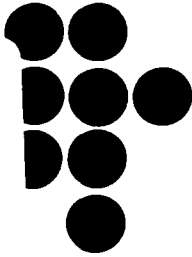


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COMMUNICATIONS
FORUM

"Sending the Primary Message"

April 30, 1992

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MASSACHUSETTS INSTITUTE OF TECHNOLOGY

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Seminar Notes

Mr. Tobe Berkovitz, Media Director, Ken Swope and Associates

Ms. Renee Loth, Political Reporter, The Boston Globe

Prof. Darrell West, Department of Political Science, Brown University

Prof. Peter Lemieux, Department of Political Science, MIT, Moderator

Elizabeth H. Prodromou, MIT, Rapporteur

Prof. Peter Lemieux, of the MIT Department of Political Science, introduced the seminar. He explained that the purpose of today's seminar was to explore how well the various Democratic candidates for the presidential elections of 1992 exploited the media in the New Hampshire primary campaign. The particular focus was on the candidates' use of television media coverage. The speakers addressed questions such as the choice of positive versus negative messages, how messages are molded to appeal to different regions and constituencies, and how the expense of television campaigning limits the field of potential challengers.

The first speaker was Mr. Tobe Berkovitz, Media Director at Ken Swope and Associates. Berkovitz remarked on the plethora of communications that affect the voting public's opinion of the campaign candidates, and pointed to four different media forces that have proven, over time, to be especially influential. These forces are: (1) advertising; (2) the press; (3) televised debates amongst the candidates. In Berkovitz view, the press has had the largest impact of all forms of media on the 1992 presidential campaign thus far. The fourth force mentioned by Berkovitz was "the big event," that is, one major issue or event which comes to dominate the campaign. Desert Storm was supposed to be the so-called big event of this campaign but, according to Berkovitz, this hasn't been the case.

Berkovitz considered some of the factors of which presidential candidates must be aware when trying to use the media to their advantage in a campaign. He also noted that advertisers working on behalf of candidates should be aware of these factors as well. Of primary importance is the notion of resonance. This concept was developed by one of the fathers of political advertising, Tony Schwartz, who stressed that an advertisement must have a central message or stimulus that will evoke meaning, emotion, and feeling for the voter. This stimulus is resonance. An example of stimulus is Pat Buchanan's "Read My Lips" ad against Bush. Berkovitz explained that the ad has been successful because it has called out already existing emotions in the voters.

Another important factor is that the ad should use something that is common (whether a person or a visual image) and which therefore taps into the voters' imaginations.

It is also important for the ad to get the attention of the voter, before trying to make an impact on him. Candidates must realize that they are operating in a cluttered media environment and that competition for voter attention is stiff. As a result of the media clutter, the ad must be able to out-compete others and to capture the attention of the voter.

A final factor of importance for political advertisers is the fact that most of the public is not interested in the campaign. The average voter is pre-occupied with his own day-to-day survival, so he is not focused on politics. Campaign advertisers need to recognize that it is not until near the end of the campaign that most voters become interested.

Berkovitz mentioned those political ads that he thinks have worked successfully as campaign tools. Pat Buchanan's "Read My Lips" ad has worked. It illustrates the resonance concept and it also shows how political ads that have a single, concrete message work best. This ad also shows that cheesy-looking commercials can work and that high-tech gloss is not necessary for a successful political ad. Another ad that has worked is the George Bush commercial against Buchanan, using the Mercedes. This ad shows how regionality can work - the ad appeals to auto country.

One of the things that most concerns an advertiser is that it is not going to be your campaign team that airs the big turkey spot. Every election campaign always seems to produce one big turkey ad that either gets bashed by the press or gets trashed by the opposition because of factual errors.

On the issue of negative advertisements, Berkovitz noted that when a candidate runs a negative commercial, he is driving up his own negatives. People begin to see the candidate in negative terms. For example, once Tsongas got out of New England, he had to take off his gloves and start attacking Clinton. It was at this point that people began to see him more like other politicians, with his own negatives as well as positives.

Berkovitz ran some commercial spots taken from the Harkin campaign (on which his firm worked), and offered some analysis of these spots. According to Berkovitz, the spots show that the political consultant was trying to paint broad Harkin's campaign in terms of broad themes. One of the criticisms levelled against the Democrats in 1988 was their lack of vision, so the political consultant went with this and tried to create a sense of vision around Harkin. But, it turned out that the voters this year seem more interested in specific plans, programs, monographs, etc., than in themes and vision.

Harkin ran a very unified, thematic campaign. But the press framed Harkin's vision as tired liberalism rather than as a new kind of populism - which is what Harkin and his consultants had been trying to achieve. The press labelled Harkin as a member of the old-fashioned liberal school that no longer works.

The distinctiveness of the Harkin spots stands out. They don't look like traditional political spots, so people knew right away whose spot they were seeing. The consultant was trying to build recognition with such distinctiveness. But the criticism was that Harkin wasn't looking at the viewer, so the viewer wanted to know who Harkin was talking to. Berkovitz acknowledged that this criticism might, indeed, be well-founded, but he maintained that the ads nonetheless created an immediate recognition of the candidate. The spots worked especially well at the beginning of the campaign, because they got the viewer to listen in order to get to know the candidate.

Finally, the Harkin campaign only ran one negative ad, despite the proliferation of negative ads as part of current political campaigning. Further, Harkin's negative ad was limited to specific issues and it only ran towards the end of his campaign; overall, the Harkin ads were positive.

The second speaker was Ms. Renee Loth, Political Reporter for The Boston Globe. She remarked that the Harkin ads have been her favorites in the campaign thus far. Loth observed that she feels as though she has spent this campaign watching thirty-second windows into the candidates, the campaign, and America. These thirty-second spots provide an interesting thematic window with which to look at the characterization of the candidates that emerged in the New Hampshire primary. According to Loth, Harkin emerged as "the Real Democrat," Tsongas emerged as "the sober, truth-teller," and Clinton emerged as "the man with the plan."

Loth ran some spots from the New Hampshire primary campaign to illustrate the above characterizations. The Tsongas ads worked particularly well to create a thematic window around the candidate who, unlike most other Democrats, was relatively well known in New Hampshire and New England.

The Tsongas spots were much like the man: not flashy, no gimmicks, workman-like. These sorts of ads were effective in New Hampshire because they matched in tone and content what the public believed Tsongas was like as a person. Also, the ads had a nice frame to them - they started with Tsongas in a bathing suit and they finished the same way. This frame gave consistency and content to the voter, but also suggested movement or the sense of people jumping onto a bandwagon.

The Harkin ads also showed a certain consistency. They were all filmed on the same factory floor and they used the same music (Loth noted that, in her view, music is one of the most under-utilized and under-valued commodities in political advertising). Loth also remarked on the fact that Harkin was the first Democratic candidate to name his opponents, as a means of putting an edge on the message; this tactic, however, gave the ads more of a negative than a comparative feeling, at times.

Loth commented on how the thirty-second windows also provide a glimpse into the regional differences of the nation. For example, the New Hampshire ads focused almost exclusively on economic issues and on solutions to the country's economic problems. Once the campaign moved out of New Hampshire and to the South for Super Tuesday, the character of the ads changed dramatically. The themes of the ads were God, country, and patriotism - examples included Buchanan's ads against the National Endowment for the Arts, and Bush's ads attacking Buchanan's lack of patriotism (because of his opposition to the Gulf War). Television advertisements are based heavily on results and interpretation of opinion polls so, in this respect, the ads show that, even in an age when the media tends to homogenize the country, there still exist real regional differences that distinguish parts of the country.

Loth discussed a recent conference of the top ad-makers for political campaigns. The conference participants gave a sort of Orwellian, revisionist discussion about how negative ads actually are a positive thing for democracy. Their argument is that negative ads help the small guy who doesn't have a large war chest, so this broadens the pool of candidates and therefore the choices of the voters. Also, the argument is that, because negative ads have generated the ad watch campaigns done now by many major newspapers and because these ad watch campaigns give greater scrutiny of the accuracy and effectiveness of negative ads, the quality of advertising is improving. This group also argued that negative ads, by virtue of their ability to capture voter attention, boost voter turnout and therefore improve democratic process.

In Loth's view, the above arguments are pure revisionism. She claimed that negative ads, overall, contribute to a decline in people's positive feelings about democracy. She added that negative ads, however, are not new (e.g. the 1964 ad about Goldwater, with the little girl picking flowers and the cut to the atom bomb) and that democracy has continued to survive despite negative ads.

The third speaker was Prof. Darrell West, Professor of Political Science at Brown University. West commented that 1992 has been a bad year for the so-called political experts. They have missed most of the important events of the campaign (e.g. Tsongas' emergence; Brown's 800 number; Clinton's survival of tabloid criticisms; Buchanan as a credible threat to Bush, etc.).

According to West, 1992 has been a fascinating election year precisely because of all of the surprises it has come shown. Few things have been as important as the media has been in determining the important, surprising events of this election year. For example, we have seen an increasing scrutiny of the advertising done by candidates. The ad watch phenomenon is a positive development, in West's view, because it lets us check the candidates messages. West's research has focused on how visible the ad watches are, in order to understand how much of an impact they are making on the voting public's opinions of the candidates and their advertising. His findings show that 57% of people surveyed said they had seen the ad watches, indicating a high level of penetration. It was more common for the voters to have noticed ad watches in newspapers rather than on television.

West compared the ad watches done on t.v. versus those done in newspapers, noting that the latter tend to be more critical in tone. In the ad watches done on the Buchanan campaign, the

newspapers have offered lots of coverage and have been quite critical. In contrast, CBS, for example, has run only two stories on the Buchanan campaign ads and has made no mention of distortions. This discrepancy suggests that t.v. doesn't recognize the power of the ad watch. Also, because t.v. is a visual medium, it is tougher to shield the voters from the visual impact of the ad as it is being replayed in the ad watch, so doing an ad watch on t.v. raises certain analytic problems that aren't confronted by the newspapers. With regard to this problem, CNN has taken to rebroadcasting the commercial when doing the analysis in the ad watch, but the commercial is shown in small blocks at the corner of the screen so that the analyst has more of an opportunity to affect the voter - rather than the ad under scrutiny being unintentionally reinforced in the voter's mind by virtue of his having seen it rebroadcast in the ad watch.

West suggested that 1992 may be the year that the voting public turns against the mass media. We saw some of this in 1988, but this year we have witnessed much more open dissatisfaction with the free media's coverage of the presidential election campaign. Surveys show that half of voters questioned gave the media either poor or fair ratings for its coverage of the election.

We are also seeing candidate advertisements which attack the free media. This is a first, according to West. He cited the examples of Clinton and Brown, both of whom have run ads which feature critical comments about the mass media. In both cases, the criticisms were subtle but, in West's view, they were well done.

The public's dissatisfaction with media coverage of the elections, as well as the candidates' capitalizing on this dissatisfaction, may be explained by the expansion in the definition of what is considered news. The American public is very ambivalent with this expansion in the definition of the news, which now includes character issues. Also, structural changes in the media itself (e.g. the expansion in coverage by the tabloids) has created a decline in the level of responsible reporting by the media, and people are upset with this declining responsibility and integrity in media reporting. Instead of venting their anger at the tabloids, which are the main culprits, the public becomes dissatisfied with the entire media. Finally, the media is seen as the new power brokers in American politics, but the American voter does not like power brokers, as evidenced by the disappearance of the party boss.

In West's view, it will be interesting to see whether or not the public backlash against the media grows as the campaign progresses. The campaign of H. Ross Perot will prove particularly interesting in this respect. Perot already has said that he doesn't like the media and the way it is covering the campaign, so he may join up with the public in criticizing the media's coverage of and role in the 1992 presidential election campaign.

Question and Answer

The first questioner asked whether or not H. Ross Perot might become entirely a media candidate. He has no party support or infrastructure to back him, so he may be entirely reliant on the media to make him or to break him as a candidate.

Loth noted that running as an outsider is a particularly popular thing to do when the public is angry, as it is in this election. Both H. Ross Perot and Jerry Brown have done this, but from completely opposite angles. They both want to win - unlike Buchanan, who has been more interested in the fight for the soul of the Republican Party than in winning. Perot is the epitome of money-speak in politics. But his appeal, as an outsider, is the same as that of Brown. Loth observed that we had seen a little of this outsider phenomenon in the Silber versus Weld gubernatorial campaign in Massachusetts in 1990. In that case, neither of the major candidates was an insider.

Berkovitz responded that the voting public is being forced to shop for a candidate in this presidential election. The psychological response for this sort of candidate shopping is the same as it would be for clothes shopping. So, in this view, it doesn't matter so much if you're an outsider or not; the important point is to use the media to make you a credible "shopper's choice."

West said that Perot may be different than those third-party candidates of the past, in that he has his own money and he has gotten a lot of media coverage. He won't be the next president but he may influence who is, by virtue of forcing the Republicans to reallocate resources to areas where they hadn't planned.

The second questioner asked about the concept of electronic democracy and the possibility of a national issues convention. He asked the speakers to comment on the idea of getting a significant segment of the population to divide up into Republican and Democratic groups, each of which would consider the issues and meet the candidate wherever possible and would be polled on their impressions. This information would be provided electronically on a mass basis, and would support the notion of a deliberative approach to democracy.

The questioner was concerned with the fact that, although there seems to be a mass retail capability to the electronic media, there does not seem to be much examination of these media as an option for improving democracy. There are enormous technological possibilities available for improving democracy, but there is little serious effort being put into utilizing these possibilities.

West commented that there is an increase in the use of these electronic media. However, candidates are using these media to win elections rather than to improve democracy.

Loth noted that, on *The Boston Globe*, the use of the ad watch spurred a discussion about the need to be aware of the new technologies that allow voters both to be better informed and to be increasingly manipulated by the candidates.

According to Berkovitz, one of the problems with the electronic media is that they tend to give the voter a picture of the first, fastest responses which, in turn, tend to become the points of reference for all subsequent discussions on the election issues.

The next questioner asked about the wisdom of trying to portray Harkin as a "real Democrat," given that this label conjures up for many voters a picture of the free-spending liberal Democrat responsible for America's current budgetary imbalances and social problems. The questioner pointed out that the ads seemed to require the voter to make a distinction between values and behaviors, in that the values of the "real Democrat" may be very appealing to much of the voting public but the behaviors of the "real Democrat" have become associated with profligate spending in the minds of most of the voting public. If this distinction was meant to be conveyed by the ads, is it safe to assume that most voters are capable of making such a distinction or that the ads were successful in conveying such a difference?

Berkovitz stressed that the ads were, in fact, intended to convey the notion of Harkin as a real Democrat in terms of his values, but that this emphasis on values (as opposed to behaviors) did not come across sharply enough. He also noted, however, that it is important to keep in mind that those ads were done for New Hampshire, a region where Democratic values and behaviors (not as framed by Republicans) are popular.