

THE MEDIA MAKE THE CAMPAIGN

Milton Berle once said that criticizing television was like describing an auto accident to the victims. With all due respect to Berle, one might argue that the journalistic and scholarly media analysis spawned by the vast expansion of TV coverage of politics since 1960 is more like preventive medicine.

The news media have been objects of almost constant controversy since the late 1960s, when they were accused of turning the American public against the Vietnam War. In 1969 Vice President Spiro Agnew blasted the networks as a monopoly controlled by "a tiny, enclosed fraternity of privileged men elected by no one." But it was Edith Efron's *The News Twisters* (Nash, 1971) that focused serious attention on TV's presentation of the nation's presidential candidates. Efron argued that all three networks were "strongly biased in favor of the Democratic-liberal-left axis of opinion," and that during the 1968 campaign they had depicted Hubert Humphrey as a "quasi-saint" and Richard Nixon "as corruption incarnate." Several journalism scholars carefully rebutted her analysis. After the Nixon-McGovern campaign of 1972, more than 10 studies of TV's coverage appeared. Their conclusion: Neither Democrats nor Republicans were favored.

Abetted by changing technology, content analysis of TV news has developed into a cottage industry. One Republican in Tennessee, upset at the networks' coverage of the 1968 GOP convention, induced Vanderbilt University to begin regularly taping the network evening news. As a result, researchers now have at their disposal tapes (which may be rented) and the *Television News Index and Abstracts*, which offers monthly outlines of news broadcasts. Indeed, the same videotape technology that enabled the networks to use shorter and shorter sound bites now allows researchers to compile their own inexpensive videotape records for analysis. In addition, two monthly newsletters, *Media Monitor* (published by the Center for Media and Public Affairs in Washington, D.C.) and *Tyndall Report* (published by ADT Research in New York), now chart the ebb and flow of topics in the network news.

Just as every campaign now yields several journalistic chronicles in the mold of Theodore H. White's famous *Making of the President* series, so it also produces several analyses of the media's performance. Typical of those for 1988 are detailed studies such as S. Robert Lichter, Daniel Amundson, and Richard Noyes's *The Video Campaign: Network Coverage of the 1988 Primaries* (Am. Enterprise Inst., 1988) and *The Media in the 1984 and 1988 Presidential Campaigns* (Greenwood, 1991) edited by Guido H. Stempel III and John W. Windhauser. Comparing the campaign coverage of 1984 and 1988 on TV, in 17 newspapers, and in three newsmagazines, Stempel and Windhauser conclude that "nine-second images dominated not only television coverage but newspaper coverage as well." They add:

Our results leave no doubt that the coverage of issues was minimal. Two-thirds of the stories in newspapers and newsmagazines and on television newscasts dealt with politics and government, candidate strength, and poll results. We believe that the lack of coverage of the economy, education, and science largely reflect what the candidates did with these issues. They didn't get coverage because the candidates did not address them in any significant fashion.

In *Feeding Frenzy* (Free Press, 1991), University of Virginia political scientist Larry J. Sabato argues that the deluge of coverage and the intensifying competition among news organizations have led to more reports about the candidates' personal, and especially sexual, lives. "This trivialization of the public discourse," he warns, "is warping the democratic process." It influences everything, from "the kinds of issues discussed in campaigns to . . . the sorts of people attracted to the electoral arena."

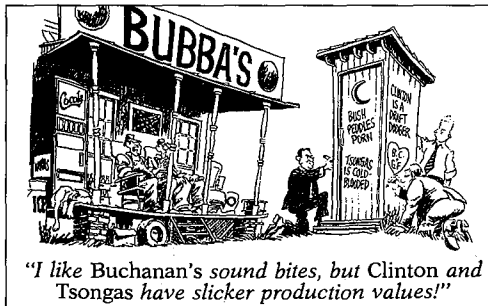
Advertising is another form of TV influence on the campaigns. Although broadcast advertising has been the biggest budget item in presidential campaigns since 1928, only since the Bush campaign's Willie Horton ads in 1988

has the daily press taken a keen interest in the subject. A good history is Kathleen Hall Jamieson's **Packaging the Presidency: A History and Criticism of Presidential Campaign Advertising** (Oxford, 1984).

Today, many newspapers provide detailed accounts of candidate spending for airtime, as well as analysis of the candidates' claims. Spots are also regularly reviewed on the evening news—NBC superimposes "FALSE" for claims it says are unsubstantiated. But all the high technology and big dollars, Edwin Diamond and Stephen Bates warn in **The Spot: The Rise of Political Advertising on Television** (MIT, 3rd edition, 1992), "may be turning campaigns and elections into a kind of spectator sport . . . to watch and enjoy but not necessarily to participate in by voting."

A bit of perspective on all of this is provided by, among other things, the fact that the decline of voter turnout in U.S. presidential elections began a century ago, long before the invention of TV. The "debasement" of presidential campaigning, notes historian Gil Troy in **See How They Ran: The Changing Role of the Presidential Candidate** (Free Press, 1991), is likewise an old story. During most of the 19th century, the nation's republican tradition made it seem undignified for presidential candidates even to speak on their own behalf. But gradually the democratic demand for "the personal touch" drew candidates to campaign, first from their back porches and later on the hustings. Increasingly, voters were interested not only in the character and ideas of the candidates but in their personality and in details of their personal life. Yet it was not until 1908 that both major party candidates took to the campaign trail.

In **The Reasoning Voter: Communication**



and **Persuasion in Presidential Campaigns** (Univ. of Chicago, 1991), political scientist Samuel Popkin argues that Americans are not bamboozled by today's media barrage. "Voters know how to read the media and the politicians better than most

media critics acknowledge," he writes. Studies since the 1940 election have regularly reminded researchers that voters get much of their information through personal communication with friends, neighbors, and local "opinion leaders." In **The Main Source: Learning from Television News** (Sage, 1986) John P. Robinson and Mark R. Levy conclude that "the good news is . . . the public is far better informed" than "previous studies have suggested," but the "bad news" is that citizens know far less about public affairs "than most news workers" assume.

The Future of News: Television, Newspapers, Wire Services, Newsmagazines (Woodrow Wilson Center & John Hopkins, 1992), edited by Philip S. Cook, Douglas Gomery, and Lawrence W. Lichty, holds out little hope for help from the media. The percentage of the population that reads newspapers is dwindling: Television coverage of day-to-day government, already scant, is likely to suffer as shrinking network market shares force cuts in news budgets. Whatever its defects, TV's coverage of campaigns today is at least plentiful.

The impact is difficult to pin down. Yet with all this coverage it seems safe to say that we will never see any candidate confessing, as Vice President William Howard Taft did at the outset of an 18,000-mile, 400-speech campaign trip for the presidency in 1908, "I am from time to time oppressed with the sense that I am not the man who ought to have been selected."

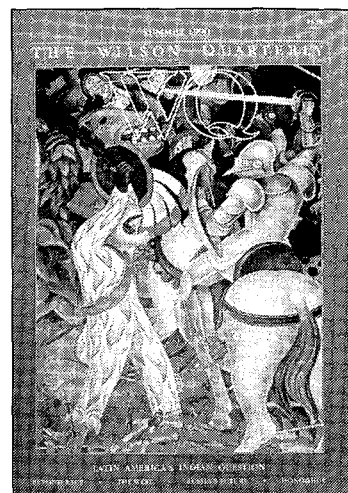
—Lawrence W. Lichty

Lawrence W. Lichty is director of the Wilson Center's Media Studies Project. He is the author most recently (with James G. Webster) of Ratings Analysis: Theory and Practice (1991).

A Gift for Grads & Dads

This Spring, give membership in
The Wilson Center Associates.

Membership in The Wilson Center
Associates is truly a prestigious gift —
even for the most discriminating of
your friends and family.



Whether you need a gift for a bright young graduate, or for your
favorite father on Father's Day, membership is the perfect solution.

Every gift includes 4 issues of the WILSON QUARTERLY... the newsmagazine of
the world of ideas. plus an outstanding package of benefits and privileges:

- **MEMBERSHIP** identification card in **The Wilson Center Associates**.
- **REPORTS** on Wilson Center conferences and seminars.
- **DISCOUNTS** on major Wilson Center books.
- **SAVINGS** on all Smithsonian books, records, museum reproductions,
and gifts — whether purchased in Smithsonian shops, or by mail.
- **FULL ELIGIBILITY** for all Smithsonian foreign and domestic study tours
and regional events.

Give one gift this spring at our **\$24** price, and your second gift is just **\$15** —
that's a savings of over 37%!

Ordering your gifts is so easy. Just fill out the attached postpaid card, and drop
it in the mailbox.

We'll then send a card announcing your generous gift to each of your recipients.

