

Media Construction of Presidential Campaigns

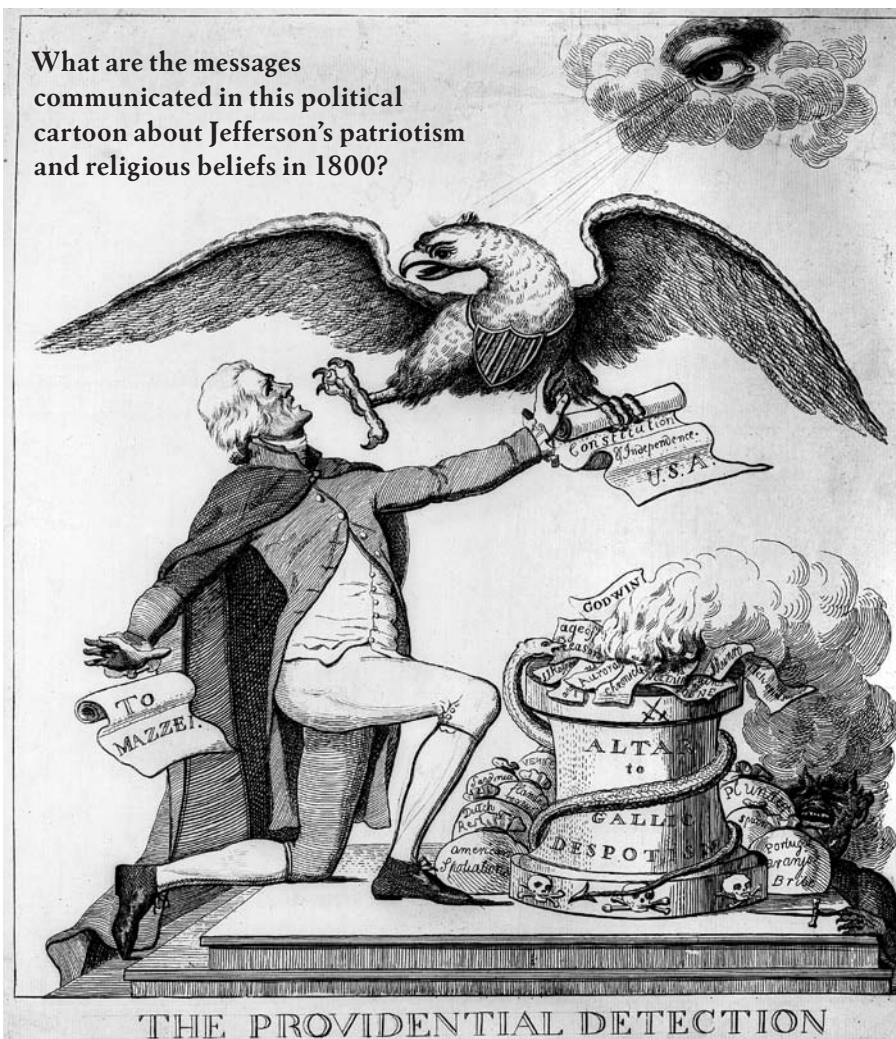
Chris Sperry and Sox Sperry

Our next president will likely be the candidate who crafts the best “impression” in the media. It is our job as social studies teachers to help students separate impressions from substance and to understand the role that media play in crafting our meaning making and shaping our decision making. We can help students to recognize the epistemology of media construction by integrating interactive decoding into our history curriculum and by helping them understand the central role that media have played throughout the history of American elections.

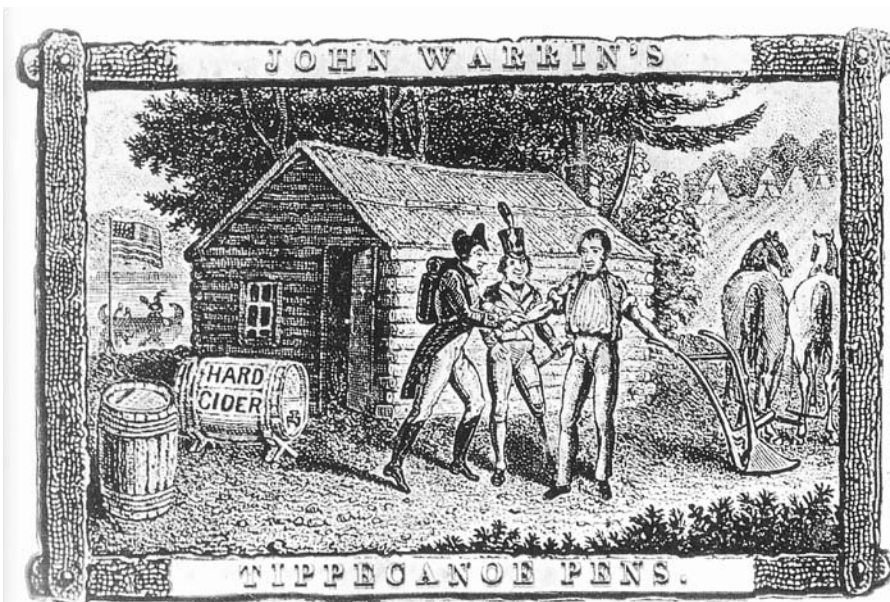
Students often assume that today’s presidential campaigns are far dirtier and more crass than campaigns of the past. One primary historical document that may help students understand the deeply partisan nature of early campaigns is the 1800 Providential Detection cartoon, in which the American Eagle saves the Constitution from Jefferson, who is alleged to be overly inspired by French revolutionary values.

The primary mass-media form in the early years of our country was the newspaper. In the 1820s, there were more than 50 newspaper subscriptions for every 100 households.¹ By the election of 1828, political parties became the primary organizations creating and sponsoring newspapers. Needless to say, their coverage was overtly partisan.

Not only did the founding fathers recognize the need for a literate citizenship, but they also saw a role for government in ensuring access to these varied points of view. Although legislation was debated that would have allowed the federal government to directly fund newspapers, Congress decided in 1792 to support the delivery of newspapers to the electorate through a postal subsidy for periodicals in order to encourage the spread of literacy and print culture.² This subsidy has recently become a political issue with arguments either to maintain or to abolish it coming before the U.S. Postal Service and the Postal Regulatory Commission.



For suggested answers to the document-based questions in this article go to www.ithaca.edu/looksharp/mcpcweb.



1840 Tippecanoe Pens Advertisement

What techniques did Harrison's campaign use to target newly enfranchised voters?

The Campaign as Spectacle

The first quarter century of contested campaigns were largely fought in the newspapers since it was considered unseemly for a presidential candidate to ask for votes face to face. This all changed in 1828 when Andrew Jackson's populist campaign abandoned previously held formalities and aggressively marketed its candidate. The Democratic Party used heroic imagery, popular songs and spectacular celebrations to sell "Old Hickory" to a newly enfranchised electorate of farmers and workingmen. In 1840, the newly created Whig Party built on these strategies to elect William Henry Harrison and John Tyler. The Whig campaign was championed by the young newspaper publisher Horace Greeley, who would run for president himself 32 years later. Greeley took an attack on Harrison as a drunkard and spun it into the now famous "Hard Cider, Log Cabin" campaign. Greeley helped construct the aging Eastern aristocrat as a hard-working, hard-drinking frontiersman. The campaign brought barrels of whiskey to frontier towns and orchestrated raucous celebrations (political "parties") where costumed "mountain men" sang campaign songs as they rolled

huge slogan-laden balls through the town shouting "Keep the ball rolling." The popularity of these rallies likely contributed to a voter turnout of over 80 percent (compared to today's turnouts of around 50 percent).

Decoding historical campaign documents such as songs, newspaper banners, handbills, and editorial cartoons, requires students to apply their knowledge of history, geography, and political science to careful evidence-based reading of primary documents. They can also begin to connect media constructions from the past to contemporary campaign imagery. For example, an excerpt from George W. Bush's biographical film shown at the 2000 Republican Convention can be compared to Harrison's Log Cabin Newspaper Banner to explore campaign constructions of "The Commoner."

New Media: Photography and Radio

American presidential campaigns have always been influenced by media, but the advent of new communication technologies in the twentieth century accelerated their impact. Today, we are accustomed to seeing daily images of candidates, but the first news photos did not appear

1864: A Newspaper Report on the Gettysburg Address

"Readers will not have failed to observe the exceeding bad taste which characterizes the remarks of the president ... at the dedication of the soldier's cemetery at Gettysburg. The cheek of every American must tingle with shame as he reads the silly, flat, dish-watery utterances of the man who has to be pointed out to the intelligent foreigners as the president of the United States."

—Editorial from
The Chicago Times, 1864

Was *The Chicago Times* a Democratic or Republican newspaper in 1864?

Give your evidence.

until 1853, and photographs did not appear in newspapers until 1897. William McKinley's 1896 campaign made particularly effective use of the "photo op." While McKinley's charismatic and populist opponent, William Jennings Bryan, took to the rails in a "whistle stop" campaign covering 18,000 miles, McKinley's campaign, with backing from the railroad companies, brought more than 750,000 "front-porch visitors" to his home in Canton, Ohio. These visits, and their resulting photos, were part of a highly organized campaign strategy that targeted special interest groups. McKinley's campaign manager, Mark Hanna, tapped into Eastern industrialists' fears of a Bryan presidency to raise \$6 million, 20 times more than the Democrats. The campaign produced over 100 million pieces of literature, more than seven documents for each eligible voter. Hanna's stewardship ushered in a new era of the mass marketing of politics. Karl Rove, President George W. Bush's primary political manager, considered Mark Hanna to be an important role model for his orchestration of Bush's successful 2000 and 2004 campaigns.

Stumping gave candidates access to the electorate every four years, but radio

What messages do you think the Taft campaign intended to communicate in this early “photo op”?

Explain your reasoning

How did radio transform campaigns and the presidency? (see photo insert)

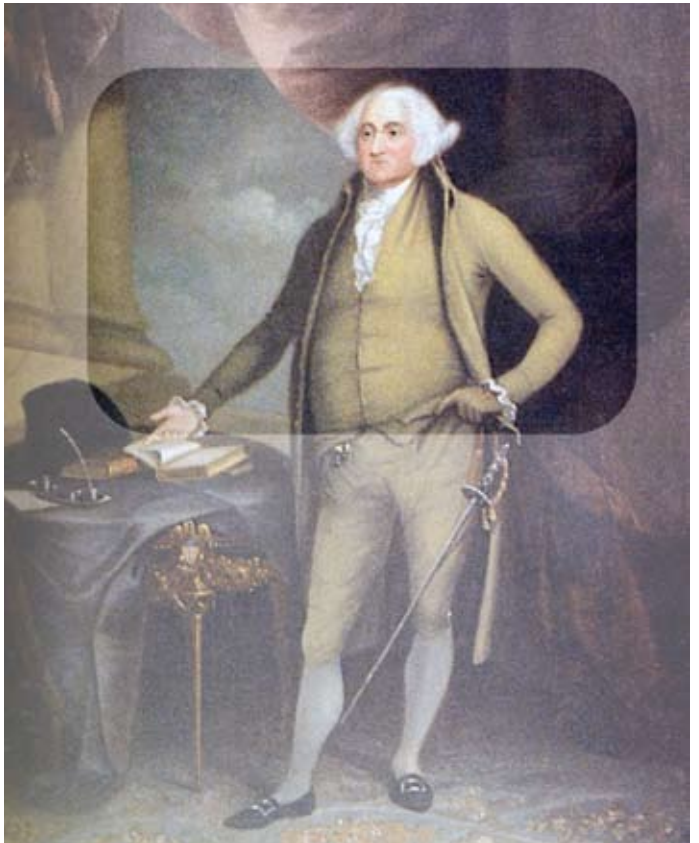


allowed Franklin Roosevelt to extend the campaign throughout his entire presidency with more than 30 “Fireside Chats” reaching into the homes of most voters. Radio helped establish the era of the “personal presidency” in which a candidate’s connection to voters often counted for more than his stand on issues.

The Age of Television

Radio’s power to craft impressions was soon eclipsed by a new medium with even greater influence on public perceptions. In 1952, candidates began producing commercials for television. A leading Madison Avenue advertiser was hired to make a series of “spot ads” for the Eisenhower campaign that were to run after popular programs like *I Love Lucy*. Eisenhower was not happy with making TV commercials, and during a break in the filming (40 commercials in one day), he commented, “To think that an old soldier should come to this.”³

No presidential candidate epitomizes both the potential pitfalls and the opportunities created by television more than Richard Nixon. In 1952, the vice presidential candidate was at risk of being dropped from the ticket due to a campaign funding scandal (ultimately shown to be false). Headlines in *The New York Post* read “Secret Rich Men’s Trust Fund Keeps Nixon in Style Far Beyond His Salary.” Eisenhower suggested that Nixon use the new medium of television to respond to the charges. Nixon’s 30-minute broadcast, following the top-rated *Milton Berle Show*, drew 60 million viewers, the largest TV audience to date. Nixon’s “Checkers” speech,



Would short and stocky John Adams have been elected in the television age?



1960 Nixon-Kennedy Debates

What role did television play in the 1960 election?

named for his reference to the family dog, ensured Nixon's spot on the ticket and highlighted the potential of television to shape political impressions.

The 1960 Nixon-Kennedy debates were both the first presidential debates and a watershed for the new medium of television. Less than a decade earlier radio had been the dominant medium, but by 1960, 90 percent of American homes had TV, and most voters watched, rather than listened, to the debates. A majority of those who heard the radio broadcast thought that Nixon did as well or better than Kennedy, while a majority of those seeing the candidates on TV picked Kennedy as the victor, even among Nixon supporters.⁴ Given the closeness of the race—Kennedy won the popular vote by less than 120,000—it seems likely that television was a decisive factor in the outcome. Historian T.H. White commented, “It was the picture image that had done it—and it was television that had won the nation away from sound to images, and that was that.”⁵

By the 1960s, televised campaign commercials had become far more sophis-



1964 “Daisy Girl” TV Commercial

Why was this commercial pulled after the first time it aired and how did 40 million Americans get to see it?

ticated than Eisenhower's 30-second lecturettes. In 1964, the Johnson campaign aired the now famous “Daisy Girl” commercial attacking Barry Goldwater as dangerously hawkish and likely to lead us to nuclear destruction. Although Goldwater's name was never mentioned in the commercial, Republicans filed a complaint with the Fair Campaign Practices Committee. The Democrats pulled the spot after it aired only once, but television stations picked up on the controversy and ran the attack ad as news (with no cost to the Johnson campaign).

This successful strategy of indirectly undermining one's opponent was to be repeated in future elections. In 1988, George Bush's campaign formally distanced itself from the independently produced “Willie Horton” commercial that many considered racist, but then the campaign produced its own, subtler commercials on the same issue. Although Dukakis had a substantial lead coming out of the primaries, the attack ads helped propel George Bush to victory in November. In 2004, the campaign of George W. Bush similarly distanced itself

Questions to ask about any media message:

Who produced and who sponsored this message?

What is the purpose of this message and who is the target audience?

What ideas, values, and perspectives are communicated?

What techniques are used to communicate these ideas?

How credible and accurate is the information and what is left out?

Who might benefit and who might be harmed by this message?

How have carefully crafted photo ops been spun into effective attack ads?



1988 Dukakis "Tank Ride" Photo used in the Bush "Dukakis Tank Ride" TV Commercial

What impressions of Michael Dukakis are communicated in this photo and resulting attack ad?



2004 Photo Ops and Counter Ops

How did the Bush campaign use a photo of Kerry windsurfing to attack the Democratic candidate on the war in Iraq?

from the "Swift Boat Veterans for Truth" commercials that questioned the military record of decorated war veteran John Kerry. The strategy pioneered by "Daisy Girl" was clear: place negative ads into the news with plausible distance between the attackers and the campaign.

Mass Marketing the Image

TV commercials proved very effective in criticizing an opponent, but they could also be highly successful in shaping positive impressions about a candidate. Perhaps no candidate used the image-resonating quality of this medium more effectively than Ronald Reagan. Reagan's 1984 "Morning in America" TV commercials stayed clear of issues and painted a wholesome, patriotic, and upbeat view of America ("Why would we want to return to where we were less than four short years ago?"). The masterful political imagery crafted by Reagan's media managers helped to cement his legacy as the "Great Communicator." Although a majority of Americans were critical of Reagan's policies, they continued to give him high

approval ratings, hence his nickname "The Teflon President."

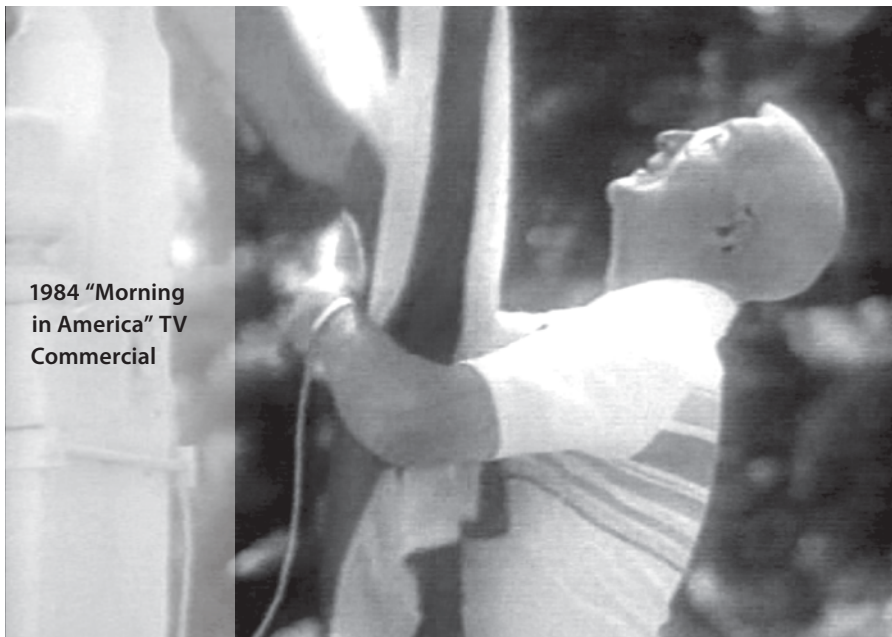
If Reagan was the master of hopeful imagery, Bill Clinton was his star pupil. The image of Clinton as "The Comeback Kid" in the primaries was skillfully crafted into "the Man From Hope" for the general election. But Clinton, like Reagan, also knew how to effectively attack his opponent and how to respond to negative ads. Compare two 1992 TV commercials in the Project Look Sharp collection about the state of the economy in Arkansas, one from the Clinton campaign and one from the Bush campaign. The Clinton commercial emphasizes Clinton's achievements as governor of Arkansas in the fields of job growth, the conversions of welfare recipients into members of the labor force, and the maintenance of low tax burdens. The Bush commercial accuses Clinton of doubling the state's debt and government spending, imposing the largest tax increase in Arkansas history, and promoting poor policies for the environment. By viewing the ads, students can learn to separate fact from opinion, understand how statistics

and language can be manipulated, and assess the credibility of sources.

Micro Marketing and New Media

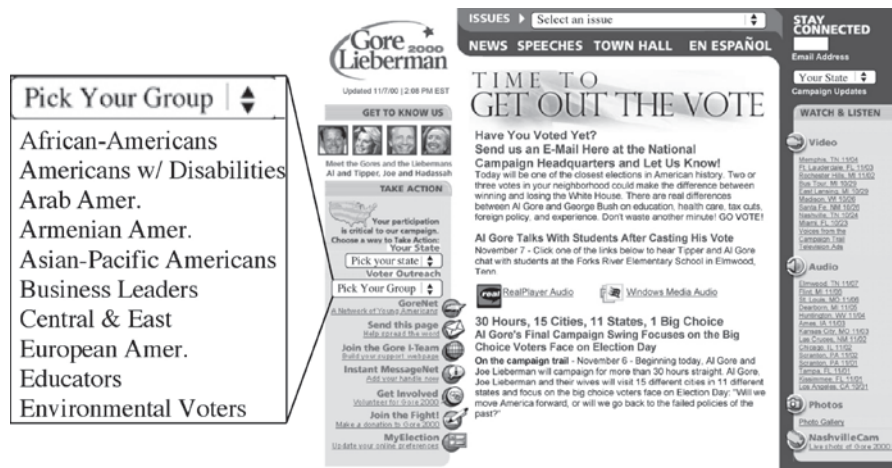
In the 2000 campaign, the Internet became a significant medium for targeting specific demographic groups. Candidates now post their own websites, use web-based networks to raise funds, and have the opportunity to transmit reactions to ongoing events and issues to millions of people. Similar to the early use of photographs in 1908 and television in 1952, today's campaigns are just beginning to exploit the potential of the new medium. Will new communication media, such as YouTube, text messaging, MySpace, blogging and cell phones, play as decisive a role in the 2008 election as television did in 1960? We can use history to teach students to recognize the ways in which media have shaped our nation's choices. We need to help our students to recognize the unique qualities of new and old media and the ways in which they craft our impressions of the candidates. And we

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1984 "Morning in America" TV Commercial

What messages about America are communicated in this commercial?
 What production techniques are used to communicate those messages?
 Who do you think was the target audience? What is your evidence from the document?



Above: Homepage from Gore/Lieberman website, November 2000, with excerpt from pull-down menu.

Why is the Internet a particularly effective medium for campaign micro marketing?

The documents and curriculum materials mentioned in this article, along with many other documents and lesson plans on presidential election campaigns from 1800-2004, are available free of charge at www.projectlooksharp.org. They are part of the collection *Media Construction of Presidential Campaigns: A Document-Based History Kit*, published by Project Look Sharp, which is a media literacy initiative by Ithaca College. The kit was developed with funding from the Schumann Center for Media and Democracy. Hard copies of the kit, as well as CDs and DVDs, can be purchased from NCSS through the NCSS publications catalog. Readers of *Social Education* who use the kit can identify the documents in this article by the following numbers: Providential Detection (1800 Doc. #5); Campaign songs (1840 Doc. #4); Republican Convention (2000 Doc. #2); Harrison's Log Cabin Newspaper Banner (1840 Doc. #4); Targeted special interest groups (1896 Doc. #2); TV commercials (1952 Doc. #3); Nixon's Checkers speech (1952 Doc. #1); "Swift Boat Veterans for Truth" (2004 Doc. #4); The general election (1992 Doc. #1); Ads (1992 Doc. #3); *Chicago Times* (1864 Doc. #2); Taft Photo Op (1908 Doc. #3); FDR radio address (1908 Doc. #3); Nixon-Kennedy Debates (1960 Doc. #1); "Daisy Girl" (1964 Doc. #2); Dukakis "Tank Ride" photo and related Bush commercial (1988 Doc. #4); Kerry "Photo Ops and Counter Ops" (2004 Doc. #4); Morning in America commercial (1984 Doc. #2)

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need to consistently guide our students in the practice of discerning substance from impressions.

Thomas Jefferson wrote that a literate and educated citizenry is essential for the success of American democracy. In Jefferson's day, mass communication occurred almost exclusively through the printed word. Today, we are saturated by a barrage of sounds and images streamed through our diverse and ubiquitous mass media. In order for students to be fully literate and educated in the twenty-first century they must learn the skills to critically analyze and evaluate messages from different media sources and forms. Without this, we will further enable a cynical democracy of consumption rather than a reasoned and substantial democracy of empowerment. 📺

Notes

1. Paul Starr, *The Creation of the Media* (New York: Basic Books, 2004), 86.
2. PBS Online, "Milestones in the History of Media and Politics," *Now: Politics and Economy. The American Media*, www.pbs.org/now/politics/mediahistory.
3. Gil Troy, *See How They Ran* (New York: MacMillan, 1981), 200.
4. Paul Boller, *Presidential Campaigns* (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 299.
5. Theodore Harold White, *The Making of the President 1960* (New York: Atheneum, 1961), 289-290.

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