

# Joan Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy

## Discussion Paper Series

#D-55, February 2010

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### **Fanning the Flames: The News Media's Role in the Rise of Negativity in Presidential Campaigns**

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“Ads are about news coverage these days.”

Mark McKinnon, November 2009

The rise of negativity in presidential campaigns is well documented.<sup>1</sup> Few doubt that attacks ads are more common in campaigns today than just 25 years ago. The typical assumption is that this negativity is a product of what we might call the Karl Rove mentality. Consultants urge more and more attack ads because the “dark arts”<sup>2</sup> help their candidates win elections. Surely, the actions of consultants are part of the explanation for the rise of negativity. But the untold story is the news media’s role in this surge of attacks. Journalists, I contend, started paying a lot of attention to advertising during the 1988 presidential campaign and have continued to do so. And most of this new attention is on *negative* advertising. This shift in coverage has recast the incentives of consultants, altering how they approach presidential elections, in general, and advertising, in particular. Consultants now know that attacks can draw significant attention in the free media, which gives them more incentive to produce and to air negative ads than they had 25 years ago. Consequently, this paper contends that changes in the behavior of the news media have helped to fuel the rise in attack politics. By shedding light on this recent development, this paper hopes to advance our understanding of negativity, campaigns and the news media. This better understanding will, in turn, offer timely lessons for journalists, consultants and scholars about attack politics.

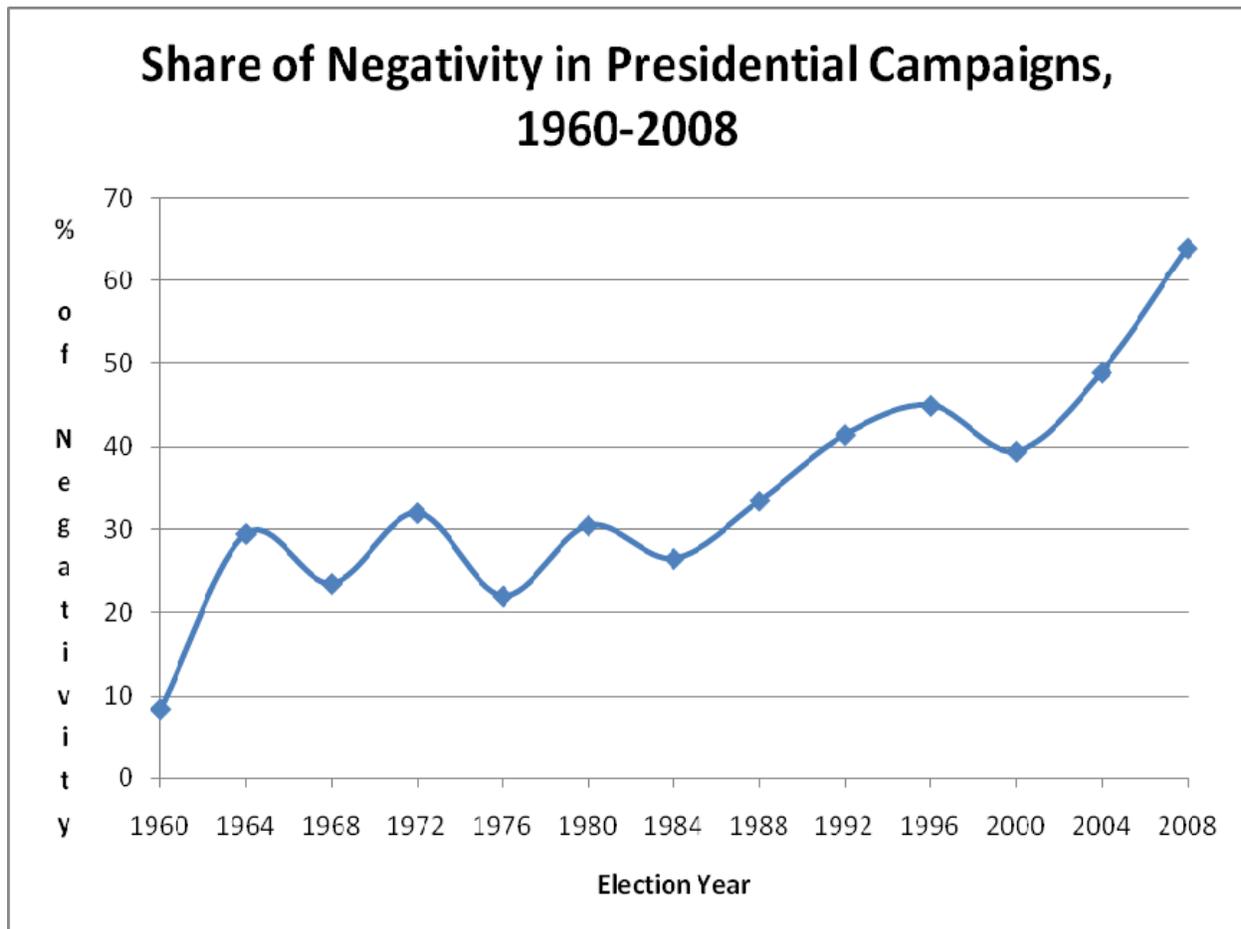
### **Background**

By most accounts, the 2008 presidential campaign was the most negative in the modern era. Obama and McCain exchanged fire on many fronts. McCain cast doubt on Obama’s readiness to serve as commander-in-chief. Obama tied the senator from Arizona to the failed policies of the Bush administration.<sup>3</sup> It was a robust exchange to say the least. Attacks are hardly new, however, in American politics. Thomas Jefferson,

for example, was attacked as being the “anti-Christ” in 1800.<sup>4</sup> Andrew Jackson was called a cannibal during the 1828 struggle for the White House.<sup>5</sup> In 1864, Abraham Lincoln was referred to as “a liar, buffoon, ignoramus, swindler and butcher.”<sup>6</sup> Harry Truman during the 1948 presidential campaign equated the Republicans and Thomas Dewey to Adolf Hitler and Nazi Germany.<sup>7</sup> The harsh tone of these claims goes well beyond McCain’s comparison of Obama to Paris Hilton.

Whether these presidential campaigns were more or less negative than 2008’s is far from clear. But what is clear is that over the last 50 years, there has been a steady rise in negative advertising by presidential candidates. Figure 1 makes this point nicely. In the 1970s, attacks constituted about 20% of the content of political ads aired on television. By the 1990s, they had grown to around 40%. Since the turn of the 21<sup>st</sup> century, negative appeals in presidential elections have averaged a bit over 50%, with 2008 being over 60%.

Figure 1



What has caused this more than doubling of attack ads from the 1970s to the present day? One explanation has been that with the polarization of the parties,<sup>8</sup> candidates have more disagreement about policy. These disagreements manifest themselves in the form of attack ads. There is good evidence to support this hypothesis. In past research, I demonstrated that at the presidential level the increased polarization of the parties seems to be driving the rate of negativity. And even more compelling, I showed that personal attacks have been flat over the last 40 years and the rise of negativity over the last 40 years has been driven largely by disagreements on policy—evidence that supports this hypothesis.<sup>9</sup> A second explanation is what I mentioned at the outset—what we could term the Karl Rove mentality. Attacks are on the rise because consultants believe they are more effective than positive ads. While the scholarly

literature does *not* indicate that attack ads work better than positive ads,<sup>10</sup> practitioners clearly believe that they work better and it is that perception that helps account for this rise.<sup>11</sup> There is merit in this hypothesis as well.

The purpose of this paper is to add a third hypothesis into the mix. That is, the news media are also responsible for this rise in negativity. The core idea is that the news media now cover negative ads so extensively that they have given candidates extra incentive to produce and air them. Candidates want to get their message out. They want to control the terms of the debate. They can air a positive ad and try to influence voters with that spot. But the news media will likely ignore it. Why cover an ad that says John McCain wants better educated children? Surely John McCain wants educated children. Nothing is newsworthy in such a spot. A negative ad, however, can generate controversy and conflict, drawing attention from journalists. So in 2008 when John McCain aired a spot claiming that Barack Obama favors “legislation to teach comprehensive sex education to kindergartners,” that drew interest from the press.<sup>12</sup> It is such coverage by the news media that helps candidates get their message out to the public and allows them to shape the all-important narrative of the campaign.

### **The News Media’s Coverage of Political Advertising**

The term “Swift Boat” has become part of the American political vocabulary, arising from the controversial negative ads aired by Swift Boat Veterans for Truth (SBVT) against John Kerry during the 2004 presidential campaign. These attacks became so well known that political commentators now refer to nasty allegations during a campaign as being “Swift Boated.” The general awareness of these ads is probably the single best example of the news media’s role in negativity. The facts are that very few Americans actually saw the attacks aired on TV. SBVT made limited ad buys for these spots in three battleground states (Iowa, Wisconsin and Ohio).<sup>13</sup> Current estimates are that about one million people saw these spots aired on TV,<sup>14</sup> which is not even 1% of the

voting public. Americans learned about these ads from the news media's coverage of them. Journalists became enamored with these attack ads on Kerry, giving them a huge amount of attention. Consider that according to a Lexis-Nexis search, the term "Swift Boat" received 40% *more* coverage from the news media during the presidential campaign than the term "Iraq War."<sup>15</sup> This comparison is quite alarming. We were in the middle of an increasingly unpopular war that was the single most important problem to the American public.<sup>16</sup> Yet, the Swift Boat controversy drew more press attention than the Iraq War. It should come as no surprise, then, that in September 2004, 80% of Americans had heard something about these advertisements.<sup>17</sup> The public awareness of these spots came from the press, not the ads themselves.

The Swift Boat case does not stand alone. Just consider that only four years later the McCain campaign caught the attention of journalists with the now famous "celebrity ad" that compared then-Senator Obama with Paris Hilton and Britney Spears. A key part of the motivation for McCain's campaign to air this ad, according to Alex Castellanos (a Republican consultant), was "to start a debate in the news media about Obama's experience."<sup>18</sup> It is clear that the celebrity ad drew the interest of journalists, playing into their reporting of the campaign. As evidence of this traction, a Lexis-Nexis search about the presidential campaign yielded 50% more news stories mentioning "Paris Hilton" than the "Iraq War."<sup>19</sup> The Iraq War was not as central an issue in 2008 as it was in 2004, but the comparison remains telling.

It is important, however, to move beyond these examples and see whether there has been a systematic shift in the behavior of the press. The Swift Boat case, as Adam Nagourney of *The New York Times* warns,<sup>20</sup> may be an outlier. So, have the news media *in general* started to cover advertising more than they did in the past?

Figure 2<sup>21</sup>

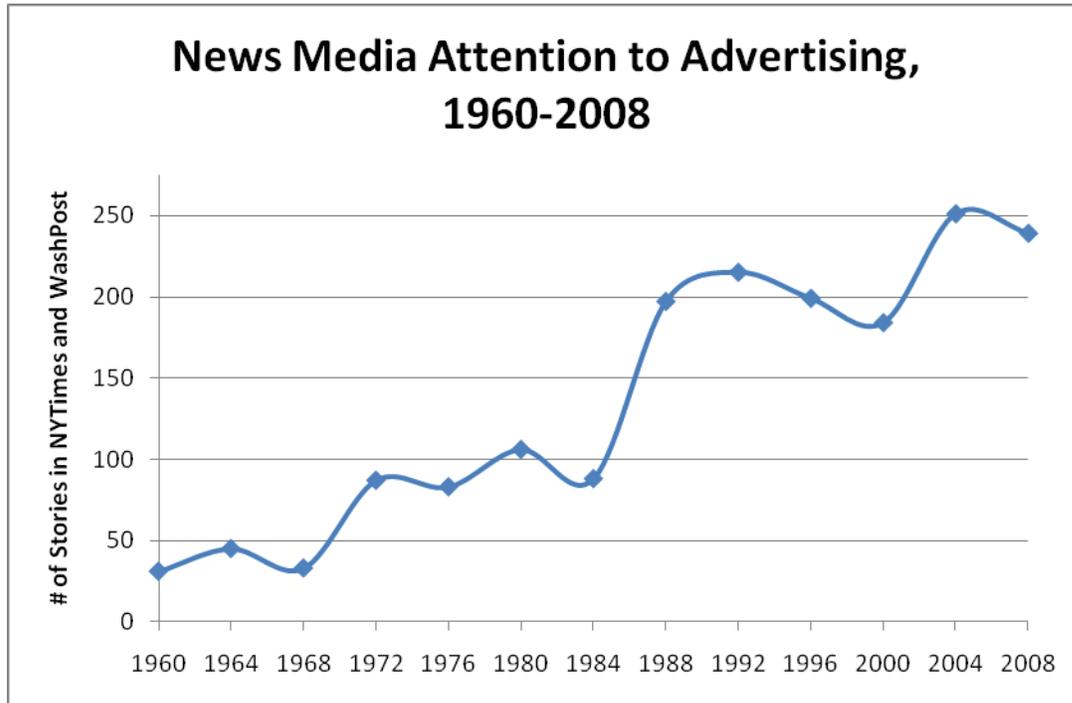


Figure 2 provides an answer to this question. Starting in 1988, the news media began to pay a great deal more attention to political advertising during presidential elections. The subject drew some attention in the press prior to 1988, but the number of stories in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* jumped from 88 in 1984 to 197 in 1988. The amount of attention increased again in 2004—surely reflecting the Swift Boat ads.<sup>22</sup>

These data seem compelling. But a skeptic might note that the press has always enjoyed conflict and so why should negative ads have drawn so little attention prior to 1988? Moreover, one might ask: “What about the ‘Daisy spot’”? The so-called Daisy spot<sup>23</sup>, which Lyndon Johnson aired in 1964, is one of the most famous negative ads of all time. Even though it aired over 45 years ago, it is still talked about today. The conventional wisdom is that this ad, which was aired in the early days of television and a quarter of a century before the jump reported in Figure 2, generated a good deal of controversy. Yet Figure 2 suggests (implicitly) that the spot drew little attention—at least by comparison to coverage of advertising in more recent campaigns. Might these

data be misleading? So to probe further, I collected additional evidence that provided a detailed look at the attention paid to the Daisy spot and compared it to the attention given to other notable ads. In earlier research, I asked informed observers to list the most famous ads from presidential campaigns. I posed this question in 2003 and the top choices were: Daisy, "Willie Horton," the "Tank ad," the "Revolving Door ad," and the "Boston Harbor ad."<sup>24</sup> These spots, save for Daisy, all arose from the 1988 campaign.<sup>25</sup> To update the list, I added Swift Boat from 2004 and the celebrity ad from 2008.

Table 1 reports the number of stories in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* for these seven spots. Two things stand out in the table. First, the data confirm in dramatic fashion the amount of attention the news media paid to the Swift Boat controversy. It got more press coverage than all of these other spots *combined*.<sup>26</sup> Second, and more relevant to the question at hand, the Daisy spot received the *least* attention of the seven ads I examined.<sup>27</sup> Admittedly, the difference between the attention of the Daisy spot and the Tank ad (or the Revolving Door ad) is quite minor. But those two ads, while well known, are not nearly as famous as the Daisy spot. Further, the Willie Horton ad drew four times more attention than Daisy, and Boston Harbor three times. The Willie Horton ad remains controversial today, so that difference is not so surprising. But that the press paid so much more attention to the Boston Harbor spot than the Daisy ad is not only a bit surprising, but underscores in dramatic terms the core claim I am making about this surge in coverage of negative ads.

These data actually suggest we may want to reconsider the idea that the Daisy spot drew so much attention from journalists in 1964. Perhaps the conventional wisdom that this ad received a lot of attention may speak more to current discussions about negativity than what actually unfolded in the Johnson-Goldwater campaign. That is, the reason we think of the Daisy spot as so controversial is because it has become part of the current dialogue over attack advertising. The rise of negativity may have made this ad far more famous now that it was at the time.

**Table 1: What about the Daisy Spot?**

<b>Name of Ad</b>	<b>Period of Coverage</b>	<b># of Stories in <i>New York Times</i></b>	<b>#of Stories in <i>Washington Post</i></b>	<b>Total Stories</b>
<i>Daisy Spot</i>	9/7 to 11/3/64	12	4	16
<i>Willie Horton</i>	9/21 to 11/8/88	28	34	62
<i>Revolving Door</i>	10/5 to 11/8/88	11	7	18
<i>Boston Harbor</i>	9/13 to 11/8/88	25	23	48
<i>Tank Ad</i>	10/17 to 11/8/88	8	12	20
<i>Swift Boat</i>	8/5 to 11/2/04	153	191	344
<i>Celebrity Ad</i>	7/31 to 11/3/08	23	38	61

In short, these data, collectively, offer strong confirmation of what I call the McKinnon hypothesis, namely that “Ads are about news coverage these days.” But there is an important amendment to this hypothesis that warrants further investigation. It is not just any kind of advertising that draws the interest of journalists; it is, as suggested earlier, *negative* advertising that is of most interest.

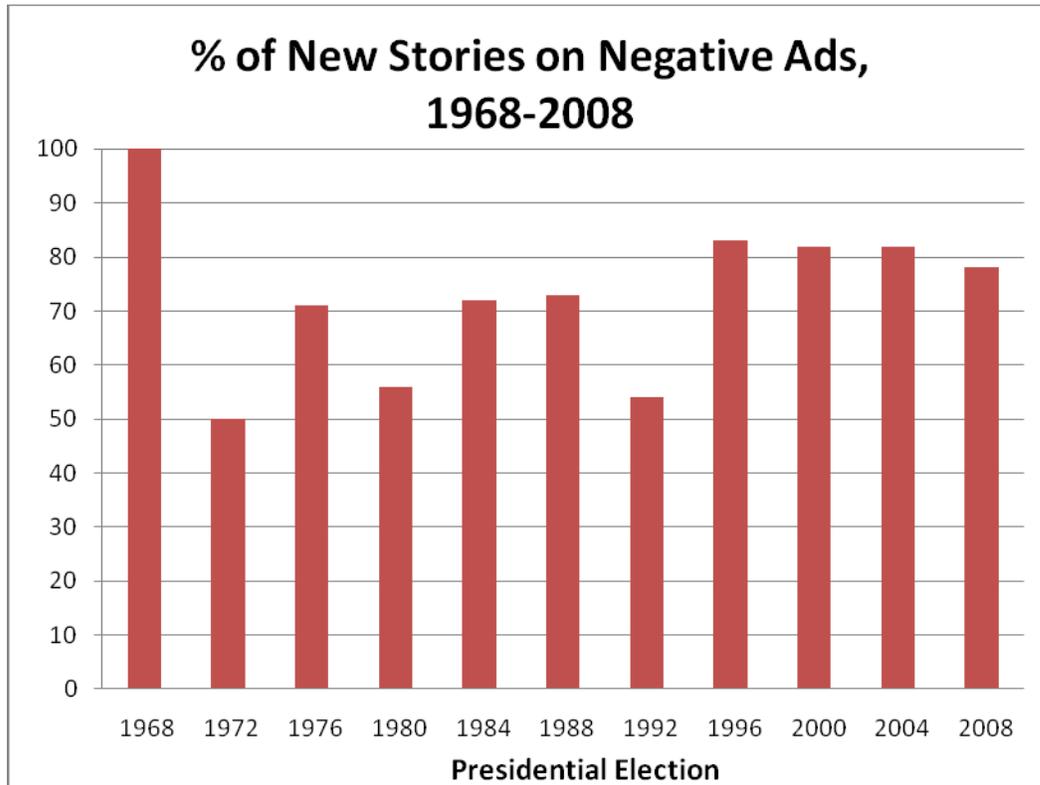
As Dan Okrent, the first public editor of *The New York Times*, said when commenting about news coverage, “Negative is where the story is.” Editors, Okrent argues, are not going to be interested in whether candidates favor world peace.<sup>28</sup> Surely the nominees do. What is newsworthy is something we do not know, something that is pointed or in dispute. Dan Balz, national political correspondent for *The Washington Post*, agrees, noting that journalists “love conflict.” Balz goes on to point out that this love of conflict often leads journalists to “exaggerate how negative things are.” We often, Balz comments, “make a big deal out of small things.”<sup>29</sup> David Chalian, ABC News political director, continues this theme, talking about the need among journalists for “controversy.” And, as Chalian notes, “Negative ads get at that. They are the most base form of controversy being injected into the campaign.”<sup>30</sup> Of course, the very fact that all

the ads listed in Table 1 are negative certainly suggests that the attack ads are what have drawn interest.

Figure 3 strongly confirms the idea that negative ads draw the lion share of attention from journalists. When taking a close look at the stories on the nightly network news, about 75% of the stories are about negative ads. In fact, since 2000, the share of attention paid to attacks is about 80%. The notable exception is 1992, which may reflect the interest by journalists in the Perot ads, which were almost all positive.<sup>31</sup> Do not read too much into the percentages in 1968 (100%) and 1972 (50%). The network news had only 2 stories each year on political advertising. In general, Figure 3 confirms that journalists do like conflict and have, in general, given attacks ads more air time than positive ads. But that bias takes on new meaning with the surge in coverage of advertising that begin during the Bush-Dukakis battle in 1988.

These data actually call for a modification to the McKinnon hypothesis: “*negative* ads are all about news coverage these days.”

Figure 3<sup>32</sup>



### Why 1988?

Why did the news media start paying much more attention to political advertising during the 1988 presidential campaign? This paper will not provide a complete answer to this question.<sup>33</sup> But I will provide some suggestive answers. For starters, Thomas Patterson has ably pointed out that journalists started shifting their coverage of news in the 1970s from description to interpretation of events. By the 1990s, his data show that 80% of stories were “interpretative” compared to only 10% in 1960.<sup>34</sup> Negative advertising provides a wonderful opportunity for journalists to interpret strategy and to assess the conflict between the candidates. So, there is a fit between the changes in the news media and negativity. In addition, it appears that Lee Atwater,<sup>35</sup> campaign manager for Vice President George H. W. Bush, was a central figure in the surge of attention. Joe Klein has made this point about Atwater, as did Ed Goetz, Dan Balz and

Adam Nagourney. When I asked journalists and consultants “what happened in 1988 to produce this change,” each of these individuals raised the mercurial operative from South Carolina *without* prompting on my part. My question was very open ended, but Atwater was at the top of their list. Klein’s account is perhaps most telling. Klein recalls observing focus groups organized by Atwater in Patterson, New Jersey, in June 1988. Atwater was showing these elite journalists the power of attacks on the soon-to-be Democratic nominee, Michael Dukakis. Klein said “we were all skeptical.” The public does not care about “flag factories.” Yet these attacks “moved the dials.” Klein contends this experience gave journalists a “new appreciation for the impact of the dark arts of consultants.”<sup>36</sup>

Of course, as we know, Bush went on to win the 1988 campaign and during its course aired some of the most controversial and powerful negative ads (see Table 1). It seemed as if these ads had reshaped the race. A quick look at the campaign suggests that Dukakis was ahead in the summer and then once the attack ads began to fly from the Bush campaign, Bush took command. From this perspective, it seemed like Atwater was able to transform the race. But in retrospect we now know that Bush regained his lead in the Gallup poll *before* he aired any of his attack ads against Dukakis.<sup>37</sup> Bush’s victory in 1988 is mostly likely due to a strong economy and the popularity of President Reagan.

The perception that these attack ads were decisive lingered, fueling a sense of unhappiness among journalists concerning the 1988 campaign. It was this unhappiness that gave the press reason to continue their new-found interest in advertising. Most notable here is David Broder’s call to action. Reflecting on the problems during the 1988 campaign, Broder made the following suggestion on January 14, 1990:

...winning candidates in both parties force-fed a garbage diet of negative ads down the country’s throat....Candidates and political consultants have concluded that this

is the way to win and are not about to kick the habit. We need to do something about this win-at-all-costs mentality that is undermining our political process. By “we,” I mean, first of all, the political reporters like me, who cover the campaigns....We should treat every ad as if it were a speech.... We routinely flyspeck those speeches, weighing the assertions against the evidence, setting the political charges against the context of the relevant information. We need to do this, just as routinely, with political ads....And we ought not to be squeamish about saying in plain language when we catch a candidate lying, exaggerating or distorting the facts.<sup>38</sup>

Broder, in effect, was issuing a call for the news media to focus on ads and treat them like speeches. Ads should be assessed, judged, and measured. It was clear that Broder was much more concerned about negative ads than positive ads. As the dean of political reporters, his call to arms carried weight. His colleagues now had even more reason to continue the so-called Ad Watches. By 1992, the major newspaper in every state had instituted some form of an ad watch.<sup>39</sup> Broder’s intent was clearly good. But its effects are less clear, as we have seen above and will now see below.

### **The News Media and the Rise of Negativity**

The usual assumption is that the news media are simply reflecting what is happening in campaigns. They are covering negative ads, because consultants produce them. That is only part of the story. The news media’s recent surge in attention to negativity has altered the incentives of candidates to produce and air negative ads. Ads today are about news coverage—they are “not about persuading voters,” observes David Chalian.<sup>40</sup> Peter Fenn expands the point that “ads are for the media these days,” contending that spots “are often video press releases designed to play into the 24-7 news coverage.”<sup>41</sup> Sam Fiest of CNN concurs, noting the ads are often “video press releases.”<sup>42</sup> Matt Erickson, a Democratic consultant, was even more pointed, noting that

“Negative ads at the presidential level have taken the function of press releases.”<sup>43</sup> This connection between ads and press releases at the president level underscores one of the core arguments of this paper.

Mark McKinnon has already made this point that presidential ads are no longer for voters, but for the news media. It seems to be a near consensus among the people I talked to. In fact, when I asked Alex Castellanos to name a few ads that were created in presidential campaigns for news coverage, he responded “well, about all of them.” He mentioned the much-discussed “wolves” ad from 2004.<sup>44</sup> The spot sought to generate discussion in the country about security and terrorism. “We wanted the media,” contends Castellanos, “asking the question: was Kerry able to protect the country?” These comments all underscore Chalian’s observation that “consultants know they can drive news coverage with ads.”

Given that candidates want to influence voters, the free media offers a powerful way to get their message out. For presidential elections, “The free media narrative,” according to David Chalian, “is the single most important thing to control.”<sup>45</sup> But as shown earlier, candidates must have a message that sparks controversy or otherwise it gets no coverage. The best way to do that is through attacks—that is, negative ads. That means for candidates to get their message out and to control this all-important narrative, the news media have unintentionally given candidates even more reason to create and to air attack ads. This argument recasts how we think about the rise of negativity, since the news media has altered the incentives to go negative.

What evidence do I have for this latest hypothesis? For starters, let me admit up front that testing this hypothesis is difficult. That there is negativity and even more of it in 2008 than 2004, is *not* evidence that supports my argument. Negativity is part of nearly all campaigns. I am arguing, instead, that a shift in incentives led to more attacks than we would have seen under the old system.

Certainly, there are some suggestive pieces of evidence. For example, if I am correct, candidates should be “fishing” with negative ads.<sup>46</sup> That is, in 2008 we should have seen more negative ads produced, but not aired, than positive ads. Certainly, there were a number of “web” ads with that purpose. Are web-only ads more likely to be negative than positive? Of the eight web ads listed on livingroomcandidate.org from the two presidential candidates in 2008, 75 percent were negative. That is only suggestive evidence. Certainly, the comments made during my interviews with consultants and journalists square with this idea. Peter Fenn observed that “campaigns are making ads that will not be aired.” And that these are usually “negative” or what he called “comeback” ads.<sup>47</sup> Stephanie Cutter, a high-ranking Democratic operative, argued that the Obama campaign was putting out a lot of negative ads with minimum media buys in the hope of shaping the narrative of the campaign. It was not until late October did they stop doing it, when “the media finally caught on.”<sup>48</sup>

My most compelling evidence comes from the 19 elite interviews I conducted during the fall of 2009.<sup>49</sup> During the course of each interview, I asked about the merits of this hypothesis that the news media have unintentionally given campaigns more reasons to produce and air negative ads. Of the 19, 17 thought the idea was on target (90 percent). I use phrase “on target” intentionally, since some of these political experts gave more nuanced responses. Given that this idea is implicitly critical of the press and gives consultants a bit of a free pass, I had expected journalists to be more skeptical of the idea. But that was not the case. I interviewed 10 journalists and all of them agreed with the hypothesis. The only disagreement came from two of the consultants I interviewed.

Here are some of the specific reactions to this hypothesis. John Harris of *Politico* said, “I absolutely believe that.” “That is probably correct,” comments Dan Balz. Tom Fiedler, who had been editor at the *Miami Herald*, had some reservations, but was “willing to believe” that coverage of ads had altered the incentives of consultants.<sup>50</sup> The reaction by Adam Nagourney was, “I think that is right.” Mark McKinnon responded

immediately, saying that it was “exactly right.” Alex Castellanos simply said, “Yes.” Nick Ayers “completely agrees.”<sup>51</sup> Sam Fiest was a bit more cautious, but still supportive, observing, “There is something to it.” Finally, David Chalian notes: “Hard to argue it is not true.” He then goes on to say that the news media “have crafted a marketplace for negative ads.” It is that observation that highlights the core claim of this paper.

### **Implications and the Future**

My central purpose in these pages is to suggest that we revise how we think about negativity. The news media are not just reflecting the ongoings of campaigns, but through their behavior have altered the conduct of campaigns. The increase in attacks in presidential campaigns is partly the result of the news media’s extensive coverage of negative advertising. This shift in coverage has altered the incentives of candidates to attack. As Nick Ayers comments, journalists have “incentivized the process” for attack ads. Negative ads are now being run and produced not so much with an eye toward influencing voters directly, but with the hope of altering the news media’s narrative in the campaign. And it is that narrative that, then, can provide candidates a chance to win over voters and secure a victory in the election.

There has been a long-standing assumption, certainly in the academic world, that the purpose of ads is to influence voters. The idea was that candidates could control the message in these 30-second (or longer) spots and that these messages would shape the preferences of the public. This assumption needs some revision. It is clear that negative ads have a new audience: journalists. But what about positive ads? Since most positive ads are not very controversial and hence do not draw the attention of the public, it is likely that the target of these spots remains voters. This means that an important asymmetry may have arisen between the goals of positive and negative ads that demands attention not only by journalists, but by scholars. The research designs

employed by political scientists, for example, have almost entirely been an effort to sort out the *direct* impact of ads on voters. That approach needs be re-thought at *the presidential level*.

I say presidential elections because statewide (or more local) races have a different dynamic. Local media tend to cover topics such as crime, sports and local interest. They do not give local elections the kind of attention that the national press pays to presidential campaigns. As a result, ads do provide the kind of link between politicians and voters we typically assume.<sup>52</sup>

The news media are obviously undergoing lots of change with the rise of the Internet, the decline of local newspapers, and the decline of the big three networks on television. Might the news media change in ways that would lessen the incentive for campaigns to go negative? While no one can be sure, the answer is likely no. In fact, the payoff from producing negative ads to drive press coverage is likely to *grow* by 2012. The reasons can be found in the 2008 election cycle. It used to be that journalists and news directors wanted to see evidence of a substantial ad buy before the press would give a spot attention. Sam Feist of CNN made this point, as did Dan Balz. But this standard eased in 2008. As Balz points out, the blogs would get a hold of an ad that might just be posted on the web, generating buzz about it. There was no way to ignore that buzz, contended Balz, and so the mainstream press ends up giving the spot coverage. Of course, with a need for 24-hour news, the press, Balz admits, are willing accomplices. Feist continues, noting that many of the ads posted on the web were interesting and often funny. They would “go viral,” and “we gave them coverage.” So this shift means that it is easier for campaigns now to draw attention to their spots without having to expend money to air them. This will only encourage campaigns to produce more spots in the hope of shaping the coverage of the candidates. Most of these spots will likely be negative so as to capture interest and attention from journalists.

However, it is well worth restating that the news media are not only interested in covering negative ads. What they are interested in is controversy, conflict or cleverness. Negative ads are good at that. But positive ads can fit the bill at times. Consider Bill Richardson's ads for 2008 campaign for president.<sup>53</sup> They were clever and drew attention. Sam Fiest of CNN stressed this point. The attention the Perot ads received in 1992 is further confirmation of this point. It is also possible that positive ads can generate "controversy." One such example arose in March, 2004. The Bush campaign, soon after Kerry clinched the Democratic nomination, aired spots that showed the president as the hero of 9/11, with pictures of the Twin Towers falling. Many thought the use of this tragedy was unacceptable and injected politics into that terrible loss of life on that fateful day. But the Bush campaign wanted that reaction and used this positive ad to meet its goals. In a post-election discussion at Harvard University, Matthew Dowd, chief strategist for Bush-Cheney '04, argued "we benefited by the fact that so many people in the press corps thought this was such a huge controversy. There was actually a discussion. Some people got a little queasy and said, are we doing the right thing? We got seven to eight million dollars worth of free run on this. The fact that George Bush's highest point of his presidency is related to 9/11 and we got ads with 9/11 in it, and everyone is talking about it—we could not have asked for better."<sup>54</sup>

The changes described in this paper are, of course, part of larger changes that have been unfolding in the news media over the last two decades. I am only focusing on one very small piece of the pie. But it is, nonetheless, an important piece. There has been a tendency just to assume that the many attack ads we see on television (and the Internet) reflect the practice of what Joe Klein aptly called the "dark arts." Negative ads are a fundamental part of campaigns and have been so since the very first elections in this country. But it is not at all clear that negativity is on the rise because suddenly politicians and their aides think they work better. I am sure when Harry Truman attacked Thomas Dewey in 1948, it was on a belief they could secure votes. We can

quibble over such points. But that misses the central objective of this paper. That is, the news media themselves need to be part of this conversation over the rise of attack politics that has unfolded over the last 20 years. We need to bring greater attention to this development, so we can forge a more complete understanding of attack politics.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup> John G. Geer (2006) *In Defense of Negativity*, Chicago: University of Chicago Press; Darrell West (2008) *Air Wars*, Washington DC: CQ Press; and William L. Benoit (2001) "The functional approach to presidential television spots: Acclaiming, attacking, and defending 1952-2000," *Communication Studies*, 52, 109-126.

<sup>2</sup> Joe Klein of *Time* magazine used this term to describe the rise of attack politics in an interview I conducted with him on October 14, 2009.

<sup>3</sup> I am not making a partisan statement here. By 2008, the public was disenchanted with the Bush administration. The economy was in a near state of collapse, the Iraq War was viewed by the public as a mistake, Hurricane Katrina remained a black mark against the administration, and the deficit was soaring out of control. President Bush's popularity was certainly at historic lows.

<sup>4</sup> <http://www.theamericanrevolution.org/ipeople/tjeff.asp>

<sup>5</sup> See Geer (2006, 9)

<sup>6</sup> See Geer (2006, 67)

<sup>7</sup> Zachary Karabell (2001) *The Last Campaign*, New York: Vintage.

<sup>8</sup> Nolan McCarty, Keith Poole and Howard Rosenthal (2006) *Polarized America*, Cambridge: MIT Press; Marc J. Hetherington and Jonathan Weiler (2009) *Authoritarianism and Polarization in America*, Cambridge: Cambridge University Press; Marc J. Hetherington (2009) "Putting Polarization in Perspective," *British Journal of Political Science*, 39:413-448.

<sup>9</sup> Geer (2006)

<sup>10</sup> Richard R. Lau, Lee Sigelman, Caroline Heldman, and Paul Babbitt (1999) "The Effects of Negative Political Advertisements: A Meta-Analytic Review," *American Political Science Review*, 93:851-875; Richard R. Lau, Lee Sigelman, and Ivy Brown Rovner (2007) "The Effects of Negative Political Campaigns: A Meta-Analytic Reassessment," *Journal of Politics*, 69:1176-1209.

<sup>11</sup> I suspect both scholars and consultants are right. That is, the average effect of negative and positive ads on the public may well be the same. But that the *range* of effects may be very different. That is, positive ads produce a small, predictable gain in support. Negative ads, by contrast, can yield big gains in support, if they hit a responsive chord with the public. But if the ads go too far, they can boomerang, leading to a drop in support. When you add up these effects, the average turns out to be much the same.

<sup>12</sup> <http://www.cbsnews.com/blogs/2008/09/09/politics/horserace/entry4433099.shtml>

<sup>13</sup> [http://www.gwu.edu/~smpa/faculty/documents/Swift\\_Boat\\_Article\\_FALR\\_000.pdf](http://www.gwu.edu/~smpa/faculty/documents/Swift_Boat_Article_FALR_000.pdf)

<sup>14</sup> <http://www.publicopinionpros.norc.org/features/2005/aug/borick.asp>

<sup>15</sup> This percentage arises from a Lexis-Nexis search that I ran from July 1, 2004 to November 1, 2004 using the key words tied to the presidential campaign and "Iraq War" or "Swift Boat." I searched under "US newspapers and wires."

<sup>16</sup> See Gallup Poll in October 11 to 14, where the Iraq War was cited by the public as the “most important problem” facing the nation. Data provided by the Roper Center.

<sup>17</sup> CBS/New York Times Poll, September 12-16, 2004, data provided by the Roper Center.

<sup>18</sup> Interview with Alex Castellanos on November 11, 2009.

<sup>19</sup> This Lexis-Nexis search was done the same as the one concerning "swift boat."

<sup>20</sup> Interview on November 10, 2009.

<sup>21</sup> The data in this graph comes from a Lexis-Nexis search for articles in *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post* on political advertising during the presidential campaign, covering the period of July 1 to November 1 for each election from 1960 to 2008.

<sup>22</sup> This pattern of news coverage is further confirmed by a detailed content analysis of all stories aired on the nightly network news from 1968 to 2008. I have done a complete content analysis of the coverage of presidential advertising in the night news for the 3 major networks, using the Vanderbilt Televisions News Archives. Those data from 1968 to 2008 have a .86 correlation with the data in Figure 2.

<sup>23</sup> The “Daisy spot” is the current name given to this commercial. It was not the term used to describe the ad in 1964.

<sup>24</sup> See Geer (2006). Some of the other ones that were mentioned was the “Bear in the woods” ad in 1984, the “weather vane ad” from 1968.

<sup>25</sup> See livingroomcandidate.org for copies of these ads.

<sup>26</sup> The reason for the amazing amount of attention is open to debate. Dan Okrent has offered the best hypothesis so far. He contended that the issue with Swift Boat was whether Kerry had lied or had the ad lied. This was not part of the previous ads.

<sup>27</sup> I want to thank Soomin Soe for able assistance in collecting these data.

<sup>28</sup> Interview on October 5, 2009

<sup>29</sup> Interview on October 28, 2009

<sup>30</sup> Interview on December 2, 2009

<sup>31</sup> Over 90% of Perot's ads were positive. This figure comes from my data of political advertising that is available on my website.

<sup>32</sup> The author collected these data and they are available upon request, john.g.geer@vanderbilt.edu.

<sup>33</sup> See Geer (2006) chapter on the 1988 campaign for a few answers to this question.

<sup>34</sup> Thomas Patterson (1993) *Out of Order*, New York: Knopf.

<sup>35</sup> I want to acknowledge the valuable insight of Bill Mitchell, a report for the *Detriot Free Press*. He first alerted me to Atwater's potential role in reshaping coverage of advertising, which led me to approach my interviews with other journalists and consultants in a different fashion.

<sup>36</sup> This material all drawn from my interview with Klein on October 14, 2009.

<sup>37</sup> See Geer (2006)

<sup>38</sup> January 14, 1990, *The Washington Post*, p. B1.

<sup>39</sup> Kim Kahn and Patrick Kenney (1999) *The Spectacle of US Senate Campaigns*, Princeton: Princeton University Press. It is worth noting that ad watches did exist prior to Broder's call. Tom Fiedler, editor at *The Miami Herald*, had been employing them well before 1990.

<sup>40</sup> Interview on 12-2-09

<sup>41</sup> Interview on November 11, 2009

<sup>42</sup> Interview on November 17, 2009.

<sup>43</sup> Interview on December 8, 2009

<sup>44</sup> [http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MU4t9O\\_yFsY](http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=MU4t9O_yFsY)

<sup>45</sup> Interview on December 2, 2009

<sup>46</sup> A cleaner test would be to compare the Gross Rating Points campaigns put behind negative and positive ads. We should see more negative ads with limited ad buys than positive ads.

<sup>47</sup> My interview with Fenn was on November 11, 2009. A "comeback" was a response to an attack ad, which could either be negative or positive.

<sup>48</sup> Comments made by Cutter on September 17, 2009.

<sup>49</sup> Joe Klein (*Time* magazine), John Harris (*Politico*), Kathleen Parker (syndicated columnist), Dan Okrent (*Time* magazine and former public editor for *The New York Times*), Stephanie Cutter (former communications director for the Kerry campaign), Dan Balz (*The Washington Post*), Amy Gershkoff (Partner for Changing Targets Media), Ed Goetas (President and C.E.O. of The Tarrance Group), Vin Weber (Republican strategist and former member of the House of Representatives), Tom Fiedler (former editor of *The Miami Herald*), Mark McKinnon (Chief Media Strategist for the Bush and McCain presidential campaigns), Adam Nagourney (*The New York Times*), Peter Fenn (President of Fenn Communications Group), Alex Castellanos (Republican consultant and CNN commentator), Sam Fiest (CNN's Political Director), David Chalian (ABC News political director), Robin Sproul (Washington bureau chief for ABC News), Nick Ayers (Executive Director, Republican Governors Association) and Matt Erickson (consultant for Lafuens, Kully & Klose).

<sup>50</sup> Statement made on November 2, 2009.

<sup>51</sup> Interview with Nick Ayers on December 7, 2009

<sup>52</sup> Alex Castellanos made this observation to me during our interview. Nick Ayers strongly seconded Castellanos' observation.

<sup>53</sup> <http://www.youtube.com/watch?v=tjOuL5qwNIc&feature=PlayList&p=A6AA348A315580E9&index=0&playnext=1>

<sup>54</sup> *Campaign for President* (2009) New York: Roman Littlefield, p. 109. This book arises from a conference sponsored at the Institute for Politics at the Harvard Kennedy School for Government.