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MEDIA COVERAGE OF THE 1988 PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN

October 20, 1988

Seminar Notes

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Prof. Michael Schudson
Department of Communication, University of California, San Diego
(while on leave at JFK School, Harvard University)

Ed Siegel
Television Critic
The Boston Globe

Prof. Peter Lemieux
Department of Political Science
MIT

Gail Kosloff
Rapporteur
MIT

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This session of the Communications Forum provided the audience with three perspectives of the role of the media (TV and print) in the 1988 U.S. presidential campaign as the race was drawing to a close. The presentations also addressed the broader questions of the role of the media in political reporting and the role of the debates in the decision-making process of the electorates.

The first speaker, Michael Schudson, Chairman of the Department of Communications at the University of California, San Diego, started his presentation by stepping back from the day-to-day accounts of the election. Instead, he focused on the broader issue of contemporary American political reporting. Schudson argues that there is a "paradox of political news": "the more objectively the media cover the news, the less able the public is to digest it, and thus the news does not engage us in political activity." Therefore Schudson concludes that "the more objective the news, the worse it is for democracy, in a sense." However, he would not conclude that making the news more "bias" would help the situation.

Schudson explains how the front page of a newspaper or headline stories on the TV news may sway us to learn about the candidates and the issues. According to Schudson, the ideal reader--potential voter--like the ideal grocery shopper has the time to read all available information and weigh the alternatives. If this were completely possible then a citizen would be able to make a reasonable and rational choice for one candidate over another. Schudson believes that often a citizen arrives at a choice with little incentive to turn this preference into a vote.

Schudson went on to discuss how news organizations make decisions that affect us in at least a small way whether we take politics seriously or not. In this vein he used example of two events that the media might cover to illustrate the concept of "mobilizing information in the media." He noted that it would be fairly easy to find logistical information about the Columbus Day parade in Boston by consulting the pages of the Boston Globe, while information to help someone interested in attending an anti-abortion rally in the city would not likely appear in this newspaper. Schudson explained that in the first instance the newspaper would publish the information because it could expect a near perfect consensus that the event is popularly approved. On the otherhand, Schudson remarked that, by its nature, a political

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COMMUNICATIONS FORUM

rally is an outcome of conflict and the media turned away from mobilizing such information since it was not regarded as the responsibility of the newspaper to provide such information (possibly other smaller, more political newspapers would see it as their role to do so). According to Schudson this is really the model by which the media "oddly enough" report elections by keeping the viewers at a "relatively safe consumer distance."

Schudson went on to explain the pieces of this model. He raises questions about who makes up the media and what their political preferences are. Schudson believes that journalists are not very different from the general public. He explained that journalists at elite institutions are usually to the left of the general public in that they identify as "liberal" more often than the members of the general public, the largest group of American journalists call themselves "middle of the road" or "moderate." Schudson believes that one of the most interesting points to be made in this regard is that scholars in talking to journalists have found them to be "apolitical." Schudson's own research has found that "a political junky is not necessarily a political partisan" and "the boys on the bus like the ride, not necessarily the driver." He noted a 1972 campaign study by Timothy Kraus which revealed that reporters on the different campaign trails were motivated most by their desire to be with the winner.

Schudson went on to discuss the 1988 campaign coverage in terms of how the media keep readers and viewers at a "safe" distance. He accuses the press of "objectivity, irony, and Barnumitus." According to Schudson the press often makes an effort to be objective "eventhough there is no rationale for it." He also believes that given the constraints of "objectivity" within which journalists have had to operate, they have "no room to seriously articulate criticism of a particular candidate." On the third point, Schudson defines Barnumitus as a condition from which the press suffers as it tries to "deceive" the public with its focus on the "strategy and tactics" of the campaign as a substitute for talking about the real issues.

Although, Schudson raised the question of whether these are sins or things for which the press should win Pulitzer prizes, he is foremost concerned with the consequences of these practices. Schudson does not advocate a return to the partisan press of the 19th century, although he finds some aspects of this appealing. He noted that in the days of the Cleveland-Harrison race Americans were drawn to the polls by "party loyalty" and a larger

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COMMUNICATIONS FORUM

percentage of the citizenry was actually involved in campaigning (20% of the potential voters according to an MIT historian). However, Schudson does not believe there is much the press can do alone today to involve people more actively in politics. He disagrees with George Bush's accusations that it is the fault of the media that the issues have not been covered in the (1988) campaign. Schudson argues on the definition of an "issue" which he believes "is not a position paper, but a controversy where both sides take a stand, ... and hopefully the two candidates have passionate and contrary positions."

In light of the events of the 1988 campaign thus far, Schudson characterized the Bush campaign as "hiding behind a flag" and accused the Dukakis campaign of "hiding behind managerialism." Given this situation, Schudson believes there are a few things the media can do, including: (1.) bringing attention to what should be issues even if the candidates are avoiding them (he applauded recent Time and Newsweek articles on the deficit which have done this); (2.) highlighting important facts of one or both of the campaigns so that one or both of the candidates is obscured (take serious statements by the candidate as an invitation to explore the surrounding facts), e.g., N.Y. Times article on Bush's 20 year relationship with Noriega; (3.) measuring candidates statements against facts and unveil distortions and lies, e.g., the Boston Globe article which compared Bush's statements to his record on the environment.

In conclusion, Schudson hopes for a balance in the media somewhere between objective and partisan coverage would allow the media more independence in its coverage of political news.

The second speaker, Ed Siegel, TV critic for the Boston Globe noted that he agreed with what Michael Schudson said in his presentation. Siegel concentrated much of his talk on the day-to-day coverage of the (1988) campaign in terms of how TV news (especially Network news) has covered the campaign and how TV, as a medium, has changed the political process and how we think about politics. He started by telling the audience about a telephone call he had received from a local news reporter, Andy Hiller (Ch. 4) who felt "had" after hearing a CBS News executive comment that "we think we're doing a lousy job of covering the (1988) campaign, but we don't know what we can do about it."

Siegel noted that he does not consider himself a "media basher," although he thinks some of the best campaign coverage has been on

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COMMUNICATIONS FORUM

"Saturday Night Live." He believes that TV news is getting better and not worse. Siegel does not think there has never been a "golden" age of broadcast journalism; he feels this might be called the "bronze" age. Siegel said that some of his columns have been sharply critical of TV coverage.

Siegel went on to characterize what he views as the four distinct stages of the (1988) campaign: (1.) The "tabloid" phase in which the coverage of Hart, Biden and others was, according to Siegel, "more illustrative of competition in the media than illustrative of character." (2.) A "reevaluation" of how the networks were covering the campaign especially on NBC and ABC the week leading up to Super Tuesday. Siegel noted this was a time of solid reporting in which journalists did not seem to worry about balancing stories objectively; he said this might have been a consequence of not having enough reporters to fully staff each one of the candidates. (3.) After the Republican Convention the campaign coverage returned to "sound bites." As George Bush's campaign really took-off the media went following Bush around the country (Disneyland, Boston Harbor, missile sites), while Dukakis gave daily press conferences. (4.) During the next phase of the campaign, according to Siegel, TV was doing a lot of "soul searching." He observed that TV news started to make a slight negative shift in the coverage of the Bush campaign (especially after his appearance at the flag factory which prompted all three networks to give him negative coverage) and gave Dukakis more air time with stories on his proposals for college tuition and housing plans. Siegel related stories of TV newsmen Lesley Stahl and Lisa Myers to illustrate how TV images (e.g., pictures of the flag factory) can be much more powerful than the verbal commentary (against remarks like "Patriotism is the last refuge of scoundrel") during a news segment. Siegel also observed that in the fourth stage of the campaign TV became less driven by sound bites and started doing their own stories (again he applauded the work of journalists like Richard Threlkeld). However, Siegel believes that the damage had already been done to the Dukakis campaign given its "inability to play the television game."

In talking about TV in general, Siegel commented that "the days of network dominance are over." In contrast to the 1960s, he feels we have many more choices beyond the networks to obtain information such as independent stations, cable and home video. He believes that "it is a myth to say that more choices make a greater democracy" since, in the words of Murray Levin,

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COMMUNICATIONS FORUM

"democracy depends upon an informed electorate." Siegel questions whether the electorate is really better informed today even with people getting more information. Siegel believes that given our times it was strategically necessary for NBC to cancel its Olympic coverage during the first debate and for NBC to move the Red Sox play-off game to the afternoon to air the Quayle-Bentson debate. He believes that "given the choice between a political event and an entertainment event politics is going to lose every time." Siegel also feels that Bush's campaign successfully gratified the American public's limited attention span. Siegel noted that it is little wonder that Clint Eastwood and Joe Isuzu have been the most quoted people by the candidates.

Siegel concluded his presentation by stating although he is "optimistic that broadcast journalism will get better," he is "pessimistic that it will make any overall difference."

The last speaker of the session, Peter Lemieux, of MIT's Political Science Department, focused his presentation on the debates of the campaigns (both presidential and vice-presidential). He noted that many journalists, including himself, felt that the debates would play a substantial role in the 1988 campaigns since the voters had "pretty undefined opinions about Bush and Dukakis and a low level of information about who these people were in terms of issues and people." Lemieux believes that if one looks at the reports of large debate viewing audiences (60-65% of all households, according to A.C. Nielsen, reportedly watched the presidential debates, while 55% of households watched the vice-presidential debates), the debates seem to have played a significant role in this campaign. According to Lemieux, despite these reports, the public opinion ("horse race") polls noted little change between people's candidate support pre- and post-debate.

Lemieux believes that one explanation for "the failing of the debates to play a major role might be that most voters felt neither candidate substantially outperformed the other." Lemieux noted that most polls after the first debate indicated that viewers felt Dukakis performed better than Bush, while this opinion was reversed in the second debate. Thus, according to Lemieux, there was no strong evidence to support the notion that the debates had little impact because they were seen as a "wash."

Lemieux went on to discuss earlier presidential campaigns. He noted that political scientists and communications researchers

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COMMUNICATIONS FORUM

have found a similar lack of impact for these events. Lemieux raised the Kennedy-Nixon and Carter-Ford contests as possible exceptions. It appears that a combination of cognitive and psychological processes limit the impact of the debates on the electorate. Lemieux notes that the audience may be composed of viewers who already have substantial involvement in the campaign and have usually decided beforehand whom they support. Also, there is a psychological "filtering" process in which people tend to view the debates through the "prism of their own attitudes and they filter out things contrary to what they believe."

Lemieux believes that both of these processes are going on in the 1988 debates. He went on to explain the results of a poll he conducted with Gary Oren at the Kennedy School at Harvard on behalf of the Boston Globe. Although he acknowledges that the results cannot be extrapolated to the entire national electorate, he believes they are indicative of similar processes among debate viewers nationwide.

The study carried-out for the Boston Globe revealed that viewing of the presidential debate was greatest among voters who had a strong preference for one candidate over the other (refer to Figure I). (The figures in the circles represent the percentage of all voters falling into each category of favorability). Lemieux noted that the lowest viewing level was exhibited by voters who say they feel unfavorable toward both candidates; only half these people claim to watch the debate. This group accounted for 6% of the entire electorate. Lemieux notes this is "much less than might be expected given reports of widespread dissatisfaction with both candidates." It is important to note that the fact this poll was conducted with Massachusetts voters might be a factor in these results. All in all, Lemieux believes the results point to the fact the debates really are partisan and not educational events.

The Boston Globe poll also looked at the rate of viewing among voters who express different levels of certainty about their voting preference. Although debates are commonly seen as an "important tool for undecided voters to learn about candidates," the polls showed that voters who were most uncertain about their voting preference were least likely to watch the debates (refer to Figure II). Based on these results, Lemieux concluded that this showed that the debate would have little impact on swaying undecided voters.

MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

COMMUNICATIONS FORUM

Lemieux noted that the poll revealed that not one of the potential voters had switched their support after watching the debate. In general the debate had little impact on people's candidate preferences. Half of the voters said the debate did not change their level of certainty, while approximately a fifth of the voters for each candidate said it made them more certain. A very small percentage of people became less certain about their candidate preference. (Refer to Figure III).

The poll also asked voters to assess the candidates performance in the first presidential debate in terms of seven criteria: caring, strong, truthful, negative, optimistic, patriotic and knowledgeable. Dukakis led in terms of people's perceptions of his caring, strength and truthfulness, while Bush appeared to be ahead in the areas of optimism, patriotism, and knowledgeability. According to Lemieux, the negative category appeared to be a draw. (Refer to Figure IV) Figure V looks at these results reweighted and raises a number of questions about the electorate's perceptions of the candidates before the debates. For example, Bush was seen "a priori" as the stronger guy, while it appears that "strength" helped Dukakis garner a better evaluation for his debate performance.

In conclusion, Lemieux reiterated his belief that these presidential debates have little impact on the electorate. He blames a lot of this on the format of the current debates which limits candidate responses to two minutes and does not allow reporters to ask follow-up questions. Lemieux noted that it was only in the Quayle-Bentson debate that we saw journalists really follow-up on each others questions.

Likelihood of Watching Debate by Favorability toward the Candidates

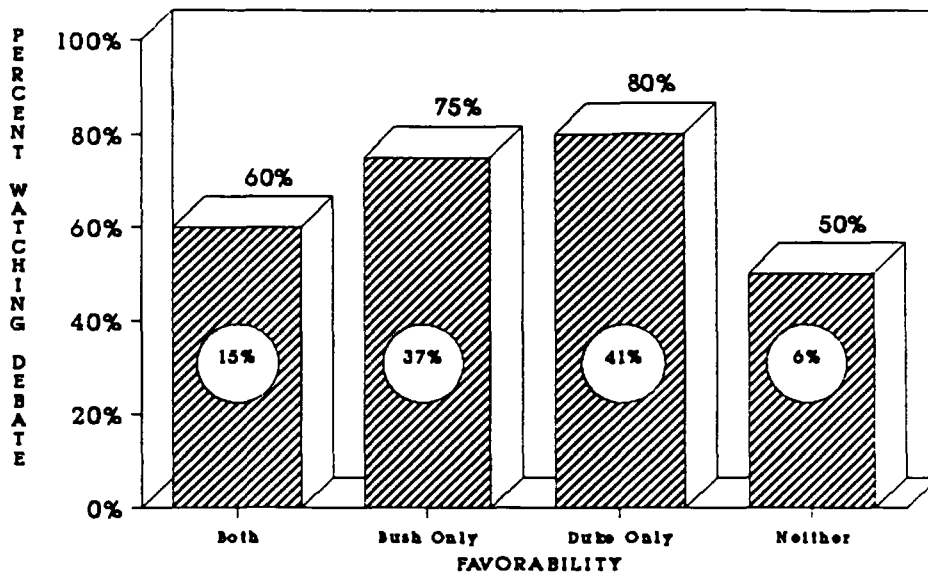


Figure I

Likelihood of Watching Debate by Certainty of Voting Preference

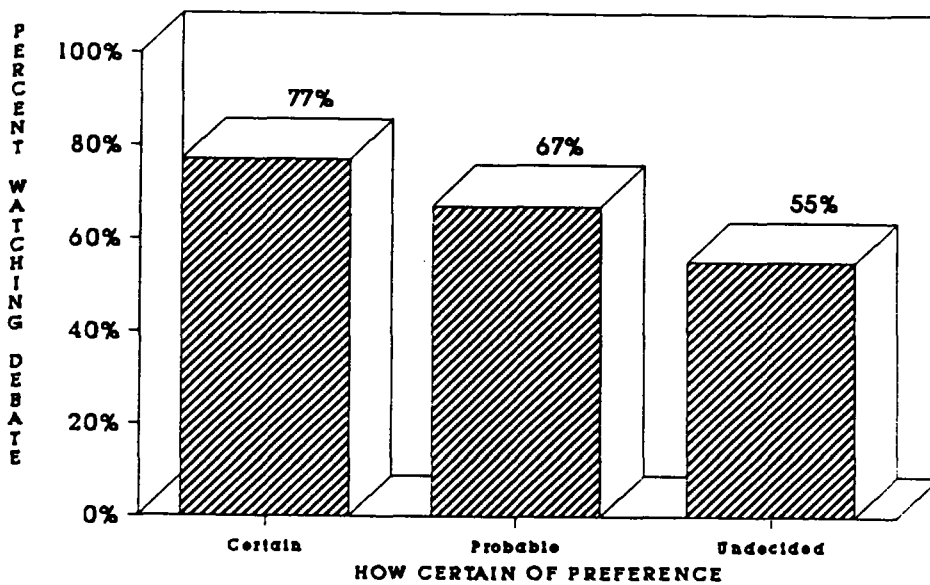


Figure II

Effect of Debate on Certainty of Vote

	Bush	Dukakis
Less Certain	1%	1%
More Certain	21	21
No Change	55	50
Didn't Watch	23	28

Figure III

Assessments of Candidates Performance in First Presidential Debate

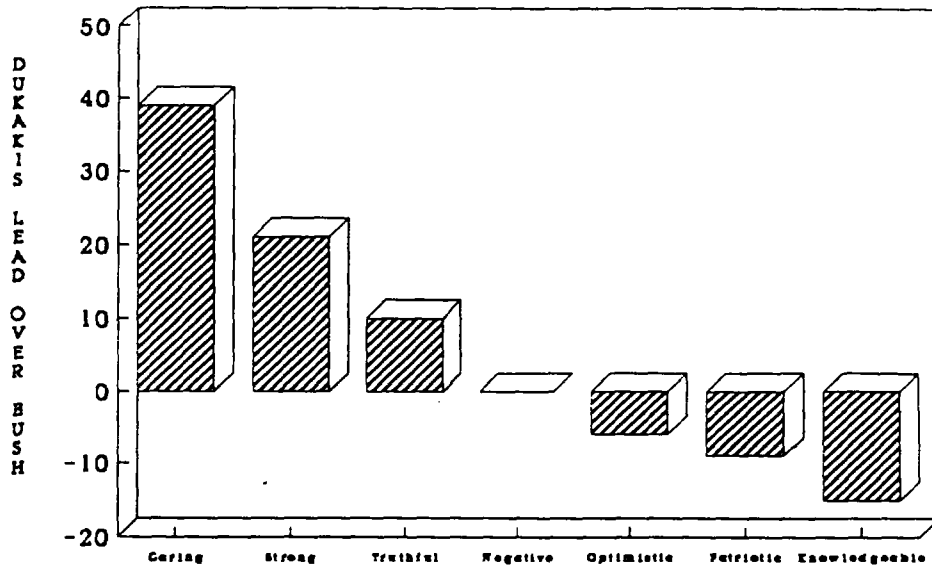


Figure IV

Impact of Candidate Assessments on Judgements of Debate Performance

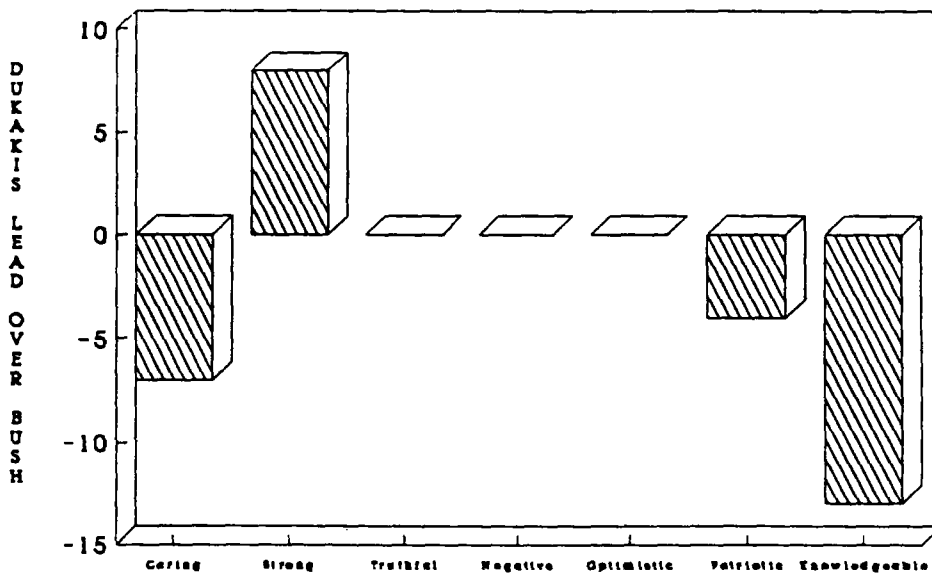


Figure V