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THE PARADOX OF POLITICAL ADS: Reform Depends on Voter Savvy

By Kathleen Jamieson

In 1988 I studied the information absorbed by 100 people during a season of presidential campaign news and advertising.

I conducted focus groups, talked to individuals about their recollections of the campaign and observed their reactions throughout. About halfway through the process I realized that what these typical voters were learning from the news and political advertising they saw was everything they needed to know not to be voters, but to be campaign consultants.

TV viewers understood, for example, that George Bush’s ad about prison furloughs was designed to make Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis look “soft on crime.”

But they didn’t know what either candidate planned to do about crime, homelessness, economic policy, the environment or other major issues of the day. A major crisis such as the savings and loan bailout—one of the most expensive giveaways in U.S. history—was ongoing at the time but never seriously debated.

Instead of a discussion of issues, voters were treated to analyses of polls and polling, gaffes and media gurus, media buying requirements and inside information on campaign staffing shake-ups. Still worse, broadcast news and much print journalism focused on the strategic intent of misleading ads but not their accuracy, fairness or relevance to governance.

The most analyzed and talked about image of the campaign completely sidestepped the question of what either major candidate would do if elected president. Known as the “furlough ad,” it depended on innuendo and visual images to link Michael Dukakis with the supposed dangers of a prison furlough program and therefore with a dangerous brand of liberalism.

When the announcer’s voice intoned “many first-degree murderers escaped” as the words “268 escaped” appeared on the screen, the human need for closure caused viewers to associate the number 268 with the word “many,” encouraging them to assume that many prisoners committed crimes while on furlough. Furloughed prisoner William Horton’s name was never mentioned. It didn’t have to be. Reporters mentioned it often as did Bush in network soundbites. With those soundbites came Horton’s menacing mug shot.

Campaign managers could also depend on political reporters to find and publicize the story of the one prisoner who assaulted and raped while on furlough. And they could expect audiences to draw desired false inferences from an ad that was not technically incorrect: First-degree murderers did, in fact, escape. Four did. And of those four, only one—Horton—committed a violent crime. In a 10-year period, 268 prisoners escaped, which meant that Massachusetts had the best record of the industrial states. Other facts about the program—its purpose, its duration, the number of prisoners released, the screening process—were also obscured.

Most obscure of all was the basic unfairness of judging Michael Dukakis’ fitness to be president on the basis of the “facts” presented in this ad. The president, after all, cannot change the furlough programs in the states. And it is the states and localities, not the federal government, that are responsible for crime prevention anyway.

This brand of unfair editing can be traced straight back to the ’30s, but it gained prominence in a campaign ad from the Kennedy-Nixon race of 1960. In a Kennedy effort, pictures of Nixon nodding his head from the campaign’s televised debates were used to make it appear that Nixon agreed with the Kennedy program.

But inevitably, suspect claimmaking didn’t work. In 1964, the Goldwater campaign created its own backlash with a 30-minute campaign film that contrasted such images as clean cut, smiling children saying the pledge of allegiance (representing the Republicans) with scenes of supposed Democratic immorality and decadence. Because the juxtaposition was too obvious, the film became a cause celebre, and the Johnson campaign ended up using it as one of its own campaign documents.

Nevertheless, the lesson was learned. Rapid intercutting of visuals can short-circuit the normal logic of viewers’ thought processes. Viewers are also slow to recognize that most ads feature actors and are highly sophisticated marketing tools using professional directors and the latest high-tech editing techniques. As viewers, we react mainly to their emotional content.

Although viewers are often knowledgeable about why campaign advertising and marketing stress particular themes, this form of media sophistication is very different from the kind of media awareness or media literacy that defuses the impact of emotionally manipulative ads. Partly this gap arises because most criticism of advertising is verbal, while the ads themselves are visual.
When the visuals disagree with the narration, people tend to base their assumptions on the visuals. But in correcting ads, reporters focus their attention on what is said, not what is shown.

Some other 1988 campaign ads demonstrate this seeming paradox:
- An anti-Bush Dukakis commercial associated the Republican candidate with cuts in the social security system. As a senator, George Bush did actually vote for a freeze in social security cost of living adjustments (not actual cuts). A visual showing a social security card being torn up associated him with massive cuts.
- Scenes of a polluted harbor linked Dukakis with Boston harbor problems. Such visuals are absorbed by viewers who can’t tell where the pollution shown originated. In fact, the Boston Harbor ad was effective in creating doubts about the mildly pro-environment Dukakis would stack up against the arguably less environmentally aware record of his opponent.

Which brings us to the question: How effective is political advertising?

Studying political ads show that they can make a difference in close elections. But their influence is complex and can operate in peculiar ways. One often-ignored factor is political advertising’s importance as a source of political information. For people who don’t seek out other forms of political information—the very voters whose response to ads is greatest—the effect of political advertising is magnified. It may be even more important in state and local races where other forms of political information are less available.

Almost no piece of communication has what is called a “direct effect,” a measurable change in behavior based on one exposure. But the effectiveness of political advertising is based not on one viewing but on many. Much research has shown that repetition can predispose a viewer or listener toward an ad’s assumptions.

In 1988, one out of four voters told pollsters that their voting decisions had been influenced by advertising. When you combine these reactions with many voters’ lack of exposure to other political information and the manipulative nature of many ads, the consequences are disturbing.

If we take it as a given—as I do—that an electorate possessing accurate information about the things its members value is necessary for democratic functioning, we have to be concerned when political advertising is misleading and when it drives out other forms of communication.

What’s the remedy? A number of other democracies restrict the campaign process in various ways to minimize the impact of manipulative ads or promote substantive debate on the issues. But such regulations would represent a revolution in our free speech traditions and the system of commercial access for political ads.

Advertising-savvy journalists can help by following a “news grammar” that avoids media manipulation by campaign managers. Correcting the claims of unfair ads, and hard questions about advertising’s relevance to how candidates propose to govern, can help. But some ads are so insidious that their impact defies journalistic caution.

Ultimately the true remedy must come from the voters themselves. TV viewers need to take a hard look at political advertising, the ordinary as well as the blatant. If campaign managers recognize that substance is what sells, they will be forced to provide it. Voters must demand that candidates answer real questions about themselves and their lives. Only then will they cease to be political campaign managers and become instead informed determiners of their country’s future.

Kathleen Jamieson is dean of the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Pennsylvania/Philadelphia. She is a widely recognized authority on political advertising and the author of several books on political ads and their effects. Her most recent book on the subject, Dirty Politics, will be published by Oxford University Press in Fall 1992.

Re:Action

**First Alert System: How to Short-Circuit Misleading Advertising**

1. **Be informed.** Because it enhances the ability to evaluate campaign advertising knowing what goes on in the body politic is the best protection against misleading communication of all kinds.

2. **Watch for counter advertising.** A responsibility of the candidates and their supporters, well-planned and produced responses to unfair attacks have a good chance of reaching the same low-involvement, inadvertently exposed audience that has been influenced by other ads. But — they require money and expertise that may not be equally available to both sides.

3. **Watch debates.** Although often criticized for shallow questions and self-serving answers, debates do provide a televised opportunity for viewers to hear candidates’ arguments’ face-to-face. When candidates are willing to take the risk, they also provide a forum for making opponents responsible for unfair political advertising.

4. **Watch the news.** Political analysts do serve a watchdog role over unfair political advertising. Some drawbacks: Their criticisms usually only air once while ads appear repeatedly; most vulnerable viewers may not follow news programs; critics may give additional exposure to unfair criticisms; and commentary may not be as visually evocative and effective as the ads themselves.