

West, Darrell, "Media Coverage of Ads" *Air Wars: Television Advertising in Election Campaigns, 1952-2000*, 4<sup>th</sup> ed (Washington, CQ Press, 2005)

Chapter 4

## Media Coverage of Ads

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Reporters used to be governed by the norms of old-style journalism—the “who, what, where, when, and how” approach to news-gathering. Candidates’ statements were reported more or less at face value; behind-the-scenes machinations fell outside the news; and, by implicit agreement, the private behavior of political leaders was pretty much ignored. However, Lyndon Johnson’s deception in the Vietnam War and Richard Nixon’s lying in the face of the deepening Watergate scandal led reporters to take more interpretive and investigative approaches to news-gathering. Rather than sticking to hard news, journalists today see a responsibility to put “the facts” in broader context.

This style of journalism also led reporters to a different approach to campaign coverage. Once content to cover candidates’ speeches and travel, reporters began to emphasize behind-the-scenes activities. What strategies were candidates pursuing? What blocs of voters were seen as most critical to electoral success? What clues did campaigns provide about candidates’ underlying beliefs and preferences? Following the lead of Theodore White, who revolutionized coverage of presidential campaigns, reporters began to devote greater attention to analysis.<sup>1</sup>

Changes in the nature of presidential selection following the 1968 election created new opportunities for reporters.<sup>2</sup> The decline in the power of party leaders, rise in the number of primaries, and extension of races over a number of months made it dramatically easier for reporters to explore behind-the-scenes maneuvering. In fact, the entry of little-known candidates into open nominating contests made it important for reporters to cover the backgrounds and goals of candidates.

But according to observers, the media have not fulfilled their responsibility. Research generally has found that the media devote little space to policy matters. A thorough study, by Henry Brady and Richard Johnston, of every United Press International story on the Democratic candidates from January 1 through July 31, 1984, revealed that only 16 percent of lines of press coverage were devoted to policy positions. The more common topics included discussions of the campaign (50 percent overall, including 21 percent devoted to prospects of election, 20 percent devoted to campaign appearances, and 9 percent devoted to sources of support), personal qualities of the candidates (23 percent), and comments about the opposition (11 percent). These figures are comparable to what Doris Graber found in her study of *Chicago Tribune* coverage of the 1983 mayoral election. In that race, 42 percent of the lines dealt with the campaign, 20 percent were devoted to policy matters, 19 percent dealt with personal qualities, and 20 percent involved other matters, such as ethics or party affairs.<sup>3</sup>

These findings have been disappointing to those who believe the media should play a central role in educating the electorate. Rather than devoting space to matters that would facilitate public education, the press focuses most often on who is ahead and who is behind. Michael Robinson and Margaret Sheehan show in their study of the 1980 presidential campaign that once the nominating season gets under way, this so-called horse-race coverage far outpaces coverage of issues and candidates.<sup>4</sup> Just at the point when voters start to pay attention to politics, reporters devote relatively little coverage to the candidates' stances on issues and devote substantial attention to the contest.

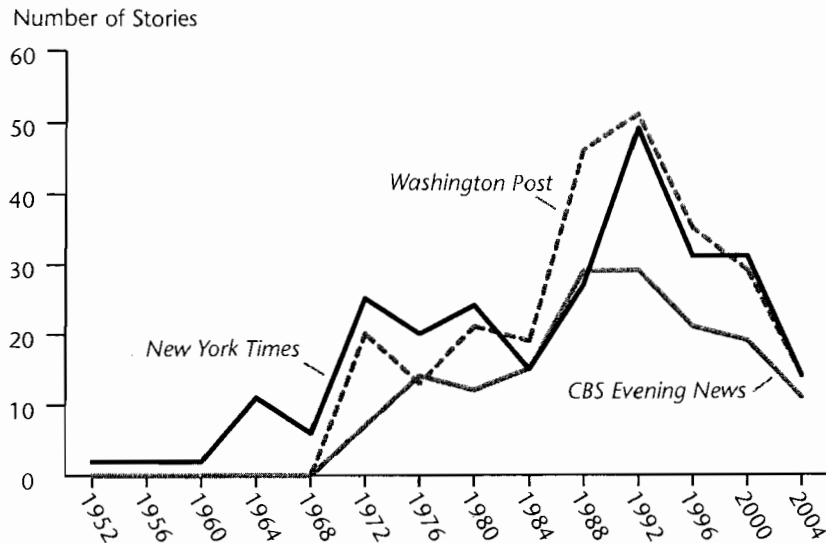
This pattern of reporting has affected voters. In their path-breaking survey research on the 1948 presidential campaign, Bernard Berelson, Paul Lazarsfeld, and William McPhee discovered that 67 percent of voters' conversations with one another dealt with the policy positions and personal qualifications of candidates, whereas about 25 percent involved questions of "winnability."<sup>5</sup> But by 1976, these numbers had reversed in public opinion surveys. According to Thomas Patterson, the "game was the major topic of conversation in 1976."<sup>6</sup> In June of that year, near the end of the nominating cycle, 69 percent of conversations involved the game and only 18 percent dealt with substantive matters.

The horse race has become a popular object of press attention because it often involves drama and suspense. Nothing attracts

media attention like a surprise showing that surpasses their expectations. Candidates who have come out of nowhere and do well in early caucuses and primaries attract a disproportionate share of media coverage.<sup>7</sup> Jimmy Carter's nominating campaign was the classic case of momentum fueled by media coverage. In the months before the 1976 Iowa caucuses, the Georgia governor was a virtual unknown. Public opinion polls a year before the election had put him on the list of "asterisk" candidates, those individuals who fell in the "others" category because their public preference ratings were under 5 percent. When Carter did better than expected in Iowa, he received an extraordinary amount of news coverage, much of which dealt with his success in the horse race. He then skyrocketed in the polls, was able to raise much more money, and eventually became the Democratic Party nominee.

### The Increasing Coverage of Ads

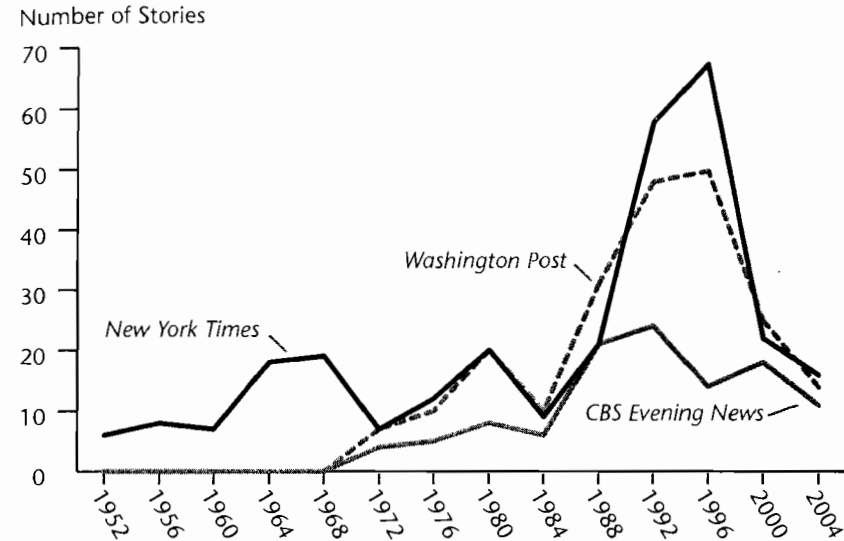
To see how advertising is covered by reporters, I tabulated the number of *New York Times* articles from 1952 to 2004, *Washington Post* articles from 1972 to 2004, and *CBS Evening News* stories from 1972 to 2004 that covered political advertising.<sup>8</sup> There were some differences among the news outlets, but the general trend was a substantial increase in coverage of advertisements in the 1980s and 1990s.<sup>9</sup> For both nominating and general election contests, the 1970s did not generate many television stories about political spot ads (see Figures 4-1 and 4-2, respectively, for the stages). For example, in 1972 only seven CBS stories about ads appeared during the nominating process in the spring and four during the general election campaign in the fall. In 1976, CBS ran fourteen ad stories in the spring and five in the fall. However, the numbers started to rise in 1980 and continued to rise throughout that decade. The 1988 race produced five times the number of ad stories (twenty-nine in the nominating campaign and twenty-one in the general election campaign) as did the elections of the 1970s. Similarly, the 1992 contest generated twenty-nine nomination and twenty-four general election campaign ad stories. Since then, though, campaign ads have generated less news coverage. For example, the 1996 campaign had fewer stories (twenty-one in the nomination stage and fourteen in the general election stage) than 1988 or 1992, and 2000 and 2004 saw a continuing decline in the number of television and newspaper stories about campaign ads.

**Figure 4-1** Media Coverage of Nomination Campaign Ads, 1952–2004

Sources: *New York Times*, 1952–2004; *CBS Evening News*, 1972–2004; *Washington Post*, 1972–2004.

In regard to the *New York Times*, the critical turning point in ad coverage for the nominating process occurred in 1972. Before then, there were few stories about political advertising. In 1952, 1956, and 1960, there were two *New York Times* articles about ads each year in the presidential nominating period from January to June. A March 26, 1960, article, for example, described Stuart Symington's decision not to launch a pre-convention television drive against Nixon. In 1968, for the same period, six stories appeared. An article on May 8 recounted Robert Kennedy's decision to spend heavily on television in Indiana because of Gov. Roger Branigan's control of the party organization. Most of the other articles dealt with the content of or strategies behind ads.

However, after Democratic reforms and the rise in the number of primaries, the number of stories on ads during the nominating process rose dramatically. The 1972 campaign was the first election conducted under the new nomination reforms, which added more primaries and therefore gave citizens a more direct voice in delegate selection. It is not surprising that press coverage of ads during the nominating period increased considerably. Twenty stories appeared

**Figure 4-2** Media Coverage of General Election Campaign Ads, 1952–2004

Sources: *New York Times*, 1952–2004; *CBS Evening News*, 1972–2004; *Washington Post*, 1972–2004.

in the *Washington Post* in 1972, compared with thirteen in 1976, twenty-one in 1980, nineteen in 1984, forty-six in 1988, fifty-one in 1992, thirty-five in 1996, twenty-nine in 2000, and fourteen in 2004. Twenty-five articles about campaign commercials appeared in the *New York Times* between January and June of 1972, twenty in 1976, twenty-four in 1980, fifteen in 1984, twenty-seven in 1988, forty-nine in 1992, thirty-one in 1996, thirty-one in 2000, and fourteen in 2004.

Newspaper coverage of general election advertising has changed as well. In general, the number of stories has fluctuated considerably, depending on the closeness of the race. Campaigns that were seen as competitive (1968, 1976, 1980, 1988, 1992, and 2000) generated many more stories than did those with a clear front-runner (1972, 1984, and 1996). This was particularly true in 1992, as the three-way battle between George Bush, Bill Clinton, and Ross Perot prompted a dramatic increase in the number of news stories. In close elections, the media devote more coverage to campaign phenomena, such as television advertising, that are thought to make a difference in voters' choices.<sup>10</sup>

## Horse-Race Coverage of Ads

The increase in the coverage of ads highlights the blurring of free and paid media, but the raw figures do not reveal what reporters actually said. There has been widespread criticism about media attention to horse-race considerations and the limited time spent on policy matters. Because television is the major news source for most Americans, I examined in detail all the stories about campaign advertising that appeared on the *CBS Evening News* from 1972 through 2004. I analyzed two features: (1) the content of the ad reference and (2) the general topic of the news story in which the ad was discussed. I then developed several categories to assess the quality of coverage and to facilitate comparison with the results for ads themselves.

There were interesting differences between the descriptions of ads in news stories and the content of the news stories. As shown in Table 4-1, the major contrast concerned the tendency of reporters fascinated with the horse race to convert substantive ad messages into news stories about campaign prospects or strategies. More ads that were reported on in the news were specific (34 percent) than the news stories themselves (16 percent).

CBS often rebroadcast ad segments that were particularly pointed in their charges about opponents' policy positions. For example, a Nixon ad featured on the *CBS Evening News* on October 30, 1972 lambasted George McGovern's defense posture and noted which specific weapons programs the Democrat would oppose. In the same vein, on January 19, 1988, CBS showed a Jack Kemp ad that attacked George Bush and Robert Dole for being willing to reduce Social Security benefits. Nominating campaign coverage tended to be more specific about policy (36 percent) than was coverage of the general election campaign (27 percent).

In contrast, most of the news stories about ads dealt with the campaign (63 percent).<sup>11</sup> Many of these stories included discussions of how particular ads fit strategic goals of the campaign (34 percent), how they affected the candidate's electoral prospects (19 percent), or how they were produced and financed within the campaign organization (10 percent).

For example, on January 29, 1980, CBS broadcast a story describing an Edward Kennedy ad that addressed the Chapquiddick incident. The ad itself dealt with personal qualities, such as Kennedy's honesty, but the story emphasized the change in

TABLE 4-1  
*Content and Tone of CBS News Coverage, 1972-2004*

Appeal	Descriptions of Ads	News Stories about Ads
Personal qualities	27%	11%
Domestic performance	27	9
Specific policy statements	34	16
International affairs	6	1
Campaign	6	63
Party	0	0
N	(266)	(266)
Negativity level	66%	64%

Sources: *Vanderbilt Television News Index and Abstracts* for 1972-1988 campaigns, and *CBS Evening News* tapes for 1992-2004 campaigns.

Note: Entries indicate the percentage of *CBS Evening News* stories devoted to each type of appeal.

the campaign's strategy, which had been designed to reassure voters about the senator's conduct. Another example appeared February 12, 1988, when a Michael Dukakis ad on the economy was analyzed in terms of its contribution to the candidate's campaign strategy.

Coverage of ad content often depended on the candidate's party affiliation. The news media were more likely to report specific ad claims for Republicans (42 percent) than for Democrats (23 percent). They were also more likely to cover ads based on international affairs for Republicans (7 percent) than for Democrats (4 percent). In contrast, Democrats earned more news coverage for ads on domestic performance (32 percent) than did Republicans (18 percent). Party affiliation also affected coverage of ads reflecting personal qualities (33 percent for Democrats and 27 percent for Republicans).

In general, however, news reports placed much less emphasis on personal qualities, domestic performance, or specific policy statements than did the ads themselves. Reporters often blame candidates for not discussing the issues, but it appears that fascination with the horse race leads journalists to turn substantive messages into campaign stories.

In addition, ads broadcast as part of news stories tended to be more negative than the news stories were. Sixty-six percent of ads described in the news were negative in orientation, compared with 54 percent of the news stories themselves. Negative ads have become more common. Negative commercials tend to be more controversial, which produces greater coverage than otherwise would be the case. But the media devote considerable time to rebroadcasting negative ads, which reinforces the widespread public view about the negativity of television ads. In fact, it is well known in political circles that one of the easiest ways to attract press coverage is to run negative commercials. Media adviser Roger Ailes explained it this way: "There are three things that the media are interested in: pictures, mistakes, and attacks. . . . If you need coverage, you attack, and you will get coverage."<sup>12</sup>

### Shifts in Ad Coverage Over Time

An intensive study of *New York Times* ad coverage since 1952 shows exactly how press coverage of commercials has shifted over time. In the 1950s, consistent with the old-style journalism practiced at that time, considerable attention was devoted to the use of celebrity endorsements in the presidential campaign. For example, Eleanor Roosevelt filmed an endorsement of Adlai Stevenson that generated press attention simply because of her celebrity status. In 1960, an April 20 story discussed a New York telethon plan to raise money for fall advertising time, and a March 26 article recounted Symington's decision not to spend \$400,000 in a pre-convention television drive against Nixon.

Both of the 1960 articles are noteworthy because of their emphasis on factual events. Hard facts were emphasized, and announcements from campaign officials were taken at face value. There was little discussion of how the decision fit broader strategic goals. There was no analysis of campaign maneuvering or how candidates actually reached particular decisions. Furthermore, no attention was paid to the motivations of campaign decision makers. Reporters did not examine the true motives or goals of Symington or the telethon planners to determine what they really were trying to accomplish or who was winning organizational battles.

A similar example of hard news coverage occurred in 1968. On May 27, the *New York Times* reported that Hubert Humphrey had hired the firm Doyle Dane Bernbach as his advertising agency. This

seemingly bland news item is noteworthy because of what it did not say. The article more or less stayed on the surface. It did not delve into strategic considerations. Furthermore, it did not address the consequences of the decision for the power balance within the Humphrey organization. There was no speculation about who won and who lost in this decision or what it revealed about the type of campaign Humphrey might run.

However, the *New York Times* began to cover political advertising in a different way during the 1970s and 1980s. A January 14, 1972 article describing Maine senator Edmund Muskie's use of television in his bid for the Democratic nomination illustrates the new tendency to put the campaign in context and tell the story behind the event. The article noted that television would be the dominant element in Muskie's campaign. His strategy was described as contrasting himself to Nixon's weak credibility. The newspaper's approach was clearly a departure. The story emphasized strategic considerations—how advertising furthered vote-getting—and illustrated the effort to report the behind-the-scenes story. The attention to the candidate's motivations and goals reflected the new direction in the coverage of political ads.

This discussion is not meant to imply that strategic considerations were the reporters' only focus. Journalists also devoted attention to the substance of television ads. A March 21, 1984 article covering Democratic Party ads focused on the "ethical and moral" violations of the Reagan administration. Rep. Tony Coelho, D-Calif., was quoted as criticizing President Reagan's willingness to blast welfare cheats but not those who violate the public trust. There were stories in 1988 that discussed Rep. Richard Gephardt's trade ads in Iowa. The Democratic representative from Missouri used highly effective commercials blasting Far East trading partners for closing their markets to American products while flooding the United States with cheaper imports. But even this type of coverage often incorporated considerations of candidates' strategic thinking. A number of stories describing the content of ads showed how particular messages were designed to appeal to particular constituencies.

### "Daisy," "Daisy II," and the "Revolving Door"

Nothing illustrates the controversy over how the media cover political commercials better than Johnson's "Daisy" spot in 1964, the Republican remake of that ad ("Daisy II") by a group of

Texans in 2000, and George Bush's "Revolving Door" ad in 1988. The "Daisy" commercial is probably the most infamous ad in television history. It opens with a young girl standing in a meadow plucking petals from a daisy. After she counts "1, 2, 3, 4, 5, 6, 7, 8, 9," a solemn voice begins its own countdown: "10, 9, 8, 7, 6, 5, 4, 3, 2, 1, 0." At zero, the picture of the child dissolves, and a mushroom cloud fills the screen. Johnson closes the ad by warning, "These are the stakes. To make a world in which all of God's children can live, or to go into the dark. We must either love each other or we must die."<sup>13</sup>

This ad aired only once, during NBC's *Monday Night at the Movies* showing of *David and Bathsheeba* on September 7, 1964. But condemnation came almost immediately. As recalled by Bill Moyers, then Johnson's press secretary, "The president called me and said 'Holy shit. I'm getting calls from all over the country.' Most of them said that it was an effective ad. Others said they didn't like it." Press reaction was swift. According to Lloyd Wright, an advertising strategist for Johnson, "The first night it aired, it created such a media flap that the next night it was used in its entirety on the newscasts on all three networks." Johnson pulled the ad.<sup>14</sup> The accusation that Goldwater would use nuclear weapons was not thought by outside observers to have any factual basis and therefore did not deserve to be on the air.

In 2000, a group of Texans used a nonprofit group called Aretino Industries to sponsor a remake of the "Daisy" ad. Featuring a similar image of a young girl plucking petals off a daisy, the commercial claimed that because President Clinton and Vice President Al Gore had "sold" military intelligence "to Communist Red China in exchange for campaign contributions," China has "the ability to threaten our homes with long-range nuclear weapons." Following the disappearance of the girl and the image of a nuclear explosion, the tag line of the commercial was, "Don't take a chance. Please vote Republican."<sup>15</sup> Because the group claimed it was engaging in public education, it refused to identify the source of its contributors. However, because the central claim was not documented (other than GOP charges during the investigation into the Democratic National Committee's 1996 fund-raising) and the ad was so inflammatory, the George W. Bush campaign asked the group to discontinue the ad, which it agreed to do.

George Bush's "Revolving Door" ad in 1988 evoked a more complex set of political reactions and media coverage. Its image of pris-

oners flowing through a prison revolving door helped convey the idea that Dukakis was soft on crime. CBS covered this commercial in its broadcast on October 7, 1988. (News stories about Willie Horton had been broadcast September 22.) The story described the commercial as a crime ad that would highlight the prison furlough policy of Governor Dukakis. Clifford Barnes and Donna Cuomo, joint victims of an assault by a convict who had been released on a weekend furlough, were reported to be participating in a speaking tour with a pro-Bush group. Bush meanwhile was shown campaigning with police officers. This story was followed on October 20 by another, this time showing in great detail Horton's crime record and supplying background on the Bush ad. Bush was shown campaigning in New York City at a police union rally. It was not until October 24 and 25—almost three weeks after the commercial appeared—that Democratic opponents appeared on the news to claim that the "Revolving Door" ad had racist undertones.

But in keeping with the horse-race mentality of the media, a second story on October 25 also quoted media consultant Tony Schwartz as saying that Bush's ads were successful and that the "Revolving Door" was particularly effective. Whereas the 1964 ad was immediately condemned and removed from the airwaves, reporters in 1988 treated the furlough ad as a typical advertisement. It was described as being quite effective. Criticisms came late and were never solidly addressed; the spot was not pulled off the air.

This subdued and delayed reaction was in keeping with the general tenor of news coverage about attack ads in 1988. A number of CBS stories and *New York Times* articles during the general election campaign emphasized the overall effectiveness of negative political commercials. A September 18 *New York Times* article, for example, discussed the role of advertising in contemporary campaigns. Former California governor Jerry Brown was quoted as saying that media and professional campaign advisors think that negative commercials work better. A number of politicians and consultants were cited as saying that Bush and Dukakis would be foolish to delve deeply into policy issues. This article was followed on October 10 with another that cited campaign officials who believed the electorate had become accustomed to sharp-elbow tactics.

In addition, political professionals quoted on October 19 derided Dukakis's advertising effort. Several experts complained about the ever-shifting focus of his ad campaign and the fact that his commercials were not well timed. An October 13 story noted that 1988

was the first time candidates used more ads to criticize opponents than to promote themselves. A number of analysts even attributed Bush's lead in the polls to the success of his negative commercials and the lack of an appropriate response by Dukakis.

The grudging respect reporters had for the effectiveness of the GOP ads created a pattern of coverage that benefited Bush. Rather than condemning the "Revolving Door" ad, reporters rebroadcast the ad repeatedly throughout the last month of the campaign.<sup>16</sup> This behavior effectively erased the traditional difference between the free and paid media. It gave Bush more air time and therefore lent him more credibility than any campaign organization alone could have managed. This style of news coverage helped make Bush's 1988 advertising campaign one of the most effective in recent memory.

### Swift Boat Veterans and MoveOn.org Ads

In 2004, another set of advertisements attracted considerable press attention. A group of military veterans formed an ad hoc organization called Swift Boat Veterans for Truth (later renamed Swift Vets and POWs for Truth). Upset over John Kerry's claims of courage, leadership, and bravery in Vietnam, they raised millions for commercials criticizing the Democrat. One ad claimed Kerry "is no war hero" and that he "lied to get his Bronze Star." Another took him to task for meeting with enemy leaders during the Paris peace talks and concluded "John Kerry cannot be trusted."<sup>17</sup>

Not to be outdone, a liberal group known as MoveOn.org challenged President George W. Bush's National Guard service during Vietnam. It claimed Bush used family connections to avoid being sent to Vietnam and that he did not meet his National Guard service duties.<sup>18</sup>

For weeks during the campaign, these dueling ads debated the two candidates' military records and revived controversies about the Vietnam War. Using their traditional prerogative of investigation, reporters delved into the claims of these groups. Investigative reports into the Swift Boat veterans revealed financing from individuals closely aligned with the Bush family. Journalists also noted a number of inconsistencies and factual inaccuracies in the group's claims. For example, it was found that several of the veterans who were criticizing Kerry's service record had praised him earlier and commended his bravery. Official military records also attested to Kerry's courage in the line of duty.<sup>19</sup>

Meanwhile, CBS News and others explored the MoveOn.org claims that Bush had benefited from favoritism in securing National Guard duty during Vietnam. In a highly publicized *60 Minutes* broadcast, it revealed long-lost military records showing Bush had received preferential treatment and did not show up for required military physicals during his National Guard duty.

However, the CBS broadcast touched off a firestorm of criticism. Documents experts claimed the military records were forgeries and relied on contemporary font types that were not in existence in the 1970s. Eventually, after considerable embarrassment, Dan Rather and CBS News apologized for their reporting and said they could no longer verify the accuracy of documents they had used to question Bush's National Guard service.

The entire episode revealed the difficulty news organizations have in exercising oversight of political claims. Given the repetition of the advertisements, it proved difficult for news organizations to penalize advertisers for the use of false or misleading claims. News critiques aired once while the ad itself was broadcast dozens of times. In addition, uncritical reporting amplified misleading group claims.

In the end, journalists proved no match for the money and power of candidates and their interest group allies. National public opinion polls showed that two-thirds of Americans had heard of Swift Boat ads and one-third of those seeing the commercials believed Kerry had lied about his record, suggesting the anti-Kerry spots significantly impacted voter perceptions.<sup>20</sup> The declining respect people had for reporters undermined the ability of the press to act as effective oversight agents.

### Voluntary Efforts and Ad Watches

Dissatisfaction with paid campaign advertisements in American elections has generated heartfelt pleas for fundamental change in the way elections are conducted. One proposal to improve civic discourse in American political life is free television time for the candidates. Put forward in its latest incarnation in 1996 by Paul Taylor of the Free TV for Straight Talk Coalition, this approach was simple. As expressed in a full-page *New York Times* ad on October 1, the coalition proposed that "from October 17 through November 1, all of the major networks carve out two and a half minutes in prime time to allow the presidential candidates to deliver

mini-speeches on alternating nights.”<sup>21</sup> This would allow office-seekers the opportunity to speak directly to the general public without mediation by journalists or interest groups.

But the problem in 1996 and 2000 was that the major networks refused to adopt a standardized format or schedule. In 1996, for example, the Fox Network agreed to broadcast ten one-minute campaign statements from Clinton and Dole during prime time in the weeks leading up to the election. Under the plan, each candidate would deliver a one-minute speech in response to each of ten questions that Fox had posed based on questions citizens had indicated were important to them in a national public opinion survey. CBS also agreed to two-minute segments from Clinton and Dole titled “Where I Stand” on each of four consecutive nights starting October 21 based on topics (education, taxes, Social Security and Medicare, and health care) defined as important by voters in a CBS News poll. However, ABC was only willing to give Dole and Clinton a single-shot, extended interview in prime time the week before the election; CNN set aside time during *Inside Politics* for candidate segments entitled “Addressing America,” and NBC would only commit time during its *Dateline* news magazine program.<sup>22</sup> The same lack of willingness to set aside block time periods occurred in 2000, which limited the effectiveness of the free television time idea. No production assistance or voice-overs were allowed, just the candidates speaking directly into the camera. The audience for these segments was tiny as a result of the lack of press attention and the lack of a standardized schedule that could be publicized.<sup>23</sup>

Even more problematic was the unwillingness of television stations to provide free time for races below the presidential level. In general, television stations refused to provide free time for any candidates other than presidential contenders because of the lost revenue and concern about equal time requirements for all candidates. However, A. H. Belo Corporation, owner of seven local stations, was one of the exceptions when it offered five minutes of free broadcast time to local candidates for the Senate, House, and gubernatorial races in the seven cities where Belo owned television stations.<sup>24</sup>

Another reform proposal centers on ad watches, which are newspaper columns and television segments that are devoted to monitoring the accuracy of political advertising. As described by Kathleen Hall Jamieson, one of the originators of the concept, ad watches provide a “grammar of evaluation.”<sup>25</sup> In their original formulation, reporters would show an ad (or provide a transcript in

the case of a newspaper story) and then critique the claims presented in the commercial. Were there factual inaccuracies? Was the rhetoric overblown? Did ads mislead the public in any way?

The 1988 presidential campaign was the first one to feature ad watches. From time to time, national newspapers printed “truth boxes” in which ad claims were assessed. The television networks ran stories containing a broadcast of an ad and a critique by a reporter. However, focus groups conducted that year revealed that these ad watches did not achieve their purpose. Viewers often remembered the ad but not the media corrections.

Jamieson encountered the same problem in focus groups she conducted. When she showed a story by Richard Threlkeld of CBS debunking Bush’s “Tank” ad, she was dismayed to learn that viewers internalized the ad message. In the Bush spot, a helmeted and obviously ill-at-ease Dukakis rode around in a military tank while visual text on screen claimed the Massachusetts governor opposed major weapons programs. Threlkeld ran a lengthy critique of this ad showing that Dukakis actually supported a number of weapons systems, but viewers who saw this story were more likely to believe Bush’s charges against Dukakis than the news story’s rebuttal.

The problem was that when Threlkeld rebroadcast the ad within his news story in order to critique it, the spot was shown full-screen. Reminiscent of Lesley Stahl’s experience during the Reagan presidency, this approach exposed people to compelling pictures (see Chapter 1). Many viewers remembered the visuals, not the audio critique.

The style of coverage in the 1988 campaign was disturbing to reporters themselves. The feeling was that by not having challenged Bush more effectively in 1988, candidates in subsequent elections ran deceptive ads to the detriment of the campaign dialogue. Based on this experience, ad watches were changed in several ways. Instead of rebroadcasting ads full-screen, Brooks Jackson of CNN made an innovative effort on the show *Inside Politics* to review ads without hyping the candidate. The trick, according to Jackson, was to use what Jamieson called a truth box to rebroadcast the commercial in a smaller square tilted to the side so that viewers could see it was not a candidate’s airing of the ad.

This shrinking of the video in the ad watch is important because it undercuts the visual impact of the advertisement. Rather than forcing news analysts to compete with powerful visual images, the CNN approach allows reporters to superimpose their own

graphics, such as “misleading,” “false,” or “unfair” over the ad. This method puts the news story on a fairer visual footing with the ad.

In the analysis of the spot, the dimensions of accuracy and fairness were separated from notions of strategic effectiveness so that viewers would realize there were several different standards of evaluation. It was hoped that this approach would overcome the tendency displayed during the 1988 presidential campaign of evaluating ads mainly on the dimension of whether they worked.

To give ad watches a distinctive identity, many newspapers created a formal box labeled “ad watch.” This feature provided the complete script of the ad (along with a photo of the most important visual), an assessment of the accuracy of the ad, and a discussion of its effectiveness.

The media in 1992 devoted considerable space to ad watches. Overall, the *New York Times* ran fifteen separate reviews throughout the nominating process, and the *Washington Post* ran twenty-one. The general election campaign featured twenty-nine ad watches in the *New York Times* and twenty-four in the *Washington Post*. The television networks also incorporated ad segments into a number of stories.

Ad watches had a big impact on candidates. The 1992 campaign witnessed the rise of what I call “ads with footnotes.” Reporters’ scrutiny forced candidates to document their claims more carefully. This led some presidential aspirants to include factual citations directly on the screen reminiscent of footnotes in a term paper. For example, Clinton ads routinely listed the source and date of publication of a quote or fact for viewers to see. Clinton would quote a statistic and cite the Bureau of the Census or a newspaper article as the source.

This was an obvious effort to boost the credibility of the Clinton ads. Because nonpartisan sources, such as newspaper articles and government reports, have greater credibility than partisan spots, ads with footnotes are a way of piggybacking claims on the high credibility of more objective sources. Clinton media adviser Frank Greer said his campaign’s research in 1992 “consistently found that viewers believed Bush’s negative ads—such as one suggesting that Clinton would raise taxes on middle-class workers—lacked documentation. . . . They [the Bush advisers] never figured out that you needed to offer people substantiation and details. Ross Perot figured that out.”<sup>26</sup>

Because of the close attention the media devote to ads, it is not surprising that the viewing public notices ad watches. A 1992 survey revealed that 57 percent of respondents said they had seen ad watches, 28 percent said they had not, and 15 percent did not remember. Viewers reported that they found ad watches to be helpful.

Another survey that year asked respondents how helpful news stories analyzing ads had been.<sup>27</sup> Of those expressing an opinion, 21 percent indicated the stories had been very helpful, and 47 percent said they had been somewhat helpful. Only 32 percent felt the ad watch analysis had not been helpful in some way.

According to reporters, ad watches were effective oversight tools. Howard Kurtz of the *Washington Post* said they were “a great step forward for democracy because they keep candidates honest.” The same sentiment was expressed by Mara Liasson of National Public Radio, who said that “candidates are more careful because they know [they] will be scrutinized.”<sup>28</sup>

However, research by Stephen Ansolabehere and Shanto Iyengar published at the beginning of the 1996 campaign concluded that ad watches were almost completely ineffective.<sup>29</sup> Drawing on three simple experiments in which some viewers were shown a CNN ad watch while others were not, Ansolabehere and Iyengar obtained a surprising result. Participants developed greater support for candidates whose ads were scrutinized by reporters. This was the exact opposite of what was intended by the ad watch. More generally, the authors raised criticism about whether it was appropriate for the press to act as self-appointed watchdogs policing the action of political candidates. Since many of the judgments of journalists are subjective and involve value-laden assessments, it would be better, Ansolabehere and Iyengar suggest, for candidates and voters to make decisions about what is unfair or misleading.

Jamieson has challenged Ansolabehere and Iyengar’s research on the grounds that the particular ad watches used in the experiment were not typical of the genre. Appearing on CNN’s *Inside Politics* and writing later in a January 27, 1996, *New York Times* op-ed piece, Jamieson argued that the particular commercials reviewed in the study’s ad watches were judged to be accurate, not inaccurate.<sup>30</sup> Therefore, it was a failure of the experiment, not a failure of the ad watch, when voters responded favorably.

To see how media outlets viewed ad watches, I participated in a project that conducted a telephone survey of 261 newspapers and

local television stations around the country in 1996.<sup>31</sup> Newspaper managing editors and local television news directors were asked whether their outlets had conducted ad watches, when they started, which election campaigns were covered, what format was used, how they evaluated the impact of the ad watches, and whether they planned to continue ad watches in the 1996 campaign.

Newspapers were much more likely (65 percent) than television stations (44 percent) to have conducted ad watches. The first ones appeared in 1988, and most television stations began to run them in 1990 and 1992. The most frequent elections covered in newspaper ad watches were gubernatorial races (54 percent of all newspapers), followed by Senate races (51 percent), House contests (47 percent), local races (36 percent), presidential campaigns (26 percent), and referenda (1 percent). Television stations were most likely to cover Senate races (21 percent), compared with presidential races (16 percent), House contests (16 percent), gubernatorial races (12 percent), local races (8 percent), and referenda (0 percent).

Few editors felt that ad watches had reduced ad frequency, led candidates to withdraw ads, made campaigns less negative, or led candidates to be more careful in what they said. Yet newspaper editors expressed more support for ad watches than did news directors at television stations.

Part of the problem with ad watches concerns their format. Whereas 60 percent of newspapers used ad watches to analyze truthfulness, only 20 percent of television stations did. Only one in every ten media sources used clear language to condemn candidate ads. Most accounts leaned over backwards to be even-handed in their treatment of the major candidates. This works to the advantage of candidates willing to push the envelope and engage in deceptive appeals. Thus, some of the failures of ad watches to achieve their potential are due to an unwillingness on the part of newspapers and television stations to use them to their full effect.

The 1996 nominating process saw a decrease in the number of ad watches. The *New York Times* printed eight ad watches in the spring, down from fifteen during the 1992 nominating process. The *Washington Post* ran seven ad watches, down from twenty-one in 1992. This decline represents the absence of a competitive Democratic primary and the shortened Republican process after Dole wrapped up a majority by the end of March. In the 1996 general election, the *New York Times* ran fifteen ad watches, down from

twenty-nine in 1992. The *Washington Post* conducted seven ad watches, compared with the twenty-four it had done in 1992.

The ad watches conducted in national outlets reviewed a relatively small proportion of the ads actually broadcast by candidates. Most spots were reviewed just a single time, in contrast to the dozens of times top ads are aired before the viewing public.<sup>32</sup> Of course, media outlets have more credibility with the American public than do partisan political ads. But an imbalance exists between the frequency of ads broadcast and the frequency with which those ads are reviewed through ad watches.

Another problem is the development of different types of ad watches. Some followed the traditional model of evaluating ad accuracy. In general, based on focus groups in 1996, voters liked these segments and felt they added a valuable perspective to campaign discourse. However, other ad watches moved into the realm of strategic calculations and evaluated campaigners' goals in running particular ads. In focus groups, these segments were not as favorably received by voters. Ordinary citizens viewing these types of ad watches felt reporters were not adding much substantive information and were focusing too much on "the game."<sup>33</sup>

Focus groups revealed that ads have added so much visual text on-screen and that so many different candidate, party, and independent group organizations are running spots today that voters have difficulty correctly identifying the sponsors of political ads. In one focus group dealing with a Senate race, only 50 percent of participants correctly identified the sponsors of candidate and party ads that we showed them. In another focus group, which dealt with the presidential campaign, only 46 percent correctly identified ad sponsors despite having just seen the ad.<sup>34</sup>

On average, the text identifying the sponsors of ads is on the screen for five seconds, which is not long enough for many viewers to identify the ad sponsor. In one case—that of an independent ad on retirement savings accounts broadcast by the American Council of Life Insurance—only 40 percent of focus group participants correctly identified its sponsor immediately after having seen the ad. Twenty percent believed it was put on by the Clinton campaign, 20 percent did not know who broadcast the ad, and 20 percent erroneously believed it was sponsored by the Cato Institute because that organization had been listed in visual text on-screen at the beginning of the spot in the footnote for a claim made during the commercial.<sup>35</sup>

These observations demonstrate that in the increasingly multifaceted world of political ads, greater attention needs to be given to disclosure of ad sponsorship. Rather than having the disclosure text shown on-screen for just five seconds, the sponsorship should be shown continuously throughout the ad. This would give viewers more time to determine which organization is sponsoring the ad and put them in a stronger position to see where the ad message is coming from.

The 2000 election reflected continuing interest on the part of news organizations in running ad watches. The *New York Times* printed eighteen during the nominating stage (double the 1996 rate) and fourteen during the general election. The *Washington Post* ran five during the primaries (about the same as in 1996) and six during the fall campaign. Most of the spring reviews dealt with the GOP primary, which was the more competitive of the two nominating contests. Three of the five Republican ads reviewed by the *Washington Post* involved George W. Bush or John McCain ads, whereas thirteen of the twenty ads reviewed by the *New York Times* involved Bush, McCain, or independent groups focusing on one of the Republican candidates. In the fall, ad watches monitored the accuracy of candidates' ads and questioned the validity of attacks on Bush's Texas record and the ambiguities of competing budget claims for Bush and Gore about their health care proposals. However, with campaign spending reaching record heights, it became more and more difficult for ad watches to evaluate the endless flow of political commercials.

By 2004, ad watches had become an endangered species. During the nominating process, the *New York Times* ran only six ad watches, while the *Washington Post* did one. In the general election, the *New York Times* had three ad watches compared to none for the *Post* (although the latter had stories critiquing ads). Many newspapers and television stations around the country dropped the practice of reviewing advertisements unless something particularly problematic took place. Bush, for example, generated a number of critical news stories when one of his early commercials referred to the September 11, 2001, terrorist attacks on New York City and Washington, D.C., and incorporated a few seconds of video images of fire-fighters carrying victims away from the site of the attack. Critics complained that Bush was politicizing a national disaster. Yet the Bush campaign held firm and continued to talk about September 11 and the risks facing the United States.

With a literal flood of advertising expenditures in contested battleground states, the ability of journalists to oversee candidate and group claims plummeted. When commercials aired dozens of times and critical news stories appeared just once, candidates learned they could stretch the truth and engage in misleading appeals without much risk. This represents a stunning reversal of the privileged place journalists held in American politics three decades ago.

### Conclusion

The press play a vital role in policing candidate abuses. From the infamous Daisy ad in 1964 to deceptive and manipulative images during the most recent campaign, journalists help to set the rules of fair play and constructive discourse. Unfortunately, in recent years, journalists have relinquished that traditional role and left candidates to police themselves. This creates problems in terms of campaign behavior. Without meaningful oversight, candidates have incentives to push the envelope and engage in actions and rhetoric that are harmful to the democratic process. Unless journalists continue to exercise vigilance over the campaign process, it will be difficult for voters to assess candidate behavior.