



1999

Introduction to "Campaigns For Sale: A Newsroom Guide To Political Advertising"

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Recommended Citation (OVERRIDE)

Jamieson, K. H. (1999). "Introduction" in *Campaigns For Sale: A Newsroom Guide To Political Advertising* (pp. 3-5). Radio Television National Directors Foundation.

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Disciplines

Communication | Social and Behavioral Sciences | Social Influence and Political Communication

Introduction

By Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Ph.D.

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Political advertising is a primary means through which candidates, parties, and issue advocacy groups communicate to the citizenry. In a typical presidential campaign, more than two-thirds of the campaign budget will support the creation, testing, production, and airing of broadcast ads.

Advertising is particularly effective when it is unanswered by those of opposing views. So, for example, when the tobacco companies outspent such opponents as the American Cancer Society and the Campaign for Tobacco Free Kids by roughly 40 to one in opposing the McCain tobacco settlement in spring and summer 1998, an Annenberg Public Policy Center survey showed that the likelihood that the claims of their ads would be believed was directly related to the amount of exposure purchased in service of their message. One of the reasons that advertising does not appear to move votes dramatically in many election campaigns is that both sides are making cases and, in the process, canceling out each other's effect.

Stations become involved in this political process and thereby assume responsibility when they air political ads. The 1998 and 1996 election cycles saw a dramatic increase in the number of candidate-sponsored and party-sponsored ads. Both elections were also marked by millions of new dollars of "soft money" raised and spent by third parties, such as political action committees, individuals, and various interest groups. The size and scope of this new advertising raises two key issues for stations.

The first issue for stations is whether to air these ads. Nothing in the law requires that stations accept ads from political action committees, independent expenditure ads, or issue advocacy ads. Where stations are protected from libel suits over ads for candidates for federal office—a protection extended in part because stations cannot, with few exceptions, interfere with the content of the candidate's ads—there is no such protection for stations choosing to air issue advocacy, independent expenditure ads or ads by political action committees. There is, in other words, a small but discernible legal risk in accepting such ads when their claims are suspect, particularly when they misrepresent the views of an individual who can claim legal standing.

The second issue for stations is how to cover these ads. If one side is substantially outspending the other on broadcast ads, as the tobacco industry did in the campaign against the McCain bill, do the newscasts of the stations drawing revenue from the ads have an obligation to ensure that viewers are not misled? In other words, is this a circumstance which invites adwatching in local news? Similarly, one might ask whether news reporters should help viewers make sense of the barrage of candidate ads in the fall of election years.

Adwatch

Adwatching emerged in local broadcast news in 1990. The ABC affiliate in Dallas and the CBS affiliate in Boston, among others, pioneered the form. Research conducted at the Annenberg School showed both the power of adwatch coverage and the importance of using care in airing any political ads in news. The reason is straightforward. When aired full screen, ad content is readily confused with news—a result we first saw in 1988 when viewers remembered the ads, rather than the corrections offered by Richard Threlkeld, in an ABC adwatch of a Social Security ad by Dukakis and a tank ad by Bush.

Bush's ad featured images and on-screen captions claiming Michael Dukakis opposed a number of defense systems. As I argued in *Dirty Politics*, in analyzing these advertisements, Threlkeld froze the pictures and words on the screen as he countered its claims orally. In doing so, he inadvertently reinforced Bush's allegations. Focus group members who saw Threlkeld's piece were better able than those who had not to recall the ad's claims. They could remember that a reporter said some of the ad was false but could not recall what or why."

The visually evocative nature of Bush's ad meant that the ad itself could thwart attempts to use words to counter distortions. This is true first because, on single exposure in most instances, viewers usually recall pictures better than words. Additionally, when the reporters' words and the accompanying pictures clash, learning declines. Because pictures are processed faster and at a deeper semantic level than words, they are able to "drown out" the verbal statements of reporters who are showing the controversial ad as they debunk its claims.

To minimize the impact of the ad and increase the effect of the reporter's corrections, Annenberg conducted a series of experiments, which led to the development of a "visual grammar" of adwatching. In this structure, the analyzed ad is reduced in size so that it is not airing full-screen. It is then boxed in a simulated television set and the resulting image is canted. The logo for the station is superimposed, as is identification of the ad sponsor. The ad is interrupted for corrections, with the corrections superimposed over the ad.

The major broadcast networks and CNN have adopted some variation of this structure. In its spring meeting in 1992, the NAB distributed Annenberg's pamphlet describing the structure and the videotape showing variations of it. Copies of these materials can be obtained at no charge by calling the Annenberg School at 215-898-7041 or writing Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Ph.D., Annenberg School for Communication, University of Pennsylvania, 3620 Walnut, Philadelphia PA, 19104.

The viewers most likely to be influenced by ads are those least likely to watch and read news. These low involvement viewers will nonetheless benefit from adwatching in two ways. First, opposing candidates are likely to feature the corrections of adwatches in their own advertising. Secondly, and, more importantly, consultants who know that adwatching is being vigorously practiced in a race are less likely to air distortions and more likely to document the claims of their ads.

Defining Ads

In their treatment of advertising, reporters face other problems—among them a vocabulary that seriously confuses the electorate. Like pundits and many scholars, reporters tend to tag any attack in an ad “negative,” a word that suggests that the content is inaccurate or in some way illegitimate. However, our content analysis shows that ads that attack and those that contrast—make a case for the sponsor and against the opponent—contain higher levels of policy claims and are, on average, more accurate than ads that simply make the case for the sponsor. By tagging attack as “negative,” we penalize what can be useful information which helps voters distinguish the records and proposals of the candidates. Reporters are also less likely to police so-called positive ads, even though our research shows that such ads contain more distortion, on average, than ads that attack or ads that contrast.

To avoid this indiscriminate use of the word “negative,” we recommend separating ads into three categories: attack, advocacy, and contrast. An attack ad makes a case against the opponent but not for the sponsor; an advocacy ad makes a case for the sponsor without making a case against the opponent; a contrast ad makes a case for the sponsor and a case against the opponent. We consider contrast superior to attack because the presence of the sponsor’s case increases candidate accountability and the case for the sponsor gives voters something to vote for, rather than simply reasons for voting against.

The casual use of the word negative also creates a misleading impression of the character of most campaigns. Contrary to conventional wisdom, 1998 was not a highly “negative” year for candidate ads. Instead, candidates were almost twice as likely to produce ads that advocated (43.8%) as ads that attacked (23.9%). The proportion that contrasted—combined advocate and attack—fell between the two extremes (32.3%).

The perception that 1998 was a negative year was driven by the habitual focus of press and pundits on attack over advocacy, by intense press interest in the New York Senatorial race, and by a high level of attack in party-sponsored ads. More than half of the party-sponsored ads attacked, freeing candidate-sponsored advertising to engage in higher levels of contrast and advocacy.

What’s Ahead

Campaign fundraising and advertising is a complex and integral aspect of the election process. Journalists knowledgeable about campaign finance and advertising can serve their audience and positively affect political advertising. By understanding the laws governing the content and funding of political advertisements, discerning the differences between the three types of political ads, and learning how to effectively analyze ads, reporters can help their viewers and listeners dissect and digest the information they receive from candidates, parties, and issue advocacy groups. As a result, the public can make informed and educated decisions on Election Day. Adwatching also may help encourage accuracy and honesty in political advertising.

CAMPAIGNS FOR SALE

A Newsroom Guide
to Political Advertising

A publication of the
POLITICAL COVERAGE PROJECT
Funded by the Carnegie Foundation and the Ford Foundation

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The Radio and Television News Directors Foundation

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