MIT Student

10/23/08

Becoming Digital

Pointing Fingers

The Rise of Television Advertisements and Negative Political Campaigns

The first television advertisement was aired on July 1st, 1941. It was paid for by the Bulova Watch Company and cost nine dollars for a twenty second spot (About Us). Since then, advertisements have become ever present in television, and television advertising has been critical to the success of many products. It was only a matter of time before presidential candidates used this new medium to promote themselves, and once Eisenhower and Stevenson started the trend in 1952, political candidates in the United States never stopped (1952 Eisenhower Vs. Stevenson). However, television advertisements have some restrictions that dictate their tone. They are short, so unlike in print advertisements or debates, there is much less time to explain an argument, so rhetorical devices and logical fallacies are much more commonplace. Also unlike a debate the other candidate does not have a chance to respond.

In the Illinois Senate race of 1858, Abraham Lincoln and Stephen Douglas faced off in a series of debates. Although not actually a presidential campaign, these two men both ran for president in 1860 and the debates attracted national attention. In a series of seven debates around Illinois, each man spoke for ninety minutes about their political views. Full transcripts of the debates were printed in national papers such as the Chicago Tribune and the New York Times. As such, Americans knew exactly where each candidate stood on the important issues of the day. This was typical of 19th Century

elections, where candidates would give speeches (although not necessarily debate) and the transcripts or some quotes would be published (Holzer). These speeches and print ads were the predominant form of political campaigning until 1948, when the two major candidates, Harry S. Truman and Thomas E. Dewey, both produced short film clips weeks before Election Day to be played in theatres. Polling that ended well before Election Day predicted Dewey to win in a landslide, yet Truman was the eventual victor. Some historians have speculated that the films had a huge influence on the results and that Truman's film was the reason he won the election (United States). Although there wasn't a study conducted to see if this is what truly changed voter's minds, it is plausible that the sheer power of the visual media was the biggest force in the campaign. There were no television spot advertisements in the campaign, as Dewey rejected their use as "undignified" (1952 Eisenhower Vs. Stevenson). Even so, visual media was starting to affect political campaigns.

Televised campaign advertisements were first used in the 1952 election between Dwight D. Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson. Eisenhower quickly produced many advertisements, appearing personally in some of them. The first of his advertisements were cartoons, about a minute long, of people marching and singing "You like Ike, I like Ike, Everybody likes Ike!" His strategy then shifted to twenty second spots, starting with questions asked by a different person each time, and then Eisenhower giving a short response. Although more substantive than his previous commercials, they were not very informative. In one ad, a woman points out that although not flawless the Democrats have good intentions, and Eisenhower responds by comparing the Democrats to a bus driver who accidentally crashes and would get fired regardless of his intentions (1952

Eisenhower Vs. Stevenson). This argument is a trivialization of the situation, and there are many analogies where having good intentions would be seen as a positive. In many situations the saying “it’s the thought that counts” expresses the exact opposite sentiment. However, in a fifteen second response to a question that didn’t have any specifics anyway, it would be hard for Eisenhower give a more logically rigorous argument. The time constraints of the thirty-second commercial justify his logical fallacy.

On the other hand, Stevenson preferred to air half-hour speeches instead of television spots. Speaking about Eisenhower’s advertisements, Stevenson stated “I think the American people will be shocked by such contempt for their intelligence. This isn’t Ivory Soap versus Palmolive.” Eventually he put some short spots on the air, usually endorsements from other political figures, but he refused to appear in them personally, being the last major presidential candidate to do so in the United States. Although recognizing that it was necessary to fight fire with fire and running a successful campaign against Eisenhower without the aid of television would be impossible, the Stevenson campaign was not comfortable with the new medium for political discourse. Stevenson’s aide George Ball sarcastically but accurately predicted that television advertisement campaigns would lead to professional actors becoming president (1952 Eisenhower Vs. Stevenson).

The availability of television spot advertising affected the campaigns. Eisenhower found it much more cost effective to run twenty second spot advertisements than air full speeches as Stevenson had. He won in a landslide. Television quickly turned from a medium by which to air long speeches into one in which short advertisements could be plugged in between episodes of soap operas. In the first election in which it was a

presence, television advertisements stifled legitimate discussion and promoted short rhetorical spots (1952 Eisenhower Vs. Stevenson).

The 1960 election between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon featured the two candidates in televised debates not unlike those of Lincoln and Douglas. In this sense television promoted intelligent conversation between the candidates. However, the television advertisements of both candidates were fairly vacuous. Kennedy aired a short musical cartoon spot similar to Eisenhower's first one, as well as a number of endorsements. However, some of his advertisements were of a new variety. Kennedy aired an ad spot in which a reporter asked Eisenhower about an idea of Nixon's, his current vice president, that he had found useful. Eisenhower stated that he couldn't think of any off the top of his head and that he would have to get back to the reporter. The Kennedy campaign took this comment and played it with a voiceover telling how Nixon doesn't have any real policy experience. This type of advertisement is unique to television spots. Kennedy could take a remark out of context and play it to promote his own agenda, without giving Nixon or Eisenhower a chance to respond. In fact, in one of Nixon's advertisement spots, Eisenhower gave a short speech detailing how Nixon was directly involved in his decision-making processes and was uniquely qualified for the job of President, making it seem as though the Kennedy advertisement was just in a momentary lapse of memory. Nixon's advertisement campaign was predominately short clips of him in his office answering question, much like Eisenhower's campaign. However, while Eisenhower used analogies and didn't have much substance to his responses, he answered each question quite differently. In contrast, Nixon made every single answer into a Cold War answer, and the voiceover at the end of every commercial

stated “Vote for Nixon and Lodge November 8th. They understand what peace demands.” When speaking about civil rights, he stated “We cannot compete with communism if we fail to utilize completely the minds and energies of all of our citizens.” Nixon’s campaign started using techniques reminiscent of current elections, with buzzwords for certain issues polarizing debates and stifling conversation (1960 Kennedy Vs. Nixon). Instead of addressing specific issues, by repeating certain phrases a television advertisement will get one of two responses. Sympathetic viewers will hear a phrase, have it conjure up some image of what the candidate represents to them, and nod approvingly. On the other hand, those opposed to the candidate will repeatedly hear the same thing and disapprove every time. Neither of these two responses leads to conversation.

Lyndon B. Johnson, the incumbent after Kennedy was assassinated, ran a harsh campaign incredibly critical of his opponent Barry Goldwater in 1964. He ran many spot advertisements, the most famous of which ran only once. It was a minute long and featured about twenty seconds of a small girl counting and pulling out daisy petals, followed by a countdown and then a nuclear bomb detonation. The spot ended simply with “Vote for President Johnson on November 3rd. The stakes are too high for you to stay home,” which is how he ended almost all of his ads. The Republican National Committee chairman at the time, Dean Burch, stated “this horror-type commercial is designed to arouse basic emotions and has no place in the campaign,” after which Johnson discontinued the ad, but it was still featured on news reports. He attacked Goldwater directly when he quoted him as saying nuclear arms were “just another weapon,” and ran ads that quoted a member of the Ku Klux Klan as a supporter of Goldwater. These advertisements put Goldwater mostly on the defensive, responding to

Johnson's claims as well as airing endorsements. Although Johnson may have been right about the character of Goldwater to some extent, the political tactics that he used were extremely forceful. He did appeal to emotion, and in the daisy girl ad he gave no arguments and didn't even mention Goldwater's name, but just implied that he was reckless without giving justification. Even worse, Johnson's advertisement of a single Klan member's endorsement of Goldwater was extremely out of line. Out of all of the serial killers in the country it is certain that at least one of them supported Johnson for president, but clearly that would have been a poor argument not to vote for him. In fact, his advertisements featured very little about him, focusing more on painting Goldwater as dangerous (1964 Johnson Vs. Goldwater).

Many of the tactics used in modern elections, such as the use of repetitive phrases and appeals to emotion, were set as precedent in these first few elections that have been discussed. Johnson's advertisement linking Goldwater to the KKK is reminiscent of current attempts to pin Obama to William Ayers and Jeremiah Wright, and hearing "The stakes are too high for you to stay home" ad nauseum seems very similar to "Change you can believe in." Just as Nixon discussed Cold War politics in every ad in 1960, John McCain has his two talking points of taxes and the war. This has lead to increasingly polarized elections, where today ninety percent of voters registered as a party, either Republican or Democrat, will vote strictly on party lines, and the number of truly undecided voters is diminishing (Bill). In the 2004 election, George Bush realized that the political atmosphere was so polarized that he would do much better by increasing voter turnout among his own party than by trying to appear moderate and getting undecided voters. In 2004, 90 percent of Republicans approved of Bush, while 81 percent

of Democrats disapproved (Abramowitz). This is the political atmosphere fostered by television ads that stifle conversation and promote campaigns based around buzz words and relying on attacks that on issues that are not completely relevant. During the era of television we have gone from being a nation very interested in reading the words of Lincoln and Douglas to one that only listens to the ideas of one party or the other. Although there are other factors that have contributed to this, the language and duration of television advertisements let us quickly dismiss the catchphrases of our opponents and cheer at the rhetoric of those we support, all in a thirty second span while we wait for the show we really want to watch to come back on the air.

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21W.784 Becoming Digital: Writing about Media Change
Fall 2009