, as another Clinton ad averred, 17,000 Arkansans had moved “from welfare to work” since July 1989. But during that time, noted reporters, the number on the welfare rolls actually increased as new recipients of Aid to Families with Dependent Children and food stamps replaced the beneficiaries of the Clinton jobs program.

The distortions in a 1992 radio ad forecast one that would dominate the 1996 Democratic television ads. In it, Republican plans to cap entitlements at the rate of inflation became “slashing benefits for nearly 30 million older Americans.” And a Bush television ad populated with working folk about to be taxed into the poorhouse foreshadowed the central false claim of the 1996 Republican ads; instead of raising taxes on upper-income
earners, the ad forecast that the Democrat planned to raise taxes on the middle class.

While the number of people who see a single broadcast or print adwatch may be small, candidates can use adwatches against their opponents in subsequent ads to counter misleading claims. "George Bush is running attack ads," noted the unseen announcer in a 1992 Clinton ad. "He says all these people [the ad shows those pictured in the Bush ad] would have their taxes raised by Bill Clinton. 'Misleading,' says the Washington Post. And the Wall Street Journal says, 'Clinton has proposed to cut taxes for the sort of people featured in Bush's ad.'" This spot was seen by many more voters than had read either adwatch in the two newspapers.

As important, the adwatches had a prophylactic effect. One television newperson told Times Mirror that the debunking of the ads "is the primary reason why no Willie Horton ads or their cousins have appeared in this [1992] campaign. Our coverage is keeping the bastards honest." Seventy-seven percent of the reporters surveyed after the election approved of these policing efforts. "We'll need a Teddy White to come along later to see if those who planned commercials really sat around worrying about whether we'd criticize them or not," another editor told the surveyors (Times Mirror Center 1992).

After the 1992 election, we asked the consultants that question. "It was a terrible feeling when I used to open the [New York] Times and they used to take my commercial apart, or [when I would] watch CNN and watch them take it apart. . . . I think these reality checks made our commercials less effective." observed Bush-Quayle adman Harold Kaplan at an Annenberg School conference. "I spent more time talking about economics and the latest statistics from the Bureau of Labor statistics and the Bureau of Census than I thought a creative person ever would in her lifetime," recalled Clinton-Gore ad director Mandy Grunwald. "Gene Sperling, who was the economic director of the Clinton campaign, and I talked far more than almost any two people in the campaign [determining whether it was] appropriate to use this statistic or not."1

Judging from these comments, it appears that in 1992, adwatches were satisfying one of the two criteria for success: they made media consultants more careful about accuracy, reducing the likelihood of misleading claims appearing in advertising. The change, however, was short-lived.

**Adwatching in the Health Care Reform Debate**

Between September 8, 1993, and July 15, 1994, under a Robert Wood Johnson Foundation grant, an Annenberg School research team analyzed more
than $50 million worth of advertising directed at legislators through voters as well as press coverage of the policy debate. At issue was pending legislation on health care reform. If 1992 illustrated the success of adwatches, the health care reform debate showed where press scrutiny of ads can go wrong. Less than 10 percent of the reporting on ads examined their fairness or accuracy. Instead, press commentary focused on strategy: the tactics behind the ads, the groups being appealed to, and the advertising’s effect on the Clinton plan’s prospects. This is a particularly glaring lapse, given the complexity of the health care issue and the lack of public understanding of the different proposed plans.\(^2\) The 10 percent of the reporting that focused on accuracy was clustered in the first three weeks of February 1994, when a problematic ad by the Democratic National Committee (DNC) elicited broadcast adwatches by Lisa Myers of NBC and Brooks Jackson of CNN as well as editorial condemnation by the *Washington Post*.

“The Republicans,” says the announcer of the DNC ad. “First they said there was no recession. Now they say there is no health care crisis. They just don’t get it.” To the consternation of the Democrats, the idea that there was no health care “crisis” entered the national debate on the decidedly Democratic lips of New York’s Senator Daniel Patrick Moynihan. Minority Leader Bob Dole then took up the claim. Moynihan specified that the crisis was not in health care but in health care coverage and cost. A number of Republicans took essentially the same position, including Republican Governors Christine Todd Whitman and Carroll Campbell. “There’s a crisis for people who don’t have health care. And there is a crisis in financing. But there is not a crisis in the whole medical system,” said Campbell on a Sunday interview show. The DNC ad reduced that statement to Campbell saying “There’s not a crisis.” Rather than correcting the ad’s misstatement of Campbell’s view and explaining the importance of identifying the precise areas of need, most news accounts reduced the exchange to the level of partisan bickering, what some call “he said/she said” journalism.

So, for example, the *Wall Street Journal* (February 16, 1994, B5) headed its coverage “Democrats’ Ad for Health Care Reform Distorts Governor’s Position, GOP Says.” After initially treating the exchange as charge and countercharge without offering arbitration, the *Washington Post* broke from “he said/she said” to print Campbell’s actual words and to editorialize against the DNC’s distortion of them. The ad’s producer, Mandy Grunwald, was given space to respond on the *Post*’s op-ed page. The ad also contained other distortions, which were pointed out in the broadcast adwatches which, for balance, also examined misleading statements in a number of ads opposing the Clinton plan.
There was, in other words, a three-week period in February 1994 that contained a flurry of adwatching. With what, if any, effect? Ads about the health care reform debate had begun airing in the fall of 1993 and continued through the summer of 1994. On average, one out of two of the ads aired in each week up to the second week in February had contained at least one misleading statement. For the three weeks following the burst of adwatching, that average dropped to one in five before returning to an average of one in three. That jump in misleading claims did not elicit adwatching. The proportion then inched back to just over one of two—a level that continued until April when, for a week, three out of four of the ads contained some form of deception. Then as the debate began to subside, so too did the level of inaccuracy, which dropped to just below one out of two with minor variation through the rest of the debate. The number of ads aired per week did not drop after the adwatching; the proportion of pro-Clinton (1/3) and anti-Clinton plan (2/3) ads did not change; the only change was in the level of accuracy of the average ad. This pattern raises the possibility that the consultants creating the ads responded to the adwatching by engaging in self-correction, tested the waters to see whether adwatching would return, and, finding that it didn’t, returned to their earlier practices.

During the health care reform debate, most of the adwatching focused on strategy rather than accuracy. “While the ad plays effectively on many people’s fears,” notes a “scorecard” in a Sunday New York Times (July 17, 1994, 16) of an ad by Citizens for a Sound Economy, “its Darth Vader tone works against it. It has an overblown quality that slips dangerously close to the tone of a spoof. But it closes on a strong point, appealing to viewers’ pragmatism with a warning that Congress should just fix what is broken in the health care system instead of embarking on a top-to-bottom overhaul.” Such analysis is helpful to readers planning a career in political consulting but useless to those trying to make sense of the controversy over access and choice in the health care debate.

Of equal concern was the fact that two of the four networks that had faithfully employed our adwatch formula in 1992 were now airing ads full screen. Some of the other practices we had argued against in 1988 were back as well. A number of broadcast ads received more free airtime in news than paid time. This lapse might be unimportant if the ads were accurate, but an analysis of 73 broadcast and 125 printed ads revealed that more than half of those aired and more than a quarter of those printed were unfair, misleading, or deceptive (Annenberg Public Policy Center 1995).

We documented the demise of adwatching, the resurrection of strategy-driven coverage, and the escalating inaccuracy of the ads. At a confer-
ence sponsored by the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg Public Policy Center on July 15, 1994, reporters from the major networks and newspapers sat down with us at the National Press Club to talk about reporting on health care and our results. After 1988, changes in press practice were driven by a pervasive belief that both the reporters and the candidates had failed the electorate. No such sense filled discussions of the health-reform debate. As a result, prodding that had worked in 1992 failed in 1994. A column by David Broder urging revival of adwatches on health care ads failed to elicit them. Reports of our findings in the New York Times and Washington Post and an op-ed in the Washington Post also did not prompt a rush of adwatching.

What effect we had occurred on the margins. National Public Radio and the MacNeil-Lehrer Newshour did shift from strategy-based reporting on ads to a structure that included analysis of accuracy. And when the Health Insurance Association of America (HIAA) released a new set of “Harry and Louise” ads the week after our conference, our attendees ignored them. Since earlier ads featuring the yuppie couple obsessing about weaknesses in the Clinton plan had garnered almost five and a half free minutes of uncritical national news time and seven hundred press mentions in the previous eleven months, this phenomenon did represent a change. As one of the reporters who attended the conference told us, a tree fell in the woods and no one reported it.

Adwatching in 1996

In late May 1996, the Democrats began broadcasting an ad attacking Bob Dole’s Senate departure as “quitting, giving up, leaving behind the gridlock he helped create.” Backed by a $1.2 million ad buy in key states, the ad, titled “Empty” by the Democratic campaign, was critiqued in fifty-nine editorials and print articles and on twenty-nine national radio and TV broadcasts. USA Today columnist Walter Shapiro called the ad “snarky” (May 29, 1996, 6A). Liberal columnist Mary McGrory observed that the person who created the “quitter” ad should “be reassigned to snipe detail in rural Idaho.” She added, “Dole has a long history of sticking to what he does—like 36 years on Capitol Hill—and it’s not a term you would slap on an old infantryman on Memorial Day weekend. It’s hard to imagine what the audience was for such a low, hard blow” (Washington Post, May 28, 1996, A2).

On the Newshour (May 28, 1996), Jim Lehrer questioned Hillary Clinton about whether the ad shouldn’t be interpreted as an attack on Dole’s character and integrity and asked, “Is that clean campaigning?” The
Boston Globe called the ad “terribly bad form,” noting, ‘When Dole announced his decision to step down from the Senate, after nearly three decades of service, the president praised him lavishly: ‘You have served your country in so many ways,’ Clinton told the Senate majority leader. ‘On behalf of a grateful America, I want to thank you.’ Now his campaign committee is running ads accusing Dole of dereliction of duty for leaving the Senate” (June 2, 1996, 26). Writing in the St. Petersburg Times, Howard Troxler called the ad “a surprisingly mean and desperate attack for a guy who is supposedly 20 points ahead in the polls” (May 31, 1996, 3A). Writing in the Washington Post, nationally syndicated columnist David Broder called the charge of “quitting” “a stunningly unseemly choice of words for a man who walked away from his Vietnam-era promise to join the National Guard and from his 1990 campaign promise to Arkansas voters to serve out his four year term” (June 2, 1996, C7). Newsday said that airing the ad put Clinton “into the Halloween mode” (June 1, 1996, A18). A Scripps-Howard News Service editorial called the ad “unpresidential” (Rocky Mountain News, June 1, 1996, 56A). An editorial in the St. Louis Post-Dispatch said of the label quitter, “To say this of a man who overcame severe physical disabilities caused by his war wounds is absurd and offensive” (June 1, 1996, 14B). In an adwatch in the New York Times, Adam Nagourney also noted that Clinton had not kept his word to Arkansans when he failed to serve out his four-year term as governor (May 25, 1996, 10). Members of Clinton’s own party, including some of Dole’s Senate colleagues, also criticized the ad.

The “Empty” ad was a response to a Republican ad that was previewed for the press and widely discussed but never aired. That ad, titled “Stripes,” pilloried the claim that as commander in chief—and hence on active military duty—Clinton could postpone the Paula Jones sexual-harassment trial. With its pictures of Clinton jogging and biking, that ad also cast Clinton as a slacker. Since one was previewed in the week that the other started airing, commentators paired the two ads, with Democrats as well as Republicans criticizing both. Maine’s Senator William Cohen said, “I would like to see a much higher road traveled by both parties” (CNN News, May 28, 1996). Jamieson added, “I think the important thing right now is that a clear message be sent to both candidates and to both parties from the American people, from the journalistic community and from the academic community saying that this is not worthy of us. This was a poor illustration of democracy; let’s get on to the substance” (CNN, May 28, 1996). On National Public Radio, Daniel Schorr suggested that the ads might indicate that “there is a mole high up in both campaign organizations committing sabotage of their principals” (May 28, 1996). Columnists
and commentators condemned both ads as attacks on the person rather than his policies.

The aftermath of this outpouring of criticism is noteworthy. Saying that a change in the Clinton legal strategy had made the ad irrelevant, the Republicans decided not to air the “Stripes” ad. By the end of the week, the Democratic ad too had disappeared. In public settings Democratic consultants argued that the ad had run its course. In any case, the claims in the ads would not recur in any form in advertising for the two major-party candidates in the next five months. And unlike both of these ads, none of their subsequent ads can be classed as ad hominem attacks. No other ads aired in the 1996 general election presidential campaign would produce a comparable avalanche of disapproval.

There was some other evidence of candidate responsiveness to criticism of ads in 1996. Since it aired late on a Friday evening in the fall of 1996, only insomniacs were likely to have heard an ad for a candidate for president link the practices of his opponents to the preaching of Lenin. But that’s just what a Ross Perot infomercial did. Perot “writes his own speeches,” said the ad. Pictures of Clinton and Dole then appeared as the female announcer added, “the other two candidates have teams of professional speechwriters to test their speeches with focus groups.” And then the zinger. “They are following Lenin’s advice, ‘Tell the people what they want to hear.’” This instance was one of the few in the 1996 campaign in which adwatching demonstrably made a difference. As part of Jamieson’s weekly evaluation of the discourse of the campaign for CNN and in a syndicated op-ed piece, she singled this portion of the infomercial out for condemnation. The next time Perot aired the taped introduction in which it had appeared, the reference to Lenin had been edited out.

Later that fall, a different ad was pulled for factual reasons. The Republicans’ first ad on campaign finance, “Riady 1,” was reedited (after airing once on CNN) when its first showing elicited thirteen critical articles and adwatching stories. These analyses challenged the veracity of the claim that Clinton had “more investigations, prosecutions and convictions than any administration in two decades.” That distinction belonged to the Reagan administration, which was investigated by nine independent counsels; at that point Clinton’s administration had been investigated by four. In the Reagan-era Housing and Urban Development and Iran-Contra scandals, twenty-eight people were convicted. At that point, only Webster Hubbell had been convicted on Clinton’s watch. The revised version made implicit the comparison that had been explicit, saying, “More investigations, more prosecutions and more convictions, and the list goes on and on.”
Other instances in the 1996 general election in which ads were changed suggest the power of media reports of a strong protest from a nationally visible, widely respected group cited in the ad. When Common Cause protested the implication of a Democratic ad that the group was critical of Dole’s record on campaign finance reform but not of Clinton’s record on the subject, the Democrats stopped airing the piece. The Republicans had a comparable experience. The day after previewing an ad on Medicare that quoted the American Association of Retired Persons (AARP), Dole’s campaign responded to media reports of a protest by the AARP and withdrew the ad. The ad had said that “The AARP, the largest and most respected citizen group, said both sides have proposals ‘which would slow the rate of growth.’” But it neglected to mention that the AARP had also said that the GOP plan went “far beyond what the program can absorb without jeopardizing quality and access to care.” Having withdrawn the first ad, the Republicans then aired a second piece that also drew an AARP objection.

The other lesson of the 1996 corrections is that an ad will be changed if a nationally visible and respected person is offended. So, for example, after Nancy Reagan objected to its use, footage of the Reagan assassination attempt was dropped from a Democratic testimonial ad featuring Jim Brady, who was also injured that day. Noteworthy in the general election of 1996 is the fact that, unlike in 1992, adwatching for accuracy was limited largely to the print press. With the exception of Lehrer’s News Hour and National Public Radio, there was no regular broadcast adwatching on television. Whereas in 1992 Brooks Jackson had provided regular tests of ads, in 1996 his time was devoted instead to “following the money.” In September, for example, only three of the sixteen network evening news stories covering the candidates’ ads focused on their accuracy. On ABC Jeff Greenfield corrected a Clinton ad on drug programs by saying, “But one former government official says that, in fact, both parties bear responsibility for brushing aside the key to stopping teenage drug use” (September 9, 1996). On CBS Eric Engberg noted that Clinton had in fact appointed a drug czar but that “He also failed to deliver on the pledge to put far more money into treatment and prevention programs” (September 22, 1996). And on CBS, Sandra Hughes challenged Perot’s claim that 76 percent of Americans wanted him in the debates by citing a CBS poll to the contrary (September 22, 1996).

More typical was coverage that commented on the ads’ strategic importance, as in this September 20, 1996, example from ABC:

*Sam Donaldson:* By late today, the Clinton ad team had their response ad shot. [Excerpt from ad.] And that’s how it goes in
modern campaigns, punch and counterpunch within hours of each other. Whatever the road they take they'll both travel at about ninety miles an hour between now and election day.

The strategic focus of most adwatches is not surprising, since strategy is the primary focus of all campaign coverage (Patterson 1993). Political reporters can view ads and come up with an immediate strategic assessment; campaign strategy is, after all, their area of expertise. To evaluate an ad's accuracy, however, research, including consulting additional sources, may be required. This expends a precious resource, time. In fact, as a content analysis by Bennett (1997) revealed, 70 percent of print adwatches and 100 percent of broadcast adwatches in 1996 focused on campaign strategy. Given that strategy coverage has been shown to elevate cynicism in some cases (Cappella and Jamieson 1997), these figures are particularly troubling.

In addition, both print and broadcast outlets ran far fewer adwatches than they had in 1992. If the campaigns were paying attention, they would have quickly realized that advertising claims were unlikely to be addressed at all; claims that were addressed would be assessed for effectiveness rather than accuracy. Whether the amount of deception in advertising can be directly attributed to the drop in broadcast adwatching is difficult to know, but in 1992, the number of televised ads containing distortions and selective uses of evidence was comparatively small, with 14 percent (seven ads of fifty-one) containing a questionable claim. By contrast, in 1996, 52 percent (thirty-two of sixty-two) of the ads televised after the start of the conventions contained at least one problematic claim.

There is no significant difference in the relative level of deception in the Dole and Clinton ads. The Clinton campaign averaged .8 deceptive claims per ad; the Dole campaign .9 deceptive claims per spot. The most often aired Democratic deception occurred in nine of Clinton's thirty-seven postconvention ads. It said in one form or another that Dole would "slash" Medicare, cutting it $270 billion. What the ad didn't say was that although the Republican plan would have cut the rate more sharply than the Democrats' plan, both the Democrats and the Republicans planned to slow the rate of increase.

The most frequently televised Republican distortion suggested that Clinton's tax increase had fallen most heavily if not entirely on the middle class. Where one ad tied the full Clinton tax increase to pictures of blue-collar workers, three others explicitly claimed that Clinton gave the middle class either a large tax increase or the largest increase in history. In fact, the Clinton tax increase primarily affected the upper 1.2 percent of income earners and high-end Social Security recipients. The increase in the gas tax affected everyone with a car.
One way of surmising that adwatching has not been effective is the reappearance of a claim already shown by adwatchers to be false. The misleading uses of evidence in ads that persisted in the face of press correction included:

- Clinton’s claim that Dole was responsible for “900 billion in higher taxes,” which appeared in four ads. *Problem:* it failed to credit Dole for his votes to cut taxes.
- Dole’s claim that “taxes are the highest in American history” (one ad) and its variant that Clinton gave Americans the “largest tax increase in history” (three ads). *Problem:* Federal taxes were not up. Adjusted for inflation, Clinton’s tax increase was the second largest.
- Clinton’s claim (in two ads) that under Dole “Women’s right to choose [is] gone.” *Problem:* Dole said he would permit abortion in cases of incest or rape or when the mother’s life was in danger.
- Dole’s claim that Clinton cut the Drug Control Office (three ads) and that the president’s “own surgeon general even considered legalizing drugs” (two ads). *Problem:* The cuts had been restored, and Elders was speaking hypothetically.
- Clinton’s claim that Dole voted against creating a drug czar (two ads). *Problem:* He later voted for it.
- Clinton’s claim that there were 10 million new jobs (six ads). *Problem:* That figure counted only jobs gained, not jobs lost; it was not, in other words, a net figure.
- Clinton’s claim that Dole opposed vaccines for children (three ads). *Problem:* It was not clear that there was a need for the vaccine program in question.

Despite at least one critique of each of these claims by a reporter, columnist, editorial writer, or academic, these errors persisted in the ads. Most found a home in the candidates’ stump speeches as well. By contrast, in 1960, when the accuracy of a Kennedy ad was questioned, the ad was pulled from the air. When a 1968 Nixon ad drew protests, the campaign withdrew it. And when reporters pointed out a misstatement in a Reagan biographical ad, the ad was edited to correct the error.

Why the high level of deception in 1996 but not in 1992? One possibility is that with both broadcast and print coverage as well as public attention down, the consultants may have concluded that the public was not paying enough attention to catch the corrections. And since the best adwatches were done in print, not broadcast, most people in most markets missed them.
Watching the Adwatches

One might also hypothesize that the candidates corrected ads that were criticized by large national organizations such as the AARP and Common Cause because those groups have heuristic value for voters. In the absence of such group pressure, the candidates failed to correct when the misleading statement was consistent with party heuristics and hence likely to override a single critical analysis here or there. So, for example, since we assume that Republicans are more eager than Democrats to cut social programs, Clinton continued to imply that the Republicans would cut Medicare despite Dole’s assertions to the contrary. Since we assume that Democrats are more likely than Republicans to raise taxes, Dole’s ads continued to claim that Clinton’s tax increase was the largest in history and that it fell on the middle class. Since Republican Dole was presumed to oppose abortion rights, the notion that he would ban abortion outright functioned as a presumed logical extension of a heuristic inference. Since Republicans oppose federal government intervention, Dole would plausibly oppose appointing a drug czar.

Other problematic claims are natural extensions of the candidate’s biography. Would Clinton cut funding for drug programs and appoint a surgeon general who favored legalization of drugs? If he had smoked marijuana, initially deceived the press about it, and protested the war in Vietnam, with all the attendant associations of being an anti-establishment figure—perhaps. The cases of “Empty” and “Stripes” suggest as well that cultural consensus can affect candidate and consultant behavior. When reporters, columnists, scholars, and members of one’s own party disapprove of an ad against the opposing candidate, and when the candidate also hears those objections from supporters at campaign events, the signal is probably more powerful than the one delivered by adwatching alone.

A third explanation is more troubling. An October 1996 national survey conducted for the Annenberg Public Policy Center found that 78 percent of respondents felt that candidates tell the public what it wants to hear, not what is best for the country. Thirty-eight percent believed that the candidates deceive the public rather than telling voters what accomplishments the candidates will pursue if they are elected. The candidates’ disposition to put the best face on their records and the worst on their opponents’ fuels cynicism. So too does press coverage that focuses on strategy rather than substance. And an electorate that pays little attention to conventions, debates, and news is a ready object of manipulation. Perhaps the candidates have concluded that unless the outcry is overwhelming, consistent, and includes objection from one’s own party or major groups with high heuristic power, there is no penalty for living up to the low expectations they and we have created.
Research on Adwatches

One factor contributing to the relative infrequency of adwatches in the 1996 election may have been the publication of Steven Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar’s book *Going Negative* in late 1995, along with an article by the authors in the *Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics* (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1996). As part of a larger study on the effects of negative political advertising, Ansolabehere and Iyengar conducted an experiment on the effectiveness of adwatches. Their results suggested that adwatches can in some cases produce an increase in support for the candidate in question, which would appear to subvert the adwatch’s intent.

The findings received a good deal of press attention. Syndicated columnist David Broder, whose early endorsement of adwatches helped encourage their widespread adoption, recanted. In a column reporting the findings of *Going Negative*, Broder wrote, “one device that we hoped would help—ad watches . . . appear[s] only to reinforce the negative consequences. . . . The evidence is strong. The conclusions strike me as dead right” (1996, 34). In the *New York Times Magazine*, Max Frankel too reported that “Ansolabehere and Iyengar found no redeeming value in the media’s attempts to critique and correct those negative ads” (1996, 18). While Broder and Frankel may have overstated the lessons that can be drawn from Ansolabehere and Iyengar’s experiment, it seems reasonable to hypothesize that the concurrence of the dean of American political columnists and a respected former editor of the newspaper of record would have affected other editors’ and reporters’ willingness to conduct adwatches.

While Ansolabehere and Iyengar located a “backfiring” effect of adwatches, other researchers have come to different conclusions. Pfau and Louden (1994) found in one case, but not in another, that adwatches showing ads full screen, contrary to Jamieson’s (1992) original recommendation, were more likely to backfire. Unfortunately, many broadcast adwatches do in fact show the ads full screen (Tedesco, McKinnon, and Kaid 1996). O’Sullivan and Geiger (1995) found that adwatches had their intended effect, boosting a candidate’s support when the adwatch positively assessed the ad’s claims and dampening support when the adwatch was critical. Using boxed adwatches with negative ads, Cappella and Jamieson (1994) found no backfiring; the adwatch did not affect viewers’ assessments of the ad’s target, although the adwatch did influence whether subjects found the ad to be fair.
The Future of Adwatches

Reporters are caught in a difficult bind. On one hand, focusing primarily on ads that contain inaccuracies and deceptions helps keep campaigns honest; on the other, such a focus may contribute to voter cynicism by encouraging the conclusion that all political ads (and by extension all politicians) lie. An alternative would be to include ads that contain no deception. Praising spots that are accurate and fair might give candidates free advertising time, but doing so would also provide even greater incentive for candidates to hew to the straight and narrow. Even in 1996, when the quantity of deception was relatively high, the majority of claims made in candidate advertising were in fact truthful.

Perhaps journalists should consider themselves neither as ad reviewers (commenting on strategy and effectiveness) nor as ad police. After all, the police go after criminals but do not spend time rewarding acts of virtue. If journalists considered adwatches a system of both punishment and reward, with both harmful and useful discourse highlighted, the multiple goals of influencing candidate behavior, increasing the accuracy of voter information, and dampening cynicism could all be served.

Particularly at a time when candidates are buying larger and larger amounts of airtime, voters will inevitably see more ads than adwatches. It is therefore impossible for news organizations’ critiques to forestall the airing or blunt the impact of every deceptive ad. A more achievable goal is to help citizens become more critical viewers of political advertising. Adwatches advance a number of premises, among them that candidate claims are sometimes truthful and sometimes not and that ads should not be taken at face value unless outside confirmation is offered. To keep campaigns honest, adwatches must sanction misbehavior. If they concentrate solely on strategy, adwatches simply reward deception.

NOTES

1. The quotes in this paragraph are from a December 12, 1992, postelection debriefing held at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania.

2. A March 1994 Wall Street Journal/NBC News poll found that 45 percent of respondents said they opposed the Clinton plan, but when the plan was described without identifying its sponsor, 76 percent said it had “great appeal” (“Many Don’t Realize It’s Clinton Plan They Like,” Wall Street Journal, March 10, 1994, B1).

REFERENCES


