THE MEDIA AND CAMPAIGNS

WHAT VOTERS ACTUALLY SEE and hear of the candidate is primarily determined by the **paid media** (such as television advertising) that the campaign creates and pays to have disseminated, and the **free media** (such as newspaper articles) that result from stories about the campaign that the media choose to broadcast. The amount, form, and content of paid media are dictated completely by the campaign staffers mentioned above who create advertisements. Free media consists of independent press coverage—all the media outlets covering the candidate and his or her run for office.

Paid Media

Within the media campaign, candidates and their media consultants decide on how to use the paid media; that is, which ads to air for which kind of campaign. **Positive ads** stress the candidate's qualifications, family, and issue positions with no direct reference to the opponent. These are usually favored by the incumbent candidate. **Negative ads** attack the opponent's character and platform and may not even mention the candidate who is paying for the airing—except for the candidate's brief, legally required statement that he or she approved the ad. **Contrast ads** compare the records and proposals of the candidates, with a bias toward the sponsor. In 2004, Kerry, relatively unknown to people outside of his home state of Massachusetts, sought to define himself by releasing positive ads stating his position on taxes and health care. In a television ad called "Patriot Act," the Bush campaign sought to use contrast ads to portray Kerry as weak by his reversal of support for the Patriot Act after receiving criticism from fellow Democrats. All three kinds of ads can inject important (as well as trivial) issues into a campaign.

Most paid advertisements are short **spot ads** that range from ten to sixty seconds long, though some may run as long as thirty minutes and take the form of documentaries. Although negative advertisements have grown dramatically in number during the past two decades, they have been a part of American campaigns for some time. In 1796, Federalists portrayed presidential candidate Thomas Jefferson as an atheist and a coward. In Jefferson's bid for a second term in 1800, Federalists again attacked him, this time spreading a rumor that he was dead. The effects of negative advertising are well documented. Voters frequently vote *against* the other candidate, and negative ads can provide the critical justification for such a vote.

Before the 1980s, well-known incumbents usually ignored negative attacks from their challengers, believing that the proper stance was to be above the fray. But, after some well-publicized defeats of incumbents in the early 1980s in which negative television advertising played a prominent role,[6] incumbents began attacking their challengers in earnest. The new rule of politics became "An attack unanswered is an attack agreed to." In a further attempt to stave off brickbats from challengers, incumbents began anticipating the substance of their opponents' attacks and airing **inoculation ads**

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paid media
Political advertisements purchased for a candidate's campaign.

free media
Coverage of a candidate's campaign by the news media.

positive ad
Advertising on behalf of a candidate that stresses the candidate's qualifications, family, and issue positions, without reference to the opponent.

negative ad
Advertising on behalf of a candidate that attacks the opponent's platform or character.

contrast ad
Ad that compares the records and proposals of the candidates, with a bias toward the sponsor.

spot ad
Television advertising on behalf of a candidate that is broadcast in sixty-, thirty-, or ten-second duration.

inoculation ad
Advertising that attempts to counteract an anticipated attack from the opposition before the attack is launched.

■ Rear Admiral Roy Hoffman, who commanded a Swift boat during the Vietnam War, appearing in an ad by Swift Boat Veterans for Truth. These ads, which attacked John Kerry's character and service in Vietnam and questioned his honor and truthfulness, had a significant impact on the 2004 election.

Photo courtesy: Swiftvets/AP/Wide World Photos

early in the campaign to protect themselves in advance from the other side's spots. (Inoculation advertising attempts to counteract an anticipated attack from the opposition before such an attack is launched.) For example, a senator who fears a broadside about her voting record on Social Security issues might air advertisements featuring senior citizens praising her support of Social Security.

Although paid advertising remains the most controllable aspect of a campaign's strategy, the news media are increasing having an impact on it. Major newspapers throughout the country have taken to analyzing the accuracy of television advertisements aired during campaigns—a welcome and useful addition to journalists' scrutiny of politicians.

Free Media

While candidates have control over what advertisements are run (paid media), they do not have total control over how journalists will cover their campaigns and convey it to voters. In this section, we look at how the media report on campaigns and how campaigns attempt to control the media.

How the News Media Cover Campaigns.   During campaign season, the news media constantly report political news. What they report is largely based on news editors' decisions of what is newsworthy, what is "fit to print." Often, the press will simply report what candidates are doing, such as giving speeches, holding fundraisers, or meeting with party leaders. Even better, the news media can report on a candidate's success, perhaps giving that candidate the brand of a "winner," making him or her that much more difficult to beat. On the other hand, the reporters may run stories on a candidate's darker past, such as run-ins with the law or a failed marriage.

Many analysts observe that not all media practices in campaigns are conducive to fair and unbiased coverage. For example, the news media often regard political candidates with suspicion—looking for possible deception even when a candidate is simply

Analyzing Visuals

MISSION ACCOMPLISHED

If ever there has been a double-edged sword in presidential public relations, it is the famous example of President George W. Bush heralding the end of the "hot war" in Iraq, by landing on the deck of the aircraft carrier *Abraham Lincoln,* and giving a speech to enthusiastic military personnel on board. On May 1, 2003, Bush gave a speech saluting the troops and congratulating them on their quick victory in Iraq, with a giant banner headlined "Mission Accomplished" in the background, as the photo shows. Even though Bush in his speech was careful to note that the work in Iraq was not finished, the picture overwhelmed his own words.

Most Americans remember the event mainly because of the Mission Accomplished controversy, since it was only a matter of weeks before a tough guerrilla war, which has since then taken more than a thousand American lives, broke out in Iraq. At the time, almost every observer saw the aircraft carrier speech as a brilliant stroke, and one that would nearly guarantee Bush's reelection in 2004. As it happened, though, in the fullness of time, the Mission Accomplished banner became a metaphor for the increasingly difficult struggle in Iraq, which critics called "Vietnam without the jungle."

How did the Mission Accomplished banner get so prominently placed? White House spokesperson Scott McClellan stated that Navy officials asked for it, and the administration agreed to create it. "We took care of the production of it. We have people to do those things. But the Navy actually put it up," said McClellan in an interview with CNN months later.

In the presidency, the occupant of the Oval Office is responsible for these mishaps, whether or not he knew about the proposed actions in advance, and whether or not

Photo courtesy: J. Scott Applewhite/AP/Wide World Photos

he agreed with them. As Harry Truman used to say during his term in the White House, "The buck stops here," and that axiom is the real lesson of Mission Accomplished.

In looking at this photo from the speech, what do you think about the strategy behind the staging of the event? In this age of the Internet and the twenty-four-hour news cycle, how can political figures avoid similar predicaments in future?

trying to share his or her message with the public. This attitude makes it difficult for candidates to appear in a positive light or to have a genuine opportunity to explain their basic ideas via the news media without being on the defensive. In addition, many studies have shown that the media are obsessed with the horse-race aspect of politics—who's ahead, who's behind, who's gaining—to the detriment of the substance of the candidates' issues and ideas. Public opinion polls, especially tracking polls, many of them taken by the news outlets themselves, dominate coverage, especially on network television, where only a few minutes a night are devoted to politics.

The media's expectations can have an effect on how the public views the candidates. Using poll data, journalists often predict the margins by which they expect contenders to win or lose. A clear victory of 5 percentage points can be judged a setback if

the candidate had been projected to win by 12 or 15 points. The tone of the media coverage—that a candidate is either gaining or losing support in polls—can affect whether people decide to give money and other types of support to a candidate.[7]

One final area in which the media tend to portray candidates in a biased way is in overemphasizing trivial parts of the campaign, such as a politician's minor gaffe or private-life indiscretions. This superficial coverage displaces serious journalism on the issues. These subjects are taken up again in the next chapter, which deals specifically with the news media.

Campaign Strategies.   Candidates, of course, want favorable media coverage. Voters tend to find the news media more credible sources of information than paid advertisements. A favorable editorial can carry more weight than a campaign ad. In an effort to obtain favorable coverage, candidates and their media consultants use various strategies to attempt to influence the press.

First, the campaign staff members often seek to isolate the candidate from the press, thus reducing the chances that reporters will bait a candidate into saying something that might damage his or her cause. Naturally, journalists are frustrated by such a tactic, and they demand open access to candidates.

Second, the campaign stages media events—activities designed to include brief, clever quotes called *sound bites* and staged with appealing backdrops so that they will be run on the television news and in the newspaper. In this fashion, the candidate's staff can successfully fill the news hole reserved for campaign coverage.

Third, the handlers and consultants have cultivated a technique termed *spin*—that is, they put the most favorable possible interpretation for their candidate (and the most negative for their opponent) on any circumstance occurring in the campaign, and they work the press to sell their point of view or at least to ensure that it is included in the reporters' stories. Early in the 2004 Democratic primaries, Howard Dean was the frontrunner, a position he won by portraying himself as the indignant or "angry" candidate, which worked well with the Democratic base voting in the primaries; yet, he lost the Iowa caucus vote. Dean tried to spin the loss as playing to his strengths, since Dean only achieved frontrunner status by starting at the back of the pack. Spin can spin both ways, however, and Dean's spin spun out of control after he tried to show strength in rallying his supporters by letting out a high-pitched yelp. While the yelp certainly helped rally the troops, it also gave competing candidates the proof they needed to spin Dean as not the angry candidate but the "crazy" candidate.[8]

Fourth, candidates have found ways to circumvent the news media by appearing on talk shows such as *The Oprah Winfrey Show* and *Larry King Live,* where they have an opportunity to present their views and answer questions in a less critical forum.

Fifth, **candidate debates** are an established feature of campaigns for president, governor, U.S. senator, and many other offices. Candidates and their staffs recognize their importance as a tool not only for consolidating their voter base but for correcting misperceptions about the candidate's suitability for office. However, while candidates have complete control over what they say in debates, they do not have control over what the news media will highlight and focus on from the debates. Therefore, even though candidates prepare themselves by rehearsing their responses, they cannot avoid the perils of spontaneity. Errors or slips of the tongue in a debate can affect election outcomes. President Gerald R. Ford's erroneous insistence during an October 1976 debate with Jimmy Carter that Poland was not under Soviet domination (when, in fact, it was) may have cost him a close election. In an effort to put the best possible spin on debates, teams of staffers for each participant swarm the press rooms to declare victory even before their candidates finish their closing statements.

A study showed that 16 percent of viewers of the 1976 debates more strongly supported their choice for president, and 10 percent switched candidate allegiance altogether.[9] A 1980 study found significant shifts occurred in candidate preference among viewers with low levels of political knowledge.[10] The debates of 2004 reinforced and added to these studies, as public opinion surveys showed that Kerry's strong

candidate debate
Forum in which political candidates face each other to discuss their platforms, records, and character.

Timeline

Television and Presidential Campaigns

performance in the first debate spurred him to a temporary lead in the polls. So, while debates do not directly alter the results of elections, they do tend to increase knowledge about the candidates and their respective personalities and issue positions, especially among voters who have no previously paid attention to the campaign. Voters, once knowing more about candidates and their positions, might then change their mind or finally decide for whom they will vote, meaning that debates may indirectly affect the results of elections.

Sometimes debates affect voters only by confirming or denying the public preconceptions of the candidates. The two major presidential contenders in 2004 offered a classic example of spin before and after their first debate. In 2000, George W. Bush was widely believed to have benefited from low expectations. Al Gore was expected to perform better in the debate, so Bush's exceeding the low expectations set for him added to the generally positive evaluation of his performance. The Bush and Kerry campaigns remembered this phenomenon, and each attempted to paint the opponent as a superior debater going into the debate. Bush strategist Matthew Dowd called Kerry "the best debater since Cicero." The Kerry campaign countered that Bush had never lost a debate. Each campaign tried to spin the press to call its opponent the superior debater, hoping that its candidate would come out as "exceeding expectations." Candidates take part in debates to disprove the preconceptions the public holds for them while hoping that their opposition will perform according to the public's negative preconception.

Technology and Campaign Strategy

Since candidates began using electronic media (Franklin D. Roosevelt and radio, John F. Kennedy and television, Howard Dean and the Internet) to reach out directly to voters, the nature of campaigns has changed drastically. Labor-intensive community activities have been replaced by carefully targeted messages disseminated through the mass media, and candidates today are able to reach voters more quickly than at any time in our nation's history. Consequently, the well-organized party machine is no longer essential to winning an election. The results of this technological transformation are candidate-centered campaigns in which candidates build well-financed, finely tuned organizations centered around their personal aspirations.

At the heart of the move toward today's candidate-centered campaigns is an entire generation of technological improvements. Contemporary campaigns have an impressive new array of weapons at their disposal: faster printing technologies, instantaneous

■ Presidential debates have come a long way—at least in terms of studio trappings—since the ill-at-ease Richard M. Nixon was visually bested by John F. Kennedy in the first televised debate. John Kerry's strong performances in the three presidential debates of 2004 helped him stay within striking distance of President Bush's lead going into the final weeks of the campaign.

Photos courtesy: left, Bettmann/Corbis; right, Rick Wilking/Reuters/Corbis

PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES: COMING TO A CAMPUS NEAR YOU?

Televised presidential debates offer the American electorate a unique opportunity to see and hear the candidates for the presidency. It is a means by which millions of Americans gather information regarding each candidate's personality and platform. Recognizing the profound educational value of these debates to the voting public, two bipartisan national study groups recommended that steps be taken to establish an organization whose main function was the sponsorship of presidential and vice presidential debates during the general election period. In response to the recommendations put forward by the two study groups, the Commission on Presidential Debates (CPD) was established in 1987.

The CPD's formal charge is to ensure that debates are a permanent part of every general election and that they provide the best possible information to viewers and listeners. The organization sponsored all the presidential debates since 1988, heavily favoring institutions of higher learning as the host sites. The last five presidential elections have included seventeen debates sponsored by the CPD, thirteen of which have been held on college campuses. In 2004, the CPD selected the University of Miami, Case Western Reserve, Washington University in St. Louis, and Arizona State University as sites for presidential debates.

Prospective debate hosts must conform to a rigorous set of criteria as dictated by the CPD. The selection criteria encompass a broad range of categories, including the physical structure of the debate hall (over 17,000 square feet with a 35-foot ceiling and 65-foot stage), the transportation and lodging networks available, and the ability to raise $550,000 to cover production costs.

Why would a college or university go through so much trouble to host a presidential debate? The answer is that the benefits are plentiful and diverse. The host sites inevitably bring in revenue with masses of people migrating into town, purchasing community services and products. The colleges gain immediate international exposure, perhaps becoming a more attractive option to prospective students. Students and professors benefit from firsthand exposure to a very important aspect of the American political process.

Source: Commission on Presidential Debates, http://www.debates.org.

Internet publishing and mass e-mail, fax machines, video technology, and enhanced telecommunications and teleconferencing. As a result, candidates can gather and disseminate information better than ever.

One outcome of these changes is the ability of candidates to employ "rapid-response" techniques: the formulation of prompt and informed responses to changing events on the campaign battlefield. In response to breaking news of a scandal or issue, for example, candidates can conduct background research, implement an opinion poll and tabulate the results, devise a containment strategy and appropriate "spin," and deliver a reply. This makes a strong contrast with the campaigns of the 1970s and early 1980s, dominated primarily by radio and TV advertisements, which took much longer to prepare and had little of the flexibility enjoyed by contemporary campaigners.

The first widespread use of the Internet in national campaigning came in 1996. Republican presidential candidate Bob Dole urged voters to log onto his Web site, and many did. According to one source, 26 percent of the public in 1996 regularly logged onto the Internet to get campaign and election information. On Election Day 2004, traffic on the CNN Web site increased by 110 percent, while the Fox News site saw a 134 percent jump.[11] All of the candidates for the 2004 presidential campaign started up Web sites, even when their candidacies were only in the exploratory stage, before their formal declarations. Candidate Web sites typically present the candidate's platform and offer information on how to get involved in the campaign and how to contribute money. As bandwidth on the Internet continues to improve, real-time video clips enable Web users to view candidate's speeches, press conferences, and other typically "live" events at their own convenience, independent of the schedule of the original television coverage or rebroadcast. Campaign sites often offer the text of speeches, as well as multiple video and audio versions of the real public event.

In the campaigns of 2002, many candidates increasingly turned to recorded phone messages targeted to narrow constituencies. Fundraisers also experimented with voice

■ Both the Kerry-Edwards campaign and the Bush-Cheney campaign used the Internet extensively in 2004 to raise money and disseminate information. Here, the Kerry-Edwards web site displays John Kerry's concession speech on November 3, 2004.

Photo courtesy: www.JohnKerry.com

messages from high-profile figures such as former President Bill Clinton. Florida Governor Jeb Bush used a fund-raising technique many might question; the governor recorded a message asking for money, which was autodialed to contributors to the 2000 presidential campaign of his brother, George W. Bush. Jeb Bush's victory is due, in part, to the cohesive use of this kind of new and effective tactic. This practice was much more widespread in 2004, as both parties used politicians and celebrities to contact voters through pre-recorded phone messages. Democrats heard from John Kerry, Bill Clinton, Wesley Clark, and comedian Chris Rock; Republicans heard from Rudy Giuliani, Arnold Schwarzenegger, and actress Janine Turner.[12]

While candidates use such technologies to gain access to votes, they also seek to convey to voters that they are technologically savvy and have a rich depth of resources. These new technologies are currently reshaping the campaign landscape. Political parties might use new technologies to organize and manage massive voter bases, in an effort to return to an older mode of campaign that supports the party, rather than just one individual candidate. Another possible scenario is that the Web allows greater interactivity among independents or third-party organizers, perhaps providing a new medium of communication and organization for those who find no representation within the two-party system.