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Campaign Lessons for '92

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

John F. Kennedy School of Government

HARVARD UNIVERSITY

RESTORING THE BOND: CONNECTING CAMPAIGN COVERAGE TO VOTERS

A Report of the Campaign Lessons for '92 Project

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Research funded by a grant from The Markle Foundation

Publication funded by the National Education Association

November, 1991

TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction.....	1
Executive Summary.....	4
Section I: The Changing Role of the Press in Elections.....	17
Section II: The Challenge: Today's Television Culture.....	34
Section III: The Journalist and the Campaign.....	52
Section IV: Campaign Ads and Ad Watches.....	91
Section V: The Gossip Culture.....	103
Section VI: Conclusions and Recommendations.....	126
Notes.....	148

INTRODUCTION

by Marvin Kalb

In one sense, this report on "Campaign Lessons for '92" completes a three-year research project conducted by the Shorenstein Barone Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy. The project started shortly after the '88 presidential campaign concluded on a note of general dissatisfaction with the "process." Reporters were unhappy, fewer Americans voted, suggesting their disenchantment as well, even victorious Republicans were disheartened. Bush adviser Roger Ailes wasn't pulling any punches, either. Unless there were radical changes in press coverage and expectations, he warned, the politicians were not going to change the rules of the game and '92 would very likely be worse than '88. Images of contrived photo-ops and snatches of sound-bites filled the narrow space reserved for political discourse. Was there a way out of this depressing cycle? Could things be improved? And, if so, how?

The project was launched on the concept first raised by Sissela Bok, the well-known ethicist who teaches at Brandeis. She reconnoitered the political landscape and concluded that there are three "vicious circles" at play in any campaign: the people, the politicians and the press. Since these are "dynamic systems, not static ones," she believed that if any one of them could be changed for the

better, the other two would be similarly affected. We have tried over the past three years to focus on the press, on the assumption that we hope is not misplaced that by trying to help the press improve its coverage of the '92 campaign, we might also be helping to improve the entire process.

No major project of this sort is the work of any one person. Ellen Hume, an experienced reporter who is now Executive Director of the Shorenstein Barone Center, spearheaded the research project. She relied extensively on John Ellis, a former Fellow at the Center, and Carter Wilkie, a researcher and writer. In addition, Howard Husock and I helped edit the final draft. All of us at the Center benefited from the extensive experience, enthusiasm and wisdom of the other Fellows and faculty, especially Professors Gary Orren and Frederick Schauer.

"Campaign Lessons for '92" comes in two parts: "Nine Sundays," a report on a better way of improving television coverage of the general election campaign, which was released in early September, and now "Restoring the Bond: Connecting Campaign Coverage to Voters," which is directed at enhancing the quality of coverage of the entire campaign, including the primary and convention seasons.

I said that "in one sense" this report completes the research project that was started three years ago. But in a broader sense the project continues. In recent months we have all witnessed two contrary trends: one asserting a

strong and credible desire to improve coverage of the '92 campaign, the other returning vigorously if reluctantly to the dispiriting norms of the '88 campaign. With the best of intentions often stated, the political dialogue among the participants still remains painfully arid, and when networks are provided with an opportunity to reach for the stars, they often continue to plumb the depths.

For example, a conservative group not too long ago produced a political ad for local cable tv costing approximately \$40,000 that bitterly attacked three Democratic Senators for opposing Clarence Thomas's nomination to the Supreme Court. It was run only once, but news conferences deliberately trumpeted its message. The networks, knowing better and yet drawn irresistibly toward controversy, ran the ad in full on national (and, given the technological reach of modern-day tv, international) television time and again, giving it an audience measured in the final analysis in the tens of millions of people. When will the networks learn to stop being used by crafty spin-doctors?

The Thomas hearings coincided with the rise of a new presidential campaign. The Democrats are stirring, and so is the White House. Again, the question: can things be improved this time? And, if so, how? Perhaps this report points to a better way. We hope so. As Bill McKay said in "The Candidate," there really has to be "a better way."

Restoring the Bond: Connecting Campaign Coverage to Voters

A Report of the Campaign Lessons for '92 Project

Executive Summary

The presidential election campaign of 1988 left, in its wake, an unusual consensus: the widespread belief that something had gone wrong with the process by which the American people choose a leader. Any election, of course, leaves at least one side disappointed, and losers can be expected to cry foul. But the 1988 campaign inspired more than partisan criticism. A variety of voices -- those of scholars, pollsters, journalists and, not least, voters -- have expressed a sense of dissatisfaction, a view that great issues were somehow not joined in the campaign, that the electorate was cheated of its chance to weigh matters of substance. Republicans wondered why it was that aspects of the personal background of Vice-presidential candidate Dan Quayle could, for a significant time, sweep away all other issues in the campaign. Democrats mused bitterly about the effectiveness of negative advertising directed at nominee Michael Dukakis. More broadly, a number of dispassionate observers concluded that our national discourse on the key issue of how we choose a president had lost its way.

Much of the ensuing reflection focuses on the campaign role of journalists. Traditionally, the press has asserted

that it is the candidates who shape a campaign, that newspapers and television reflect a campaign's tone but do not set it. In the aftermath of 1988, however, journalists themselves have joined the ranks of those wondering about whether they are among those culpable in the decline of American political discourse. Questions have emerged. Do the demands of television actually dictate the nature of campaign events? Have reporters failed to scrutinize the assertions of candidates? Has political advertising taken the place of reportage as the major source of voter information? Do journalists now prefer to focus on the horserace aspects of a campaign rather than on the substance of the debate?

Over the past three years, the Joan Shorenstein Barone Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy has attempted to confront these and other questions about the nature of presidential campaign coverage -- and, by extension, American political reporting generally. Our work has taken two forms. Nine Sundays: A Proposal for Better Presidential Campaign Coverage attempts to deal with the perceived vacuousness of campaign discussion through the advent of a new institution, a debate/conversation format in which the major party presidential candidates will address each other in tv encounters whose design is meant to ensure that serious discourse will emerge. This second report, for its part, addresses the challenge of improving

coverage of the rest of the campaign -- the whirlwind of events and proposals which the press must weigh and explain to the electorate, as voters attempt to take the measure of candidates.

This report is divided into two parts. First, it is an attempt to go beyond a general feeling of unease about campaign coverage and to cite specific problems which have arisen. Second, we offer a series of recommendations designed to help news organizations with practical, easily-implemented suggestions which, if adopted, hold the promise of improving national and local coverage of election campaigns.

Background: How the "Campaign Lessons for '92" Project Worked

Over the course of the past three years, the Shorenstein Barone Center, with the support of the Markle Foundation, has created a series of conferences at which different aspects of the coverage of presidential campaigns were considered from a variety of viewpoints: those of scholars, pollsters, campaign operatives and journalists themselves. These forums were designed to be a kind of neutral turf on which representatives of the various sides of the campaign wars, along with those who chronicle their battles, could discuss the old ground rules governing the coverage and consider a new set of ground rules.

CONFERENCES

The Role of Polls in Campaign Coverage-February 8, 1989-Harvard University

Television News and the Presidential Campaign Process-April 8, 1989-New York City

Values and Images in Presidential Politics (sponsored jointly with the Harvard Divinity School)-April 18, 1989-Harvard University

Public Figures and Private Lives: What Lines Should be Drawn?-June 10, 1989-Harvard University

Presidential Debates (sponsored jointly with the Annenberg Washington Program for Social Communications Policy)-December 5, 1989-Washington, DC

School for Scandal: Lessons for the Politicians and the Press-March 29, 1990-Washington, DC

Campaign Lessons for '92-May 14, 1991-Washington, DC

In addition, the Center has sponsored a major lecture/symposium on the role of the press in political coverage. The first annual Theodore H. White Lecture on Press and Politics was given, in November, 1990, by longtime CBS anchorman Walter Cronkite. These conferences and the White Lecture, along with weekly brown bag lunches and seminars and a review of new literature about campaigns and their coverage, have formed the research basis for our critique and recommendations. In addition, research and discussion papers by Lawrence K. Grossman and Kiku Adatto were central to this project. The insights and sensible suggestions emerging from this process are reflected in this

report.

Problems with Campaign Coverage

If a single overriding theme emerges from this work, it is a concern that campaigns have become distant from the concerns of voters, that a "disconnect" has developed between the electorate and their prospective leaders -- and that journalism, rather than bridging that gap, has helped create and sustain it. The belief that voters are in some ways alienated from the campaign process is a profoundly serious charge in a democracy. How could such an alienation develop? Other studies have focused the blame on voter registration problems, campaign finances, campaign ethics, political tv ads and the decline of the political parties. This project, while not intending in any way to minimize or dismiss these other factors, is limited to analyzing another part of the current political dynamic: the role of television and the print press.

1) The press has generally adopted too much of an insider's approach to its campaign coverage.

The insider's perspective is rooted in an overemphasis on the most obvious and enticing part of the campaign: the "horserace" drama of which candidate is ahead and who is likely to win. "Horserace" coverage leads to more stories

about campaign strategy than about substance. The spread of a multitude of new polls, including those commissioned by news organizations themselves, have contributed to this trend.

This same emphasis encourages news organizations to turn increasingly for analysis of campaign events to so-called "spin doctors," who become the equivalents of seconds in a duel or handlers in a boxing match.

2) The emphasis on political strategy over substance has allowed political advertising to supplant reporting as the most important vehicle for transmitting policy information to voters. Candidates take advantage of the paucity of issue-based coverage to proffer what amounts to their own versions of news, in the form of a burgeoning volume of political ads in primetime television. Such ads are more widely seen and more influential than even television news, which used to be the primary source of public affairs information for American voters. Because they are brief and deliberately punchy, these ads are, however, likely to distort an opponent's record. They also are increasingly likely to adopt a negative tone, contributing to voter cynicism.

3) The production demands of television, which place a premium on symbolic visual elements and powerful emotional moments, have come to dictate the daily activities of presidential candidates and to drive out the extended

explanation of issue positions. The format of the nightly news, with catchy visuals and quick soundbites, has affected how candidates and reporters operate in the field. It is not an accident that, in 1988, George Bush spoke in a flag factory and Michael Dukakis sought to crystallize his views on the military by riding in a tank. In addition to reducing the incentive to discuss the issues, the sheer physical staging necessary to produce such visually-potent events for a large press corps tends to distance local observers -- physically -- from candidates as they campaign. Thus, even the contemporary equivalents of a whistle-stop trip leave those who actually come to see the candidate with a sense of distance and alienation -- the feeling of being an extra in a feature film production.

4) Reporters have responded to this development with an ill-advised new form of reportage, a kind of "theatre criticism" about the effectiveness or ineffectiveness of event staging. For voters -- who are meant to be the consumers not the producers of such visuals -- such reportage reinforces their remoteness from the power centers of campaigns. The economics and logistics of the news business make it difficult to undertake and gain attention for enterprising, research-based stories. Campaign managers offer stories with strong visuals for television. Financial problems have been exacerbated by the increasingly cutthroat competition among news organizations -- especially

those in television, in light of the struggle for ratings and revenues in which networks are now engaged with local and cable channels. The need in recent years for television news to serve as a profit center also has created pressure to treat politics and public affairs more as entertainment than as serious business. On the local level, appearances by candidates are frequently covered by general assignment reporters unversed in major issues and likely to treat the candidate mainly as a visiting celebrity.

5) Television, with its emphasis on the individual candidate and his or her skills in projecting a message, has contributed to the decline of political parties as organized screening mechanisms and abetted the rise of a personality-based politics which tends to diminish discussion of issues. Contemporary journalism creates an incentive to focus on the candidate as an individual rather than as a purveyor of ideas and issue positions. As a result, there has been an increase in stories about "character", "gaffes" and scandal, at the expense of issue-based stories which might, if done clearly, help link public policy to the lives of voters.

The problems of campaign coverage are sufficiently daunting that there is a temptation to make primarily negative recommendations. And, indeed, those who participated in the "Campaign Lessons for '92" project did identify a number of succinct "don'ts" to urge on news-gathering organizations. At the same time, the project did identify some positive counter-trends worth encouraging.

Recommendations for News Organizations

1) Find Ways to Turn Manufactured News into Real News

News organizations can be more than passive intermediaries, recording or describing events produced by campaigns. Political advertising, for instance, can become the point of departure for enterprising journalism. Rather than allow an ad to run on television or be published in a newspaper, without any critique, it can be analyzed for possible distortion. Similarly, "photo opportunities" can also be used as points of departure for analysis of issues and perspective on problems rather than simply be reported as stories on their own. The most encouraging, yet relatively simple, positive trend in political coverage is the so-called "ad watch", reportage which offers fuller explanations of issues raised in advertising, points out misrepresentations and offers context to readers or viewers. The "ad watch" is a worthy approach that should be widely adopted by news organizations interested in a more serious look at political coverage.

2) Plan Campaign Coverage in Advance of the Campaign

A coverage plan should include more than a list of which reporters will cover which candidates. News organizations can develop what Washington Post columnist David Broder

calls a "baseline agenda" of what a cross-section of observers identifies as important policy issues. Reporters can be assigned to follow discussion of these issues -- whether through statements of candidates or reports in party platforms or other venues -- as the campaign progresses. It is important for local and regional news organizations to identify issues of particular interest to their areas, as well as to interpret national issues for their local constituencies. In addition, editors should consider assigning reporters with particular policy interests and backgrounds to cover those issues during the campaign. Such assignments could act as a substantive counterweight to the kind of fluffy sound-bite coverage that was the norm in '88.

3) Use Polls to Do More Than Indicate Who's Ahead

Polls can do much more than provide information on the horseraces. They can be a means of assessing voters' concerns and perhaps a way of bringing voters back into the campaign debate. Polls can track changes in public opinion on specific issues during the campaign -- and thus serve as a measure of the effectiveness of the campaigns.

Polls about issues can be amplified through the use of interview material from a variety of voices: community leaders, policy experts and, most important, individual voters. The use of such material can serve as another way

to bring voters into the campaign. Moreover, as citizens watch or read about other citizens expressing their views, they are likely to develop their own views further -- or, at the least, to value their own opinions and see the ballot as an outlet for them.

4) Avoid "Theatre Criticism" and "Spin Doctors"

It is a disservice to readers to subordinate coverage of the message of a campaign to discussion of its mechanics. It is fundamentally different to offer analysis of why a campaign chooses certain settings for a candidate's appearances rather than to critique the way in which an appearance is staged. Similarly, it is better to offer analysis of the themes a candidate emphasizes -- and what might be new in his or her position -- than to quote partisan observers ("spin doctors") as to the effectiveness of the candidate's manner of presentation.

Such changes in coverage will be a natural consequence of journalism which keeps in mind the perspective of voters, rather than campaign insiders.

5) Base Campaign Journalism in Research Rather Than In Events Coverage Alone

Effective campaign coverage, in order to make sense for readers and viewers, must offer context. How has the abortion issue changed in light of the most recent Supreme

Court decision? What do legal experts expect? How do such trends influence a candidate's position? The reporter who brings research to stories -- rather than simply "packaging" events -- serves a much-needed explanatory role for voters. Insistence on a research basis for stories will also ensure that the unverified rumor stays out of print and off the air.

Conclusion

In offering explanatory information to readers and viewers, journalism can reach its highest goal: to help citizens enjoy a fuller understanding of events which affect them. Such coverage should not be hidebound by artificial balance and objectivity, which might lead a reporter, who has uncovered an advertising distortion, to try to find a comparable offense in a rival campaign. Fair-minded analysis should not be mistaken for bias.

In the discussions which formed the basis for the Campaign Lessons for '92 project, there was unsurprisingly no shortage of pessimism.

Yet many participants also held out hope for improvement, including even those who worked for successful candidates. "If we all take some responsibility for the shallowness of it and we all try to set up some informal guidelines," said Roger Ailes, media advisor to the 1988

Bush campaign, "maybe we could arrive over a period of time with some way of improving this for the American people."

Perhaps most hopeful of all, however, were the positive experiences of news organizations which have tried some of the innovations endorsed above and found that the public did respond enthusiastically. When KVUE-TV, Austin, Texas initiated an "ad watch" team during that state's 1990 gubernatorial election, it found that what reporter Carole Kneeland called "solid, old-fashioned reporting, fact-checking, analyzing, backgrounding" was not only less expensive than some other types of coverage but that it attracted viewers. "People were watching our station for political coverage, because they knew we were being so aggressive about it."

It is in the hope that there is both a need and a market for courageous truth-telling journalism that the Joan Shorenstein Barone Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy offers this report.

RESTORING THE BOND:
CONNECTING CAMPAIGN COVERAGE TO VOTERS
A REPORT OF THE CAMPAIGN LESSONS FOR '92 PROJECT
by Ellen Hume*

Section I

The Changing Role of the Press in Elections

Thanks to the weakening of political parties and the rise of television, the relationship between the journalist and the politician is one of the most powerful -- and problematic -- forces shaping American democracy today. Political journalism has improved dramatically over the past 50 years. Major news organizations now commit enormous financial and human resources to covering national, state and local politics. Newsrooms are no longer all-white or all-male; there is greater diversity of coverage. Journalists are better-educated and better-paid, and there is less partisan bias. Gone are the days when reporters followed politicians like small flocks of eager stenographers, willing to record their statements and

*with contributing analysis by John Ellis and research by Carter Wilkie.

dispense them at face value. The well-documented evasions and deceptions of the executive branch during the Vietnam War and Watergate, as well as the escalation of blatantly manipulative electoral politics, all encouraged reporters to take a more critical role in gathering and reporting political news. Stephen Hess of the Brookings Institution has gone so far as to conclude that the media's 1988 presidential election coverage was the best in history.¹

Yet there is acute discomfort with the changing role of the electronic and print press in our political life, particularly as dissatisfaction rises about the political process itself. There are some inherent limits on the degree to which the press can improve matters. The press, by itself, can't make voters vote. It can't make politicians lead. And it can't, without much discomfort, fill the roles that political parties used to perform. Public expectations of what the press should and should not be doing are high -- and public understanding of the operating goals and standards of the press is low.

The Press and the "Disconnect" Between the Public and Campaigns

The 1988 campaign makes clear that while technology, party reforms and other changes have created higher stakes for their performance, news organizations haven't faced

effectively the challenges of this new environment. The values that increasingly define commercial success in television and to some extent, print journalism -- the emphasis on pleasing or titillating images, gossip, conflict, personalities, drama and entertainment -- are swamping the factual reporting and thoughtful analysis that have always defined good journalism. Distorted pictures of society, war, the political process, and the basic contexts of our lives are presented in ways that appear seductively credible.

In practice, this means that the public is losing its grip on the democratic process. Elections, the litmus tests of democracy, are becoming mud-wrestling contests that are irrelevant to the realities that face the candidates once elected. Of course presidential politics has always been a nasty, gossipy business, with great gaps between political rhetoric and reality. As Paul F. Boller, Jr. reminds us, the first real presidential contest in American history was full of mud: "the Federalists called Jefferson an atheist, anarchist, demagogue, coward, mountebank, trickster and Franco-maniac, and said his followers were 'cut-throats who walk in rags and sleep amidst filth and vermin.'"2

Historically, however, the effects of such campaign excesses were balanced by the activities of other institutions with a role in elections. Precinct workers, churches, labor unions, party organizations and other

diverse influences helped shape and translate political messages. Today those messages are sent predominantly through the news media. The media, particularly television, have come to serve as a kind of national glue, binding the electorate together and providing shared experiences. At the same time, they have replaced other institutions and made the power of the messages conveyed through and by the media much more influential than before.

Seventy percent of the public has said it became acquainted with the presidential and vice-presidential candidates in 1988 through television, 20% through newspapers and 4% through radio, according to a 1988 Roper Organization survey. A 1980 survey, taken by the University of Michigan, found that just 24% of the national sample said they had been contacted by a political party worker. "Today, a party precinct worker who knocks on a typical American door has to counter the messages that voters have been receiving from television and newspapers. It is not a fair fight, to say the least," Gary Orren and William Mayer have concluded.³ Thus public expectations about the press are high because television, and to some extent print and radio, have become the filters through which the candidates and voters experience much of their national government and political culture. It is hardly an overstatement to say that the institutions of the press -- because of their ubiquity and influence -- have come to serve as our new political bosses.

It is a fundamentally different kind of power than that exercised in the past by some local journalists who actively tried to influence political campaigns; that direct kingpin role has been minimized by contemporary journalism ethics.⁴ The power of the contemporary press manifests itself not as a direct attempt to promote a party or a candidate. Its power, rather, is a function of the nature of today's reportage -- and is felt much more broadly and deeply throughout the political process. This power to affect both the agenda and the fate of the campaigns results from acts of omission -- as, for example, when the press fails to highlight certain issues and voices -- and of commission, as when pressure from the press precipitates the withdrawals of candidates from the contest before the citizens have had a chance to vote.

Many journalists are uncomfortable with this political influence. It is a deeply-held professional norm that journalists must eschew direct political intervention and remain neutral. Typical journalists might well define their mission in covering an electoral campaign as follows: to convey the news (i.e., events which have occurred) while beating other journalists to the punch, if possible; to provide analysis when appropriate, to serve, with some degree of skepticism about what they witness, as the public's eyes and ears. The candidate's mission during an electoral campaign is quite different. It has essentially

two parts: to win and to establish political support for positions and actions the candidate wishes to take.

Meanwhile the third key player in the electoral process -- the voter -- has a fundamentally different set of priorities from the journalist's or the candidate's. It is to seek to understand what is true and false, what is actually at stake in the election, how the choice connects with his or her own life and actions, and how to evaluate the candidate's personality or the incumbent's performance in office. Political journalism, at its best, can serve as a neutral, credible source of information to help the voter make these evaluations.

Failures of 1988

The Campaign Lessons for '92 project has concluded that during the 1988 presidential election, the press fulfilled only the simplest mission of the journalist, i.e. to report the news competitively. Other missions -- including those that would be most helpful to the voter -- were not, by many measures, adequately achieved. Instead, the 1988 campaign and its coverage provided evidence that the journalist's credibility as a neutral source of information for the voter has been undermined. The commercial goals of journalists (particularly the production goals of television) and the political goals of

the candidate, far from being at odds, may, in fact, have come to overlap. Instead of providing leadership and introducing what may be new and difficult issues to the public, more politicians and news organizations alike have embraced a formula dictated as much by marketing surveys as a sense of mission. It is a formula which includes telling the public what it already wants to hear, which relies on routinized modes of presentation rather than on raising facts and issues that may -- because of their dark implications or the challenges they pose -- turn off voters and news "consumers" alike.

In the 1988 presidential election, for example, the savings and loan crisis was, in effect, swept under the rug. ("Television can't deal with facts," NBC News President Michael Gartner observed, when asked why this happened.) On the congressional campaign trail in 1990, the looming Persian Gulf War and deepening recession were barely discussed. "The nation, in other words, went through an election season unenlightened by serious discussion of war and recession. To say nonvoters didn't miss much at the federal level is a colossal understatement," veteran Boston Globe political reporter Thomas Oliphant has written. While this may not be much of a departure from politics as usual for candidates, the marketing-based approach represents a significant change for the journalist. It represents no less than the erosion of a central professional ethic that

has been in place, with varying degrees of effectiveness, for more than 30 years.

At many local news organizations, and certainly at the major "impact" news companies -- the New York Times, Wall Street Journal, Washington Post, Los Angeles Times, ABC, CBS and NBC -- the news divisions have, historically, operated with a significant degree of independence from promoting the direct financial or ideological self-interest of their parent companies or owners. As television news divisions succumb more and more to market factors in deciding what to cover as news, historians may well look back on the last three decades as the golden age of objective non-commercialized news. Specialty magazines have not generally held to the same independent standard, but some newspapers and even the Public Broadcasting Service, which have maintained such independence, now are showing signs that they are more frequently tying news judgment to marketing needs and perceived financial imperatives. Competitive pressures throughout the news business threaten to overwhelm the autonomy and quality of journalism. Layoffs and bureau closings are increasingly common to both the broadcast and print media; these cutbacks are likely to erode the political discourse even further.

The Press and Voter Apathy

Financial pressure is only part of the story. There is no shortage of explanations for the failure of America's democracy to fulfill its full promise. An "insider" perspective adopted by the press and a not unrelated candidate cynicism are leading contributors to voter apathy. Yet when examining the role of the press in particular, one finds that dissatisfaction about its performance is shared, to some extent, by journalists as well as the political community and the public. "We sort of lost the focus as to who we were reporting for," Warren Mitofsky, then executive director for voter research and surveys at CBS, has said of the 1988 coverage. "If we were reporting to tell each other how smart we were, we did a great job. If we were reporting to tell the American people what they wanted to know about the candidates and what they perhaps should have known, I don't think we did a very good job."⁵ A public opinion poll taken by the Times-Mirror Center for the People & The Press after the 1988 campaign found that the press received a "D+," the lowest grade of all the participants, including the political parties, pollsters and even campaign consultants. In a similar survey after the 1990 election, the grade for the press rose to only a "C+." Alan Simpson, the Republican Senator from Wyoming, has observed that "it used to be that the press could lecture us on lots of things

because they were held in higher esteem. That is no longer the case. They're right down there in the rat dump with the rest of us."⁶

Given their central role, it is understandable that the media have become a favorite target for complaint as evidence mounts that our electoral process isn't what it should be. Fifty percent of Americans don't vote in presidential elections, a fact that can be viewed as directly connected to the quality of the political discourse as presented by and through the media. Curtis Gans of the Committee for the Study of the American Electorate has concluded that "the principal causes of continued low and declining voter participation -- in which only half of our electorate votes in presidential elections and only a third in congressional elections -- lies not in voting laws and procedures, not in mobilization and demography, but in the quality and content of our politics."⁷ He argues that campaign coverage -- particularly that on television -- has helped create the problem. "Unless the public believes it is voting for something meaningful and that its vote will make a difference, low voter participation will continue to be the order of the day," he predicts, criticizing in particular the propensity of television news to emphasize the sporting aspects of politics, its presentation of information in undifferentiated blips and its development of passive, rather than involved, spectators. Ruy Teixeira,

author of Why Americans Don't Vote, agrees that the failure of many Americans to vote stems not from structural barriers but from "the way politics is conducted in our society," including in part the influence of the media and polls.⁸

The 1988 Markle Commission on the Media and the Electorate (henceforth referred to as the Markle Commission) has found that public dissatisfaction with the tone and content of a campaign is demonstrated not by demands for a different kind of campaign but by "verbal cynicism toward politics and politicians and (by) staying away" from the polls.⁹

To be sure, voter lack of interest is a problem that long predates modern coverage, including that on television, which often bears the brunt of media criticism. Several historians argue, in fact, that the decline of the partisan press in the mid-to-late 1800s turned off the voters, as the newly neutral newspapers created a less contentious and more confusing political landscape. "Politics became less simple and accessible and the partisanship that sustained high voter turnouts lost its cultural hegemony....Once the centerpiece of party journalism, politics became engulfed in a sea of sports, gossip, murder and scandal. The sense that elections held a special place in public life ebbed away," writes Michael McGerr.¹⁰

Yet there is reason to believe that the problem has grown worse, at least in part because the journalists and the campaigns aren't "connecting" with voters -- i.e., are

not making clear the relationship between political choices and the electorate's concerns. Campaign participants and reporters "are people who speak of the process as an end in itself, connected only nominally, and vestigially, to the electorate and its concerns," writes Joan Didion. Instead of being "the general mechanism affording the citizens of a state a voice in its affairs," campaigns have become "the reverse: a mechanism seen as so specialized that access to it is correctly limited to its own professionals...to that handful of insiders who invent, year in and year out, the narrative of public life."¹¹ Evidence is mounting that voters are tuning out because elections seem to be theatrical displays with insignificant impact on their own lives. They find little guidance about whom to believe and how to judge politicians' behavior. They are increasingly resigned to being powerless spectators, according to focus group research conducted by the Markle Commission.

"...[D]iscussants showed that they perceived 1988's and other presidential campaigns as the 'property' of candidates and media, not themselves as citizens. They deplored the '88 campaign's evasive, mean-spirited quality, but felt no proprietary responsibility for corrective action. They did not expect candidates, media or future campaigns to change. They seemed content with a distant, minimalist role for themselves."¹²

There are other symptoms of a breakdown in citizen participation in politics that can be attributed, at least

in part, to the way politicians make use of the media -- both in the forms of the so-called paid media (advertising for which candidates pay) and the "free" media (news coverage). The cost of campaigns -- driven up by the high price of putting campaign ads on television -- has distorted political leadership. Candidates complain that they must spend too much time raising money and that they become beholden to their contributors. The average senator must raise \$35,000 every 20 days to pay the \$4 million minimum price tag of a competitive campaign, according to an estimate by the Wall Street Journal. An estimated half to two-thirds of a candidate's budget goes to preparing campaign ads and broadcasting them. The fundraising pressure has been blamed for leading office holders to respond too directly to political action committees and other donors, as in the "Keating Five" savings and loan scandal, centered on the effect of savings and loan industry campaign contributions. The 96% re-election rate for Congressional incumbents, notwithstanding the public's stated unhappiness with congressional performance, is further evidence that our electoral system is stalled. If elections are about something other than just winning and losing -- if they're a chance for voters to talk back to their political leaders -- then the process is indeed in trouble.

Each party to this process behaves the way it does because the incentives are stacked that way. Politicians

feel they must cynically do whatever it takes to win, and that the press and the voters punish those who take the risk of speaking frankly. News organizations, under more competitive and economic pressures than ever before, conclude that substantive political coverage is boring their audiences. While some worked creatively in 1990 to improve coverage, many news organizations are talking now about cutting sharply the amount of time and money devoted to politics, which will further erode the political discourse.

Negative Coverage, Negative Campaigning

The public is especially turned off by the negative tone of today's campaigns, a tone generated both by the candidates, who have found that "attack" advertising works when handled skillfully, and by the journalists, whose skeptical approach to the manipulations of the political officials has been fed by such experiences as covering Watergate, Vietnam, and the Iran-Contra affair. A November, 1988 Gallup Poll found that voters, by a three to one margin, considered the 1988 presidential campaign more negative than past contests, and that more blamed the news media's coverage (40%) than the campaign managers (32%) or the candidates themselves (17%). It is not clear whether the reason is that the press, by being perceived as closer to the electorate -- the reader and the viewer -- is more

susceptible to criticism than the handlers and the candidates, who more and more hide behind the camera and distance themselves from the voters.

Several studies have documented the negative bent of campaign journalism. University of California political scientist Daniel Hallin has found that, as the campaign coverage became more interpretive in the 1980s, it also became more preoccupied with "debunking" the politicians. In 1968, positive and negative television news stories about the election were equally frequent, but from 1980 on, "negative stories clearly predominate."¹³ The negative tone does not, of course, remain confined to news accounts. Paul Taylor of the Washington Post describes a cycle of press/politics cynicism which took hold during the 1988 campaign: "We are carriers, as well as chroniclers, of the prevailing disenchantment with public life. The more cynical the news reporters and news consumers have become, the more image-manipulating, demagogic and risk-averse the newsmakers have become. And so our cynicism begets their fakery, and their fakery our cynicism, and so on."¹⁴ This assessment is echoed by the Markle Commission and Sissela Bok, who agree that the press, the candidates and their managers and the electorate influence and reinforce each other's behavior in ways that can either strengthen or diminish the value of the electoral process. "Just when people the world over look to our democratic traditions for guidance in how to safeguard

fundamental rights, many in our own country feel trapped in a vicious cycle of manipulative and trivializing discourse," concludes Bok. "In any vicious cycle, a number of factors contribute to a downward spiraling. When it comes to the erosion of public trust in government, politicians, the press, and the public affect one another in similarly debilitating ways." 15

This poses a daunting challenge for those who would like to break this vicious cycle. When asked what the press might do to reform the campaign process, some journalists respond, "Don't ask us. Ask the campaign people. We only cover what they do." The campaign people reply, "Don't ask us. Ask the press people. We only do what they cover." Yet both the press and the politically active warn that unless this dynamic is changed, future campaigns will get even worse. "If we all take some responsibility for the shallowness of it and we all try to set up some informal guidelines, maybe we could arrive over a period of time with some way of improving this for the American people," media adviser Ailes said after the 1988 election. "But unless we are all willing to admit that we have a stake in it, to admit that we had a part in it, and discuss mistakes we've made, it ain't ever going to change, folks. It's going to get tougher."16

The dangers of this empty political process are evident: If candidates aren't held accountable on specific

issues during an election, the voters will have a difficult time holding them accountable once they take office.

Structural factors that benefit incumbents further isolate politicians from voters. Albert Hunt, Washington bureau chief of the Wall Street Journal, worries about the price paid by the American political system if the campaign discourse isn't improved: "The problem is there's such a disconnect between the campaign and governance. I don't think any of our recent campaigns have certainly prepared voters, and I don't even think they've done a very good job of preparing candidates for the critical task of what presidential elections are all about; namely that of governance."¹⁷

All the parties in the electoral process depend on each other. Thus, the opportunity to improve the situation rests with all three parties to the process: with the politicians, the public and the press. Journalists can't possibly do all that the public expects them to do, but it can be argued nevertheless that the media, by the way they cover and convey politics, do have a profound impact on the way candidates wage their campaigns and on the way voters feel about the democratic process. "Responsibility now must be shared by those who share the public's attention," former CBS news anchor Walter Cronkite has said. As the press examines that responsibility, Cronkite concluded, "I think [campaign coverage] will be done considerably differently in '92."¹⁸

Section II

The Challenge: Today's Television Culture

The Rise of Television

Since the 1960s, television has been the principal vehicle of political communication in America. Americans today get most of their political news and information from the tube, either through news programming or political advertising. Television has helped to reduce and replace the relationship between political parties and voters. Television has become a "common carrier" enabling leaders to speak to voters without mediating political institutions. It has established the news media as the central political force in presidential campaigns. Journalists -- reporters, producers, editors -- influence, by virtue of myriad small decisions they make each day, how political leaders are perceived by the electorate.

To be sure, television isn't solely responsible for the changes and problems of today's electoral politics. Scholars such as Thomas Mann of the Brookings Institution argue that popular unhappiness with today's political process is based more on economic factors than on the role of television. Michael Schudson of the University of California at San Diego agrees, charging that real economic

news matters more than television images. He says that those who over-emphasize the role of television in politics are guilty of "telemetry."19

Yet it is impossible to analyze today's political process without observing the powerful impact of television technology, television news management and the role of paid television advertising in electoral campaigns. "The media system is the new elector of the modern political age. Networks have become the opposing party, the shadow cabinet," concludes political scientist Austin Ranney of the American Enterprise Institute.²⁰ Richard Bond, who helped run George Bush's successful 1988 presidential campaign, describes television as "absolutely the dominant player in presidential campaigns" and concludes "there's no escaping it....Every day of a presidential campaign is planned for television. Every event, every speech down to the pre-figured applause lines and the sound bites...is pre-programmed."²¹ Television has hurtled everyone forward, willy-nilly, into a world in which political communication travels at the speed of light. The immediacy and intimacy of television has provided the nation with what feels like direct access to its political leaders and events. The public sees television as "inherently more trustworthy, more believable" than print journalism because it seems to provide viewers with a first-hand experience, as Lawrence K. Grossman, former president of NBC News and the Public Broadcasting Service, has observed.²²

It is an often overlooked fact that the potential of television to enhance democracy is extraordinary. "It is a machine that gives tens of millions of viewers the simultaneous experience, partly real and partly illusion, of being on-the-scene participants in the major happenings of our time," Grossman notes. And yet public frustration builds when what appears on television to be personal political communication turns out to be empty staged events and "insider" news about the process behind the scenes, rather than news about matters connected to peoples' lives. People say they feel manipulated equally by the candidates and the press, and they don't know whom to believe. Politics experienced through television is a one-way street; it has no direct input from interested citizens. Television's ironic "strength was that it could appear so open and be so closed," David Halberstam has observed.²³

Instead of making politics more of a communal exercise, television appears to have had the reverse effect. Eighteenth century American newspapers were normally read and discussed in social or group settings. In the next century, newspapers were highly partisan organs used by the political parties to help turn elections into rituals of group solidarity.²⁴ But during the past 30 years, television, creating a direct link between politicians and individual voters sitting at home, has helped to shift democracy away from this group event to an atomized, individual and essentially passive experience.

"You can sit around today on C-Span or what have you and know more about politics than you've ever had the opportunity in the history of the country," says GOP consultant Ed Rollins. "The problem is fewer and fewer Americans...really are asked to participate fully in the process. Forty, fifty years ago we had precinct organizations, you had block captains, you had jobs related to that."²⁵

Ordinary voters are outsiders when it comes to the television news; while their voices filled over 20% of the sound bites used in the pre-election evening news broadcasts in 1972, that share had dropped to 3 to 4% in 1988, according to researcher Hallin. He found that the voters were quoted in 1988 almost exclusively to illustrate poll results and not to contribute ideas to the campaign coverage.²⁶

It is hardly surprising, then, that citizens are having trouble identifying with campaigns and their coverage. The Markle Commission found in 1988 that "American voters today do not seem to understand their rightful place in the operation of American democracy. They act as if they believe that presidential elections belong to somebody else, most notably, presidential candidates and their handlers."²⁷

Risk-Taking Disincentives for Press and Politicians

The television spotlight has created other problems as well. It often makes the politician's ability to address tough political choices more difficult. Compromise is hard to negotiate, issues tend to be polarized, and opinions entrenched when policy-making takes place instantaneously in an atmosphere where image predominates, Grossman writes. Gans points out that television's propensity for fast-paced, dramatic stories downplays the sense of history and may create unrealistic expectations about the pace of political progress.²⁸

Thus the risk-taking necessary for developing new solutions to public policy problems is hampered as new ideas are instantly exposed to a huge audience, without much chance for deliberation, changes of position, or thoughtful explanation. "If we come out with a sweeping view of how to change things, there are going to be some flaws in it. And the next 30 days of stories are going to be about the flaws. Therefore, you have made a terrible mistake in trying to present an idea which may be helpful," concludes campaign adviser Ailes.²⁹

In this political environment where the smallest error can be amplified instantly, not only the politicians but the television programmers like to play it safe. As Grossman observes: "In seeking to attract the largest

possible audience all the time, commercial television cannot afford to veer from the path of mainstream thinking, or to advocate unpopular causes or radical ideas either of the left or right. It strives for objectivity and balance, which translates into mainstream orthodoxy. Television will not risk alienating large segments of its mass audience which its advertisers pay so dearly to reach. For this reason, television's influence derives less from its ability to change people's minds than from its ability to reinforce popular beliefs."³⁰

This also makes the inclusion of minority views and candidates more difficult. Producers in need of interviewees turn to reliable tested veterans who are expected to play by the established rules of television, rather than take a chance on someone who might try to seize the microphone for too long, look inappropriate or speak unpredictably about controversial issues. As a result, the pool of "experts" remains small whether the subject is a national election or the Persian Gulf War. The result, again, is another kind of gap between television news and the electorate.

The narrow range of voices on television also reflects the fact that television management -- and that of most newspapers, magazines and radio stations as well -- remains largely an "old boys'" network. Cokie Roberts, a political commentator on ABC and National Public Radio, observes that "television is run by a bunch of white guys who care about

middle-class people...And so you have agenda-setting that's completely unconscious, but that says these are the things we think are important and therefore, we are going to tell you that they are important."³¹

Television also affects politics by focusing on the personal qualities and celebrity status of the candidate. Television brings strangers into the viewer's living room, converting them into instant stars. Candidates and television reporters alike become larger than life. "It has established unreal expectations for our political system by creating heroes and as quickly destroying them," Gans has said.³²

The interest in highlighting television news "personalities" (news anchors, readers or correspondents) as a point of competition among stations and networks also distorts news values. This backfired against CBS in 1988 when anchor Dan Rather was unable to make substantive headway on the Iran-Contra scandal in his interview with candidate George Bush, and he was seen as having "lost" his interview, as if interviews were prize fights between contesting equals to be won or lost.

Television's Need for Drama

Increasingly, television executives are requiring news programs, including political coverage, to meet the same

entertainment standards as their other programming. A famous 1963 memo from then NBC News president Reuven Frank to his correspondents, described those goals. "Every news story," wrote Frank, "should, without any sacrifice of probity or responsibility, display the attributes of fiction, of drama. It should have structure and conflict, problem and denouement, rising action and falling action, a beginning, a middle and an end."³³

That dictum has become conventional wisdom in television news. "Everything is being judged on the same audience-attracting ratings base as entertainment programs," former CBS News producer Martin Koughan has said.³⁴ The result is that "the direction of television news coverage in a presidential campaign leads itself toward entertainment and not towards news," concludes GOP campaign strategist Rich Bond.³⁵

The Rise of Image Politics

Perhaps most disturbing of all, the modern technology of television has shaped a new political reality that is defined more by images than facts, and more by emotions than rational deliberation. This has enabled the politicians to turn their favorite weapon -- the political symbol -- into an emotional smart bomb that can hit voters with little explanation or relevance to what actually lies ahead if the candidate wins.

Studies have not yet been done which prove definitively that consumers receive information emotionally rather than rationally from television, or that pictures actually overcome words when both are experienced through television. But the collective experience of the television, advertising and political communities asserts both findings so powerfully that they have become the assumptions upon which all three sectors act. During the past two decades, news producers hoping to hook their audiences have deliberately honed their product to heighten the emotional and image-based connection with their viewers.

This effort to maximize the television viewers' emotional responses accelerated at CBS in the mid-1980s, when CBS president Van Gordon Sauter ordered that within every evening news broadcast there should be "moments" which emotionally involve and connect the viewer to the stories being told. Sauter measured the success or failure of each broadcast on the basis of these emotional hooks. "The kind of thing we're looking for is something that evokes an emotional response. When I go back there to the fishbowl, I tell them, goddamn it, we've got to touch people. They've got to feel a relationship with us. A lot of stories have inherent drama, but others have to be done in a way that will bring out an emotional response," Sauter explained.³⁶

As scholar Kathleen Hall Jamieson has observed, this approach diminishes the rational process necessary for

sorting out facts and issues. "The notion that the end of rhetoric is judgment presupposes that rhetoric consists of argument --statement and proof. Morselized ads and news bites consist instead of statement alone, a move that invites us to judge the merit of the claim on the ethos of the speaker or the emotional appeals (pathos) enwrapping the claim. In the process, appeal to reason (logos) -- one of Aristotle's prime artistic means of persuasion -- is lost."³⁷

In addition to the power of emotional connection, television provides candidates with the opportunity to recreate themselves from scratch, through images rather than facts or words. "Politicians have long since learned that in the days of television, pictures are more important than words anyway. Image is everything," laments Walter Cronkite.³⁸ "It's the picture that's remembered, no matter what we're saying," agrees Robert Furnad, Vice President and Executive Producer of CNN.³⁹ CBS correspondent Lesley Stahl discovered this as a White House reporter, trying to point out the difference between the Reagan administration's advertising and campaign images and its actual performance. "Many times we would run these pieces and say 'While the President went fishing today, back in the White House things were falling apart,' but no one would hear us."⁴⁰ Doris Graber's studies of political advertisements have confirmed the point. "People tend to believe what they see more than

what they hear," Graber says. "You can try to counteract it by explaining what a candidate is trying to do. But people still succumb to the beautiful visuals."⁴¹

Political operatives, highly sophisticated about the television programmers' common goal of winning over the viewer, have become ever better at providing entertaining pictures and themes for broadcasters to use. Michael Deaver, who orchestrated the Reagan campaign and White House pictures that Stahl couldn't overcome with words, reports that the networks could not resist his pretty or emotion-laden pictures. "We absolutely thought of ourselves when we got into the national campaigns as producers," Deaver has said. "We tried to create the most entertaining, visually attractive scene to fill that box, so that the cameras from the networks would have to use it. It would be so good that they'd say, 'Boy, this is going to make our show tonight.' And that's it exactly -- we became Hollywood producers."⁴²

This mutual interest in powerful visuals often blurs the important line between the broadcast news organizations and the politicians. "In a funny way the (Reagan White House) advancement and I have the same thing at heart -- we want the piece to look as good as (it) possibly can....I'm looking for the best picture, but I can't help it if the audiences that show up, or that are grouped together by the Reagan campaign, look so good. I can't think of that. I can't factor that out of the piece," notes Susan Zirinsky of CBS News.⁴³

This non-journalistic, commercial approach is eroding the quality of the coverage and creates what Ken Bode, Director of the Center for Contemporary Media at DePauw University, has called a "symbiotic relationship that exists between the news desks and the campaigns," one in which television is corrupted by its need for pictures that entertain. This need, says Bode, "overruns both the news judgments of the reporters that are out on the campaign trail and any coverage plan that the networks have committed themselves to. And it is a big problem."⁴⁴ In addition, there are signs that the public is turning off to the press in part because of this collusion to create images that will sell. This may be a significant problem for the press, which relies on a special First Amendment mandate to justify its standard operating procedures. If people believe that the press is not truly independent, or that it is not striving to meet the public interest or some higher standard of fact and truth, First Amendment privileges could suffer setbacks in the courts and political arena.

Print Journalism Still Counts

Print journalists, who used to dominate the political discourse, now literally sit in the back of the candidate's bus. While there are more of them covering politics these days -- just as there are far more broadcast journalists --

their audience has been shrinking. Only half of the adult population reads a newspaper every day, and circulation has stayed level while the number of households has increased by 44% in the past 20 years.⁴⁵ Not only do Americans by a 65% to 44% margin choose television over newspapers for their news, but they say they are more inclined to believe a television report than a newspaper when they differ on the same story.⁴⁶

Yet while television dominates the political culture, newspapers and magazines continue to play vital roles and most people rely on both television and print for their news. Print journalists have an edge over their television counterparts in their ability to provide greater investigative depth and analysis to political coverage at all levels. They still have a powerful voice in raising issues, investigating facts, and creating leads that the television journalists will follow. Veteran reporter Bernard Kalb has quipped, "the New York Times is the cheapest tip sheet the networks have."

And while television dominates by far the national and statewide political discourse, newspapers still reach a broader audience in their coverage of mayoral and other local races than television does. A 1988 Roper Organization survey found that the dominance of television declines the more local the election gets. When asked through what source they became best acquainted with statewide candidates, 50%

of respondents said through television, 31% through newspapers and 5% through radio; regarding local candidates for mayor, the state legislature and so forth, 36% of respondents said from television, 40% said from newspapers and 5% from radio.

Because it relies less on image and emotion than television does, print journalism has not succumbed nearly as much to the entertainment values and manipulation that dominate today's television news. Print journalists have more leeway to provide context and to weigh the pros and cons of an issue as it emerges. What they lose in immediacy and emotional impact, they can provide in scope and perspective. (Check the front pages of even the top newspapers, and you are certain to discover a "softer," more human interest focus than earlier. Newspapers are not immune from entertainment pressures, either.)

National print journalism is particularly effective in influencing the political elites who set the broader agenda for campaigns and governance. Officials will leak to an "impact" newspaper like the New York Times, Wall Street Journal or Washington Post in order to send a message to other political insiders; trial balloons on appointments and issues tend to find their way into print stories where they'll be discussed more fully than they would be on television. Thus while television attracts more people, still, print journalism has a powerful role to play in

setting the political agenda. Newspapers and magazines can derail the "manufactured news" of symbolic photo opportunities and sound bites and temporarily establish a different campaign agenda if they hit a nerve at the right time:

--It was a newspaper team from the Miami Herald that found Gary Hart and Donna Rice together in 1988, and a newspaper article in the New York Times that set off the political bombs under candidate Joseph Biden and Dukakis aide John Sasso.

-- A Wall Street Journal page one story about Ronald Reagan's age, published right after the 1984 debate with Mondale in which Reagan seemed disoriented and out of touch, swept the rest of the print and electronic press and became a thorn in the Reagan campaign's side.

--A famous Newsweek cover story profiling candidate George Bush as a "wimp" in 1988 also set off a firestorm of controversy, as Bush campaign strategists accused the magazine of going over the line to become a partisan player in the election. Journalists from Newsweek and other organizations defended the magazine's cover by pointing out that the big issue preoccupying political strategists was exactly that question -- did people think George Bush was a wimp? -- and that the press was simply reflecting one aspect of the political reality of the moment. The willingness of Newsweek to address the issue head-on established the "wimp"

factor as an early theme of the 1988 campaign, and became the pretext for Bush's transformation into a so-called "pit bull" candidate.

Television's greatest weakness -- its lack of focus on context and facts -- remains the greatest strength and opportunity for print journalism. The very fact of a story's origin in print, however, does not ensure that it will play a high-minded role in the campaign. Facts that are carefully placed in context in some newspapers and magazines become isolated and distorted as they follow the news chain to tabloids, radio talk shows and television. A case in point is Wall Street Journal reporter David Shribman's careful handling of a story about Republican candidate Pat Robertson, whose campaign emphasized traditional social values. Shribman's story -- that Robertson and his wife had apparently conceived their first child before they were married -- became sensationalized as others picked it up. Overall, however, it can be said that entertainment values continue to play a lesser role in print than television journalism -- and that print, as a result, serves as a check on television's tendency to allow images and entertainment to dominate journalism.

Newspapers and Campaign Research

The print press also has begun to play an expanding, if involuntary, new role in campaigns. Often a campaign will

pore through news clippings to find negative facts to use against an opponent. The news organization then becomes a pawn in the negative campaign cycle; its credibility is used -- or misused -- by the campaign in speeches and ads to back up charges that may be distorted beyond recognition from the original news reports.

A popular trend in the 1990 election, for example, was the use of newspaper headlines or phrases, pictured on television ads, which often were taken out of context to smear an opponent. What should journalists do in such a situation? Some news organizations officially complained; others wrote articles pointing out the distortions. It's not clear that the readers separated this kind of story from the other "insider" coverage. Democratic media consultant Daniel Payne believes that news organizations must be far more aggressive in stopping their manipulation by political campaigns. For example, he cited a television ad for 1990 Massachusetts gubernatorial candidate John Silber, in which a Boston Globe headline was deliberately misused to create a false inference. The television commercial reproduced the Globe headline -- which said that "Questions Linger Over Bellotti's Corruption Record" -- to imply that candidate Francis X. Bellotti himself had a record of corruption. The article under the headline had been about whether Bellotti, as Massachusetts attorney general, had pursued corruption adequately -- not whether he was himself corrupt. The Globe

asked Silber's campaign to pull the ads off the air, citing copyright infringement. Because the ads continued to air without the Globe's filing a lawsuit, the campaign "got away with it, and this is an important and disturbing precedent," Payne concludes.

Newspapers have found themselves caught in the middle of campaign wars, particularly in their "ad watch" coverage of campaign television ads. Their criticism of one campaign's ads during the 1990 elections would sometimes appear in the next campaign's counter-ads. While some journalists felt uncomfortable providing ammunition for one campaign against another, particularly if the campaign distorted the newspaper's comments, the Campaign Lessons for '92 project views this as a positive trend, indicating that watchdog attempts are having an impact.

Another trend in print journalism is less auspicious. The competitive pressures with television and tabloids are driving some serious newspapers to lower their standards and return, in some ways, to the yellow journalism of Joseph Pulitzer and William Randolph Hearst. Regardless of the virtues or vices of the print press today compared to yesteryear, print news organizations face as many economic and cultural challenges today as broadcasters do.

Section III

The Journalist and the Campaign

Covering "Issues"

One of the great shortcomings of America's electoral politics lies in its failure to engage voters and candidates in a discussion of public policy issues. This kind of political discourse, which does take place in Great Britain and in varying degrees within other democratic nations, has rarely marked American elections, except at the local level. There are, of course exceptions -- those times when issues are of such moment that they cannot help but take their place on the public agenda. One thinks of slavery in 1860; the Depression in 1932; the Vietnam War in 1968. In less fractious times, however, serious policy debate is not the norm.

The kinds of issues that do seem to matter in American national and statewide elections are those of performance -- report card assessments of the candidates --and what political scientist Gary Orren calls "valence" issues, the motherhood, apple pie, wave-the-flag, anti-crime themes which are not subject to debate but rather to symbolic manipulation by the candidates. One can interpret the success of the 1988 Bush campaign as a demonstration of the fact that a candidate can go far by simply aligning himself

on the side of the obvious "plus" valence issues (the flag) and against the "negative" valence issues (crime). There appears to be no need, in order to capitalize on these issues, to discuss the ins and outs of public policy.

Journalists have made attempts to inject serious discussion of policy matters into campaigns dominated by valence issues. The "impact" press, including newspapers, magazines, radio and network television, all produced special public policy issue pieces during the 1988 campaign. Their authors felt their efforts had little resonance for the public. Recalls Paul Taylor of the Washington Post: "We all wrote in the print press and the electronic press lots of (issue) stories. One never had the sense that you were connecting up with the American public." David Shribman of the Wall Street Journal agrees: "I never had the sense that we connected at all on those stories."⁴⁷

Some of the fault for this empty political discourse lies squarely with the voters, as the Markle Commission found in 1988. "Much of the information the media makes available is ignored," they observed. "The political apathy and striking political ignorance of average Americans is well-established." Nevertheless, the Markle Commission concluded, too, that what little the voters did manage to learn about policy issues during the 1988 general election was attributable, not surprisingly, "mainly to the influence of the media." The Commission said the voters' ability to

cite the deficit and other policy issues during the campaign was "the clearest instance of media influence, and the best example of the media's contribution to an informed electorate" to emerge from their study.⁴⁸ The reason is clear. The candidates themselves rarely discussed the issues, preferring a sound bite approach to their campaigning.

Yet to underscore how tuned out the voters can be to election coverage, consider the fact that Republican vice-presidential nominee Dan Quayle was the subject of 93 network evening news stories relating to his military service (or lack thereof) during a 12-day period in August, 1988, which was more coverage than all of the 13 presidential candidates except George Bush had received during all the primaries combined.⁴⁹ But 37% of the public polled immediately afterward by the Harris Survey for the Markle Commission could not identify Dan Quayle as George Bush's running mate.⁵⁰

Despite the disincentives for taking risks, candidates also must bear much of the blame for failing to wage substantive campaigns and instead seeking to manipulate the voters' emotions. Some analysts believe that the way candidates deliberately use valence issues, also called "wedge" issues by political operatives, forces a polarization of the American electorate that otherwise wouldn't happen.⁵¹ Attempts to get the candidates to

address substantively the nation's challenges in 1988 was a losing battle, as E.J. Dionne of the Washington Post has described it: "We always asked about the damn deficit. Bush had no interest in discussing it, because it was the main problem from the previous administration. Dukakis had no real interest in discussing it because he couldn't use the tax word...They wouldn't go to the bottom of that issue because they had no interest in doing so....I think there is a limit to how much the press can force candidates to behave against their own interests."⁵²

Indeed, the current incentives for a candidate to avoid such serious issues are certainly greater than those for discussing them. William Lacy, who managed Robert Dole's 1988 presidential bid, said that after their campaign "toyed with ideas" about a constitutional convention for a balanced budget and other "very novel" public policy approaches, they decided not to unveil them "because we never came to the conclusion it would really benefit us." Bush's media consultant, Roger Ailes, says it is "suicide" for a candidate to lay out a blueprint for handling the nation's problems.⁵³

Despite these frustrating hurdles, the press could inject serious policy discussion into campaign coverage much more effectively than it did in 1988. Journalists themselves cite the problem of timing; many issue stories are written or broadcast early in the campaign season, before voters

have focused on the contest. In addition, journalists are always searching for something new to report, and are therefore unlikely to give more than one-time coverage to an issue that may be repeated by a candidate in numerous speeches throughout the campaign. "It's no longer news (after) the first time we say it, and we can't get you to write it again; and yet the citizens out there, many...will never have heard it if they didn't happen to read the paper the one day you decided it was news," says New Jersey State Treasurer Douglas Berman, who ran James Florio's successful campaign for New Jersey governor in 1989.⁵⁴

But what hinders the "issues" discussion most of all is the political press corps' current set of priorities. It is more interested in "insider" strategy stories and the drama of the daily campaign than in policy discussions. Thus while "even a modest amount of media attention" to issues "was able to have a significant impact on voter awareness," focus group participants told the Markle Commission, "it took a good deal of targeted searching to locate such information amidst the saturation coverage of campaign hoopla."⁵⁵

The White/McGinniss Legacy: Insider Journalism

Indeed, one of the changes in political coverage over the past 50 years has been this shift in priorities from

policy issues and candidate qualifications to "insider" campaign stories and horserace measurements. A study by Paul Lazarsfeld and Bernard Berelson of political coverage in the 1940s found that only 35% of the election news concerned the campaign battle to gain the presidency, while a much larger amount, 50%, was about policy and leadership issues. But by 1976, Thomas Patterson found, those priorities were reversed and most of the coverage was about winning, strategy and campaign theatrics.⁵⁶

Today's political journalism -- both in television and in print -- exaggerates the example set by the late Theodore White, whose landmark book The Making of the President, 1960 inspired reporters to cover campaigns as insiders, focusing on strategy and campaign staff maneuverings rather than on the exterior politics of issues and rhetoric. As David Broder has observed, "The exposing of the inside of the campaign really was (White's) great accomplishment. Everybody tried to get much more of an insider's status from then on -- to negotiate for that kind of access."⁵⁷ Yet as early as 1972, White himself said he'd come to "sincerely regret" developing that fly-on-the-wall method of reporting, since, he observed, the sheer numbers of reporters crowding in the back rooms had made it impossible for anyone to function there.⁵⁸

Today's emphasis on how campaigns are conducted rather than on what they actually might say about governance and

the issues of the day also reflects the tradition of author Joe McGinniss, whose book, The Selling of the President, 1968, concentrated on the political marketing of the candidate Richard Nixon. White and McGinniss helped define what today's campaign coverage is all about: the behind-the-scenes drama of the selling of the president. The most successful marketer is viewed as the best candidate, and by implication, as the best political leader. Whether the images are true or false, fair or foul, is not typically the focus of most political coverage. Political reporters still adhere to this White/McGinniss tradition because it fulfills some important journalistic requirements. First of all, it creates the kind of fresh, daily melodrama that today's entertainment-driven journalism prefers. "A presidential campaign...is a long-running drama. Rightly or wrongly -- and a lot of it is our own need to create a story that has dramatic moments, episodes -- we make it a mosaic of episodes that serves our structural needs as journalists," says the Post's Paul Taylor.⁵⁹

Secondly, this perspective fits the journalist's desire to remain neutral. Most political reporters, considered the cream of their profession, are political "junkies" who spend their time with others from the activist side of the fence -- seasoned operatives who, like the journalists, go from campaign to campaign, year after year. Since the journalists' professional code demands no bias,

their focus is more on how the game is being played than on what it means when one side actually wins or loses. Since their counterparts on the campaign staff earn their way by winning, they care far more about the outcome; but as hired guns, they tend to care more about it as a contest than as a boost for ideological or public policy choices. It is hardly surprising, then, that the journalists and the operatives -- the "insiders" -- share a preoccupation with what is politically effective rather than what winning may mean for the voters and the country.

Journalists "feel most comfortable making essentially technical judgments about campaign performance -- judgments that can be presented as nonpartisan and verified by polls and the judgments of other political professionals...it is precisely these non-substantive aspects of candidate effectiveness on which the community of political professionals can agree," scholar Hallin observes.⁶⁰ Former New York Times reporter John Herbers contends that news organizations should reach beyond this comfort zone, to challenge themselves to package stories as dramas without being simplistic, to provide analysis without the taint of bias. Says Herbers: "Many news organizations treat most policy issues as if they are unimportant or exist in a vacuum separate from the turmoil of the campaign. One problem is the fear of appearing partisan if an issue is pressed too hard. But there should be no need for

that....The press has the power to bring back policy issues to presidential campaigns if it chooses to wield it."⁶¹

Other critics add that this White/McGinniss kind of coverage not only misses serious issues; but it highlights campaign trivia, gossip and a cynical, sporting-event approach to politics. The Markle Commission, Adatto's study and other research on the 1988 election show that today's exaggerated "insider" focus leaves the voters as "outsiders" whose concerns are not seen as part of the political discourse. The Markle Commission, analyzing more than 7,000 news stories in 18 news outlets between Labor Day and Election Day 1988, found that more than 57% were devoted to the "horserace" --who was winning or losing -- and to conflicts among the candidates, while 20% dealt with candidate qualifications and less than 10% with the issues.⁶² The Markle Commission's voter focus groups "showed that even people who claim to follow newspaper and campaign coverage lack a coherent sense of the policy agenda that the new president will be forced to confront." Other survey research determined that the voters had "little concrete knowledge of issue substance or candidate issue positions," according to the Markle Commission report. While campaign coverage promoted judgments about strategic priorities facing the candidates, it failed to promote judgments about the strategic priorities facing the next president.⁶³

In short, the coverage failed to connect the electoral process with voters' lives. "There's a presumption today that most of politics is irrelevant and uninteresting to the average viewer. I can't say I disagree with that," concludes Dotty Lynch of CBS. "To say that the average working woman coming home at 6:25 at night -- thinking about paying the mortgage, whether a kid was exposed to drugs at school, worried about an aging parent, the car was broken down and how to reduce the fat content in her meal that she's trying to put on the table -- is going to be really interested in whether there were Republican delegates at the DLC convention or whether Jesse Jackson got to speak is something that I think is at least questionable. On the other hand, what Jay Rockefeller had to say out there about health care or what Al Gore proposed about tax relief for parents of children might be very relevant to her. That's not typical political coverage."⁶⁴

The Horserace -- and the Polls

The advent of poll-based journalism, often drawn from polls conducted by news organizations, represents a dramatic change in campaign coverage during the past two decades. The number of polls conducted by news organizations mushroomed between 1976 and 1984. Despite some dropoff in the number and prominence of poll stories in 1988, the use of polls in

political coverage has grown steadily. A study of major newspapers during three weeks in October, 1988, found that poll news appeared in 53% of campaign stories in the Washington Post, 54% of those in the Boston Globe, and 37% of those in the New York Times. Scott Ratzan has found that in the month before the 1988 election, the Washington Post ran 13 poll stories on its front page and the New York Times ran 10, one front page poll story every three days on average. Time and Newsweek magazines, which in 1968 ran poll news mostly as footnotes or as sidebars to lengthy articles, treated polls as regular headline and even cover stories. The prominence of polls raises a question: Have polls encouraged journalists to concentrate too much on strategy, particularly because small "blips" in public opinion can be linked to individual tactics and are readily apparent? Some journalists argue that, even if this is so, such journalism nonetheless serves the public, that the concentration on insider maneuverings and horserace journalism truly reflects what the public wants to hear. "The most interesting fact, I'm afraid, about an American election, is who's going to win. And people want to know that," concludes New York Times correspondent Adam Clymer, formerly political editor in charge of the New York Times poll.⁶⁵

Yet there is evidence that Dotty Lynch is right and this kind of coverage, particularly when it comes to

horserace polls, is turning the public off. In a study of poll reporting in 1988 by Paul Lavrakas, Jack Holley and Peter Miller, two-thirds of the respondents said the press gave too much play to poll stories. And when the researchers asked about poll stories that reported which candidate was leading in the race for president, a plurality of those surveyed "believed that the media's reporting of the horserace aspect of these polls did more harm than good to the presidential election process."⁶⁶ Veteran pollster Everett Ladd recounts how he spoke during the 1988 campaign "to about 50 groups, mostly community groups on campus. And the one line that would never fail to get applause would be if you said anything critical about the polls." He said that "it was really the sense that it was part of a larger picture of intrusiveness, a complaint...that the election is our business, the people say. We want to be able, by ourselves, to go about reaching a choice, but someone is always telling us what is happening, how it's coming out. And just leave us alone and let us make the choice."⁶⁷ Voters may even be starting to fight back against the pollsters. A 1988 study by Walker Research, a company that follows the market-research industry, found that 34% of all adults contacted said they had refused an interview request in the prior year, up from 15% in 1982.⁶⁸

Polls are popular with the press because they provide some "scientific" measurement of how the drama is

proceeding, and they give the poll-taking news organization a chance to create its own "scoop." The use of polls as a special competitive news product can exaggerate their importance. "When we produce a poll that shows George Bush leading by 8 points, is that really all that newsworthy if three days earlier you produced a poll that shows George Bush leading by six points? The fact is, we're going to unfortunately make it news because it's our poll," observes Rich Jaroslovsky of the Wall Street Journal.⁶⁹

As polls are picked up by other news organizations, they create an echo effect which can distort even further the timeliness and importance of the poll data. Gary Orren has noted that "(It) can be misleading to the public when the Boston Globe and the Kansas City Star and the Milwaukee Journal are part of the syndication, some consortium, and the public thinks there are many polls out there. In fact, a lot of political elites think that there are a number of polls that are being conducted when in fact there's one poll."⁷⁰

It is also worth noting that poll stories, even if done well, are taking space and resources that might have been devoted to other kinds of political coverage. "I feel we do too much polling and we give it too much play on the air and in print," Hal Bruno, director of political coverage for ABC News has said. "It becomes the only source of political knowledge these days. It's a lazy way of covering politics."

The television networks devoted chunks of broadcast time entirely to poll reports during the 1988 campaign. The most excessive example of this, and the most controversial poll of the 1988 presidential election, was the ABC/Washington Post poll on the eve of the October 13, 1988 presidential debate. The poll, dramatically presented by anchor Peter Jennings as a major campaign development, indicated the projected or likely winner in each of the 50 states, depicting George Bush as a landslide winner with 220 "firm" electoral votes to Michael Dukakis's 30 votes. The poll story led the ABC evening news and took up half of the entire newscast that night.

Most analysts agree that this was not only journalistic overkill but that the methodology and analysis were flawed, being based on very small sample sizes that were in some cases more than three weeks old. Democratic consultant Bob Beckel called it "the worst poll done in the history of American politics,"⁷¹ and the Washington Post's Richard Morin, who designs, analyzes and writes poll stories, pledged that the Post "will not do that 50 state project" in 1992 because of "some real substantial problems" with it.⁷² The value of polling depends entirely on good analysis as well as careful methodology. "Too often the poll just goes up and there is no story that goes with it. That's the type of thing we absolutely must avoid," Bruno says. "We've reached the point now where either we control the technology

or it controls us."⁷³ Competition can lead to hurried and inadequate poll analysis. Particularly misleading are the primary and caucus polls, which are so early in the campaign season that they tend to reflect simply name recognition at the starting line rather than the electorate's true choices. "Everybody in this room knows of a campaign that has probably been broken by a bad poll, that dried up a bunch of money," says David Yepsen of the Des Moines Register.⁷⁴

Technology has greatly speeded-up poll results, but often at the expense of accuracy. The least reliable are the 900-number call-in polls, the reporting of single-day tracking polls, post-debate polls and overnight polls, according to Thomas Mann of the Brookings Institution. The greatest increase in poll-taking and usage is at the local level, where methodology tends to be the weakest. Citing "the dropoff in quality and sophistication once you get beyond the major players and the world of media polls," Mann notes that "the polls become the flagship for local stations and news organizations, which oftentimes gets in the way of informing public opinion."⁷⁵

This is not to say that the capability to gauge public opinion through the vehicle of polls should be abandoned. Polls can be an opportunity for better political dialogue if they are used properly. Combining good polling with interviews or focus groups can provide insights into the electorate that otherwise might be lost in the blizzard of

insider, marketing journalism. "Your use of polls ought to be ultimately designed to help the people for whom you write, the voting public. And I think often that's not the case, that you get involved in minutia or inside politics. That loses them....It's also a marvelous opportunity to learn what your reading public wants to learn about politics," pollster Geoff Garin has said.⁷⁶

The Power of "Manufactured News"

Today's political coverage suffers from an overdose not just of polls but of "manufactured news" -- the carefully-designed photos, quips and symbolic gestures that dominate the modern candidate's campaign efforts. While candidates are blamed for failing to provide more candid, complex discussions of public policy issues, they say they are simply providing what the television culture demands. Daniel Hallin and Kiku Adatto each have provided clear evidence of how dramatically television's addiction to rapid-fire "sound bites" and pictures has transformed our political discourse.

The average "sound bite" or bloc of uninterrupted speech by presidential candidates on the network evening news, which was 42.3 seconds in 1968, had shrunk to under 10 seconds during the 1988 campaign, they found. Hallin has determined further than this mini-bite is typical not just

of political coverage, but all television news programming.⁷⁷ As Walter Cronkite observed after reading Adatto's study, "Naturally, nothing of any significance is going to be said in 9.8 seconds...issues can be avoided rather than confronted."⁷⁸

To be sure, there are more opportunities now than ever before for candidates to appear unedited on television, thanks to the MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour, morning talk shows, "Nightline" and cable programs. But the primary medium for political news, the network evening newscast, is providing candidates with much less unmediated access to the voters than they had 20 years ago, Hallin's and Adatto's studies demonstrate.

Not only are candidates reduced to quick quips; often they're rendered entirely speechless. In 1988, the network evening newscasts' use of pictures of the candidates -- unaccompanied by their words -- increased by over 300 percent from 20 years before, Adatto found. During a sample three-week period in 1988, candidates spoke only 37% of the time their images appeared on the screen. In another study of the 30 broadcasts of the NBC Nightly News that appeared in September, 1988, GOP candidate George Bush's sound-bites added up to 1:50 minutes and Democratic candidate Michael Dukakis's totalled 2:40 minutes for the entire month.⁷⁹ Some news organizations, including the New York Times and the MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour, have tried to provide

candidates with greater opportunities to speak at some length, directly to the public, by conveying their standard "stump speech" once or twice during the campaign. But this is the exception rather than the common media practice.

The shrinking opportunity to be heard on the evening newscasts raises the stakes for a campaign to control the candidate's image with sure-fire pictures and uncomplicated themes. It also puts a new premium on other vehicles for candidate speech: debates, conventions and paid political commercials.

Not surprisingly, candidates design their campaigns to provide the press with succinct images that will get across the symbols and themes on which they are running, with as little danger as possible that these images will be taken apart or used in unanticipated ways. The result is the campaign preoccupation with producing "manufactured news" -- strategically-designed photo opportunities, sound bites, "spin doctor" propaganda and paid commercials -- which have displaced other campaign coverage, particularly on television.

"Manufactured News" on the Campaign Trail

Thanks to this development, today's political campaign is little different from a Hollywood production. National and statewide candidates travel from town to town,

largely protected from their own traveling press entourages, in order to create local backdrops for their photo opportunities and sound bites. They appear at identically-staged rallies where the best seats are replaced by scaffolding for the television cameras which are the candidate's target audience. The citizens -- and the press corps -- become props in the campaign's theatrical event of the day. Any citizens "lucky" enough to sit between the scaffolding and the candidate are there as an unwitting "studio audience" for the television performance. Other citizens, whose view of a candidate is blocked by the huge press entourage, often blame the journalists and cameras for what is, in reality, the campaign's deliberate staging.

Most television, radio and print journalists feel obligated to cover these stylized campaign moments since they are the day's "news" about what the candidates are doing. Their attempts to shout questions at the candidate as he or she arrives and leaves the event are likely to produce either a pre-planned sound bite or a cold shoulder. Spontaneous interaction is anathema to the candidate's managers; the candidate might "step on" the carefully prepared image of the day. Thus highly controlled images, quips and symbols, whose use first was pioneered by the advertising world to sell products, now define our national political culture.

These "manufactured news" pieces work because they also are ideally suited to the needs of the television news

producer, who is the critical target of the campaign's daily strategy. These theatrical set-ups are easy to cover and easy to get back to the home station or network by deadline time. It is noncontroversial news involving little independent news judgment. For both television and print journalists on the campaign trail, there are more incentives to use these fresh, sure-fire "hot button" images and quotes than to dig up independent, meaningful stories that take more time. Traveling reporters are ill-equipped to explore the deeper meanings or facts in the candidate's message while they're packed into a bus or a plane, far from any data base back at the office, with multiple events to cover and a new deadline looming every day.

Some reporters, particularly those working for major newspapers and magazines, have the luxury of jumping on and off the campaign trail, so they can use campaign material as illustrations of broader themes. But many political reporters spend most of the campaign season on campaign buses and planes, worrying about the logistics of filing their stories to the home base on time and trying to get exclusive interviews with the candidate or strategy information out of campaign staffers. There is little opportunity, and often little pressure from the editor or producer back home, to figure out whether what the candidate is saying is relevant or true.

Dan Rothberg of the Associated Press, explaining why reporters didn't press candidates about the savings and loan

crisis during the 1988 campaign, has observed that "when you're bopping in there with a candidate making six stops in Texas in a day, you don't have time to look around and find out whether the banks are collapsing....If you sleep later than 6 in the morning, all the newspapers are gone when you get up in the morning and you can't even get a local paper."⁸⁰ On the campaign plane, journalists can become captives of the campaign theme-makers. These campaign "spin doctors" --aides who try to provide pithy quotes and steer the journalists' stories -- have a willing audience in the competing reporters and producers who are eager for the exclusive interviews and whispered insider tips that might separate them from the rest of the pack.

"It is interesting how easy it is to lead the networks," says Bush adviser Bond. He tells how the Bush campaign in 1988, concerned that Democratic rival Dukakis was making headway, decided to divert reporters by suggesting a strategy/horserace theme. The "spin doctoring" worked. "They decided what they would do is send me out on the (press) plane," Bond said. "...They told me to go out and bring some maps out and talk about electoral votes....From that day on for the next three nights on network news there were these elaborate electoral vote stories with maps and showing how the whole thing was collapsing in around Dukakis. And here's Dukakis, probably on...his finest moments of the campaign, and we had the

network coverage shut right down like a wet blanket across his entire operation."⁸¹

Journalists as Theater Critics

Frustrated at this kind of exploitation, some veteran journalists worked in 1988 -- and to an even greater extent in 1990 -- to demystify the "manufactured news" images that the campaigns were putting forward. While they didn't feel they could ignore the theme-of-the-day photos and sound bites, they tried in good faith to describe how these images were being created so that the voters would be informed about their own manipulation. This effort to focus the political journalist's insider/marketing perspective on the manufactured news generated by the campaigns was well-intentioned, but it often backfired. Too frequently, journalists devoted more time to "theater criticism" of the candidates' campaigns -- critiques of the effectiveness of candidate efforts at manipulation rather than analysis of the substance of candidate assertions.

"Instead of saying look what they're doing, they're manipulative, they're not addressing the issues, we said wow, isn't that campaign terrific and what is wrong with Michael Dukakis, he doesn't know how to manipulate us in the same way? So that we give them all kinds of extra points on their brilliance at manipulation and don't call into question what they are doing," says Dotty Lynch of CBS.⁸²

Adatto's study found that reporters in 1988 devoted 52% of their evening news coverage of the campaign to this "theater criticism" of the candidates' image-making; this compared to just 6% of such coverage in 1968 newscasts.⁸³ This meant not only that they spent less time and energy raising substantive issues and facts that no one else was willing to tackle; but that they often unwittingly passed on the subliminal images and messages they were trying to expose, according to research by Adatto and by Jamieson. "Journalists showed potent visuals even as they attempted to avoid the manipulation by 'deconstructing' the imagery and revealing its artifice," Adatto found.⁸⁴ In doing so, they "became conduits for the very images they criticized."

This pass-through got even worse when staged "photo opportunities" were repeated as pretty backdrops -- a practice called "wallpapering" in television jargon -- for later news spots, minus the critical commentary. For instance, Bush's flag factory visit prompted a cynical report from ABC's Brit Hume on September 20, 1988, which talked about how Bush was working on his image by wrapping himself in the patriotism issue. But three days later, that staged image of Bush at the flag factory appeared without comment as background footage for an ABC report by Jim Wooten on independent voters in New Jersey. "The media event that Hume reported with derision was quickly transformed into an innocent visual document of Bush. The criticism forgotten, the image played on," observes Adatto.⁸⁵

Perhaps the most frustrating plethora of "theater criticism" commentary comes after candidate debates, when television commentators focus on who won or on elements of image and style rather than on the substance of what was said. The Markle Commission found that as many as 80 million Americans watched some or all of the presidential debates in 1988. Nearly half of their survey sample said they were influenced by the second debate.⁸⁶ These debates "were the most significant opportunities to learn about the candidates" in 1988, the Commission concluded.

Yet here, for example, is what typically passed for post-debate commentary during the 1988 election:

Rebecca Chase of ABC News: "There were no major gaffes, no knockout blows, each candidate seemed to make their best points. It was a night of sharp exchanges that ended with a handshake."

Christopher Matthews, former Democratic speechwriter, appearing on CBS: "Everyone's going to use that sound bite from now through the rest of the campaign (but) I think it was as programmed as anything Quayle said."

Tom Pettit of NBC News: "If this had been a boxing match, Bentsen would have scored a TKO, but Quayle was still standing at the end...the referee would have stopped the match."

Robert Novak, syndicated columnist, commenting on CNN: "I thought the loser was Senator Bentsen. He had to bring down Dan Quayle in this debate and he didn't do it."

Rather than employing such sporting metaphors in an attempt to assert who won or lost the debate -- in some ways a decision to be made privately by each voter -- journalists can perform an invaluable service by recapping and analyzing what the debaters were saying, including checking their facts and their consistency against prior statements. While this has traditionally been done by the best print journalists, it is rarely done by television commentators; their emphasis is on instant analysis of the horserace, marketing and insider strategies of the campaigns.

Image is so important to the way strategists and journalists view debates that ABC anchor Peter Jennings, forced to watch the second Bush-Dukakis debate in person rather than on the television screen because he was one of the panel of questioners, found himself unable to comment on it afterwards. "What do you think?" Sam Donaldson asked him. "I don't know. I didn't see it on television," Jennings responded.

The journalists' use of campaign "spin doctors" -- glib but partisan observers -- for commentary after the debates was even less defensible. "Their musings are nothing if not predictable, yet the networks compete for these nuggets as if they were holy writ," contended Ed Fouhy, executive producer of the 1988 presidential debates and a veteran network news executive. Instead of quoting these partisans, journalists should "analyze what the candidate

actually said on the issues. Which one had said something new; who had said something inconsistent with previously stated positions; who had said something inaccurate?" Fouhy suggested.⁸⁷

The Obsession with Gaffes

The journalist's obsessive focus on the candidate's image, both in debates and elsewhere during the campaign, has led to another bad habit: treating "gaffes", often minor campaign misstatements, as significant events. As Roger Ailes has observed, "There are three things that the media are interested in: pictures, mistakes and attacks. That's one sure way of getting coverage. You try to avoid as many mistakes as you can. You try to give them as many pictures as you can. And if you need coverage, you attack, and you will get coverage. It's my orchestra pit theory of politics. If you have two guys on a stage and one guy says, 'I have a solution to the Middle East problem,' and the other guy falls in the orchestra pit, who do you think is going to be on the evening news?"⁸⁸

Ailes is more right than most journalists would like to acknowledge. Twenty years ago, television journalists would have been likely to ignore gaffes, but in 1988 they were standard fodder for entire news spots, Kiku Adatto's study has found. Early in the 1988 campaign, for example,

Bush misstated that September 7, rather than December 7, was the anniversary of Pearl Harbor. He corrected himself, but it became big news on all three networks that night. Dan Rather began CBS's coverage of Bush that day by saying "Bush's talk to audiences in Louisville was overshadowed by a strange happening." NBC's Tom Brokaw said "he departed from his prepared script and left his listeners mystified," while Peter Jennings on ABC said "What's more likely to be remembered about today's speech is a slip of the tongue."⁸⁹

Print reporters downplayed Bush's Pearl Harbor gaffe, but they still treated it as news; the New York Times ran a small six-paragraph sidebar on page B-10 the next morning, with the headline "Bush Trips in Speech" and the Washington Post included six paragraphs in a larger campaign story about Bush's stand on the minimum wage and his opposition to the establishment of a Palestinian state. In the Los Angeles Times, an eight-paragraph story on page A-19 appeared under the headline "Bush Disremembers Pearl Harbor." The wire services moved several stories about the slip-up, none of which were longer than a few paragraphs.

Perhaps the most extreme example of television journalism's overblown focus on mistakes was Sam Donaldson's report on Michael Dukakis in October, 1988, in which Donaldson ridiculed Dukakis for failing to play to his television cameras. Dukakis, playing "Happy Days are Here Again" on the trumpet as a campaign photo op, failed to

perform as a photo op expert is supposed to perform; "he played the trumpet with his back to the camera," Donaldson said in his news spot. Donaldson was heard off-camera, calling "We're over here, Governor." The parting shot of Donaldson's piece, summarizing the campaign's ineffectiveness, showed Dukakis throwing a gutter-ball at a bowling alley.⁹⁰

The entertainment value of campaign glitches helps explain, in part, their current appeal; they fit the entertainment culture of television noted above and thereby help reporters, in competition with colleagues for broadcast time, to get their stories on the air. Gaffes can also provide a rare moment of spontaneity and "news" in an otherwise prefabricated campaign day. But, most importantly, gaffes are taken seriously by journalists as a measure of whether a candidate is qualified or not to succeed in the fight over manipulated images. Within this framework, the candidate who can manipulate the voters -- and the media -- most effectively is the candidate who is heralded as the likely winner. As Adatto points out, the gaffe is the breakdown of the candidate's carefully-crafted image; it becomes a sign of political ineptitude. "Public officials have to be error-free actors," former Dukakis press secretary Dayton Duncan concludes. "Many reporters view an interview as their chance to have a politician make a mistake. A mistake is viewed as one way of stripping away the artifice."⁹¹

Journalists all too often accept the television culture's dictum that sheer image-making ability, or the opposite of it, as seen in the campaign gaffe, is the most important yardstick for measuring a candidate's fitness for office. Other factors which clearly matter to governance, including the candidate's courage in taking principled stands even when they are unpopular, or the candidate's propensity to tell the truth or to lie, get short shrift in today's political coverage.

"Viewers and readers are implicitly invited to assume that the strategic political contest is a worthy and possibly a sufficient test of suitability for office, and that the shrewdest candidate with the most effective campaign both wins and deserves the presidency for that reason alone," the Markle Commission has observed. "Critics believe that the media should convey a more accurate sense than this of what candidate qualifications are relevant to the presidency."⁹²

The Local Press

Gaffes used to be part of a forgiveness zone shared by candidates and reporters as they were thrown together for the campaign season. There also was an unwritten understanding that at the end of a campaign day, they could together engage in candid conversations that would be off

the record -- completely unusable in their news stories. But that was when political journalism was dominated by a small number of print reporters who could fit easily into a presidential candidate's hotel room for a drink. Today the sheer number of both television and print reporters, many of them from local television stations and newspapers, makes such intimacy and trust virtually impossible. While this has created a "media pressure-cooker", one which Larry Sabato says contributes to the "feeding frenzy" phenomenon when a scandal breaks, these numbers have not produced a comparable diversity of coverage. Many local and national reporters chase the same story: what did the candidate do and say in the day's prefabricated photo opportunity and sound bite?

Despite this disappointing lack of regional flavor, local journalists do have special opportunities as they engage in covering a national campaign. Local reporters can raise "beyond-the-beltway" questions that the national press corps has missed. And candidates on the presidential campaign trail view local stops not just as a chance to reach a new media market and find a new backdrop for their photo opportunities, but as a chance to play the local news stars off the national ones.

The Bush campaign in 1988 devoted a lot of time to one-on-one interviews with local reporters, banking on the fact that the local and national reporters would, in many

cases, treat the candidate quite differently. The Bush campaign would hold special local news conferences, barring the national media from attending. Rich Bond described how this would work for them: "Ninety percent of the (local) questions would be of the awestruck, gee, that's a nice tie, where did you buy it?" Bond said. Understandably, the candidate would go out of his way to spend time with local news personalities instead of hanging out with the national press corps. As a distinguished visitor to the community, he also would get more free air time on the local newscasts than on the network news, Bond said. "So the people in the city that we've just visited will hear one thing, and that is Gabe Pressman (a local New York television newsman), five minutes with George Bush, very chummy, very collegial, not too many fast balls across the plate, and they might see Ken Bode (network correspondent) an hour or so later saying George Bush didn't say a damn thing today here in New York....There will be a split reality out there. That's one way that we inoculate against what (the national press) have been trying to do."⁹³

On the other hand, some of the best journalism is done locally, as evidenced by efforts to cover the savings and loan scandal. Along with the trade press, many local reporters including those from the Dallas Morning News, Miami Herald and the Los Angeles Times, aggressively covered savings and loan failures and the lack of proper federal

regulatory oversight. But their reporting generally wasn't picked up by the national correspondents covering the 1988 campaign. It is a difficult task to project issues raised in locally-initiated reportage onto the national campaign agenda.

Several creative ideas for improving political coverage in 1992 have come from local journalists. Carole Kneeland, who now is the senior political reporter at WFAA in Dallas, recounts that her station in 1990 dispatched its political specialists to different regions in the state rather than simply covering the gubernatorial candidates as they traveled. This meant, for example, that there were enterprise stories on oil and agriculture in West Texas when the candidates visited there. "We went out ahead of time and spent a day talking to people about the problems they were having. We covered the speech and then talked to the people after the candidate left. It was much more effective than being with the candidate," Kneeland said, adding that in order not to miss the candidate's activities on the campaign plane, it is also necessary to use a "pool" system rotating travel coverage among news organizations who then share the day's footage.

A key to WFAA's substantive approach was the use of a coverage plan. This plan outlined how each week during the campaign would be labeled with a particular issue such as education, energy or AIDS. Reporters developed stories on

those subjects, which aired during that particular week. "By doing that, we kept hold of the issues," Kneeland said.

"Otherwise you lose them in the Willie Hortons and the flag issues. You get caught up in the day-in, day-out stuff."

Another innovation is being developed by Minnesota Public Radio and the American Public Radio Network, which has created a Sunday afternoon 90-minute program to be used on the network during the 1992 campaign. For the first 45 minutes of air time, political experts who are not attached to any current candidate will discuss a hypothetical issue facing the candidates. Then two groups will have air time to react: a panel of business, labor, clergy, poets or assorted other non-politicians from the community, and a second group of people who are in the studio audience or calling in on the telephone.

While these locally-generated experiments may have a salutary impact not just on local but on national coverage in 1992, the state of local news coverage is not generally encouraging. Many local news organizations are not motivated or equipped to cover the substance of the campaigns. Local television stations, which Hallin says led the way to reducing sound bites to today's level of under 10 seconds, often are short-handed, with a rapid turnover in personnel. One reporter may have to cover a fire, a school board meeting and a mayoral press conference before racing to the airport to meet a visiting candidate. Not

surprisingly, politicians complain that they have a hard time getting local reporters to focus on anything but horserace polls. "There's an awful lot of young television reporters who have not even had a course in government," says U.S. Secretary of Labor Lynn Martin, a former House member who ran for the U.S. Senate in Illinois in 1988. "I have to give them background...so they'll even ask me a tough question."⁹⁴ Rep. William Thomas (R-CA) agrees. "I've tried to sit down and explain to them what to look for. They're not interested in educating themselves about the mechanics of politics, let alone the issues behind the headlines....There's a lack of professionalism in the candidates and in the press and in the media at the local level."⁹⁵ Yet the stakes for good local reporting are higher every day. Local and cable television news organizations are gaining more viewers and eating away at the networks' dominance; at the same time, a vacuum in regional coverage is being created as national news organizations, including the networks, are shutting down their local bureaus in order to save money.

This has led at least one enterprising public interest group to try to aid local reporters during the 1992 campaign. The Center for National Independence in Politics, an Oregon-based public interest group co-founded by former U.S. Senators William Proxmire and Barry Goldwater, among others, is hoping to develop a self-supporting information

service, in which journalists and others can call a 1-900 number to find out basic congressional votes, finance reports and other important campaign information. This proposed emphasis on research, both at the local and national level, is one of the most important conclusions that emerged from the Campaign Lessons for '92 project. Good journalism used to be defined in journalism schools as the presentation of "who, what, where, when and why," with the facts presented in an inverted pyramid of decreasing importance. But today, most journalists would acknowledge that it requires far more than that simple formula: good journalism requires judgment about the quality and context of the material used and, increasingly, it requires independent research beyond the facts or images on which the report was initially based.

Objectivity, Balance and Truth

Another central lesson that emerged from the 1988 and 1990 campaigns involved the need for journalists to rethink their definition of "objectivity." Traditionally, journalists feel they are performing their jobs most responsibly by simply balancing one claim against another, and not injecting any analysis or fact-correction into the discussion. They avoid exercising bias, but, at the same time, they fail to provide any information to their audience

about how to evaluate the conflicting claims. This "objective" tradition, heightened by the political reporter's concern about appearing biased toward one side, has prompted many news organizations to stop short of their most important mission: telling the voters what is really going on. These news organizations often feel that they cannot state when one candidate is distorting the truth, unless they can find something comparably negative to say about the other candidate in order to "balance" the piece.

Senator Joseph McCarthy took advantage of these rules, counting on the press to simply pass through his accusations that the government was riddled with Communists. Many reporters still believe they've done their jobs if they repeat what the politician they're covering says, without any attempt to determine whether it's accurate. Under this operating procedure, a candidate can get away with lying as long as the public will fall for it.

"Those (reporters) on the (campaign) plane claim that they're trying to be objective. They shouldn't try to be objective, they should try to be honest. And they're not being honest. Their so-called objectivity is just a guise for superficiality," complained Brit Hume to author Timothy Crouse in 1972, when Hume, now an ABC correspondent, was still columnist Jack Anderson's assistant. "They report what one candidate said, then they go and report what the other candidate said with equal credibility. They never get around

to finding out if the guy is telling the truth. They just pass the speeches along without trying to confirm the substance of what the candidates are saying. What they pass off as objectivity is just a mindless kind of neutrality."⁹⁶

Kiku Adatto has found that, more often than not in 1988, this traditional non-evaluative approach to candidate pronouncements was followed in the television newscasts. "They sought fairness in balance rather than objectivity, in setting the pictures or the claims of each campaign side by side, without breaking through the images to report the facts...In the name of balance, the reports created a false symmetry," she determined. If Dukakis attacked inflammatory ads produced by local Republican groups, for example, the networks didn't mediate who was right, but instead treated Dukakis's complaints "as one more chapter in a dirty campaign, as if Dukakis's criticisms of these commercials were on a par with the smears themselves," the study concluded. In another example, ABC's Jim Wooten did a report on negative campaign advertising on October 10, 1988 in which he didn't assess the veracity of the commercials, but instead interviewed media advisers from each side who naturally asserted that their own ads were accurate.⁹⁷

The journalism of "balance" in 1988 failed to help citizens sort out who was telling the truth and who was dissembling. Perhaps it is not surprising, therefore, that most citizens were not sufficiently well-informed during the

1988 election to recognize distortion of truth by the candidates, according to the Markle Commission's study. "This is particularly disturbing in light of Commission data which show that in 1988 the public got most of its information about the candidates from the Bush campaign's paid advertising," the study concluded.⁹⁸

The professional goal of providing an objective snapshot of "just the facts" has always been impossible for journalists to achieve, even on television. The journalist's role in providing context and fact-checks is ever more important as the glut of images and propaganda increases with every advance in media technology. The plethora of television news sources of varying quality, together with the barrage of news-like advertising, direct mail propaganda and other forms of pseudo-information, is an opportunity for news organizations to emerge as reliable resources for consumers. Instead of sinking to the same level as other sources of self-promoting information, journalists still have the ability, by separating truth from falsehood and by applying context and relevance tests, to fill the unique public service role envisioned under the First Amendment.

There were some signs during the 1990 campaign that journalists were ready to emphasize this more evaluative, "truth squad" approach. Some came to define fairness as an overall balance in campaign coverage rather than a forced

symmetry in each news piece. A survey of 110 television news directors and newspapers in major media markets by the advocacy group People for the American Way found in 1990 that 80% of them now favor the press's taking "an aggressive role in exposing false or misleading advertising by political candidates."⁹⁹

The Campaign Lessons for '92 project endorses this approach to political journalism, in which news organizations apply fact checks and raise relevance questions not just in analyzing campaign advertisements, but in evaluating all of the political rhetoric during a campaign. This requires, of course, a redirecting of resources away from entertaining the news consumers with the day's "manufactured news," however seductively it has been served up by the campaigns, and emphasizing instead enterprise research by the news organizations. In order to maintain professional neutrality and credibility in this more aggressive stance, news organizations need to defend their evaluations with facts and arguments, rather than simply asserting them as the opinions of the reporter or other resident "expert."

Section IV

Campaign Ads and Ad Watches

The New Role of Ads

One of the journalist's greatest challenges in covering modern elections is dealing responsibly with the candidate's television advertising. Such ads have swamped the political discourse, filling the airwaves with emotion-packed images. Between 1972 and 1988, the dollars spent on political advertising on television in this country increased by more than a factor of ten.¹⁰⁰ The ads have overshadowed the old-fashioned "stump speech" and other means of reaching the voters. While some analysts argue that "free media" news coverage, debates and other campaign coverage are more powerful than the "paid media" television commercials alone, there is no denying the new influence of ads in politics.¹⁰¹ Republican consultant Edward Rollins believes that "the ads (have) led the way. The message on the stump reinforced what the ads did."¹⁰² Rollins views this vanguard role of television advertising as the most distinct change of the 1988 presidential campaign. The extent of advertising's audience is as important, moreover, as its message: the audience which, in the course of prime-time entertainment programming, is likely to be exposed to

political advertising is roughly twice that which watches the nightly network news. This larger audience will, what's more, see the candidates' 30-second commercials not once, but many times. In this context, the Markle Commission's finding that Bush campaign ads served as the major source of campaign information for many voters is not at all surprising. In their voter focus groups, the Commission found that 36% of the "learning" comments about candidate Dukakis were negative, and of these, 57% were traceable to Bush campaign advertising.¹⁰³ Every member of the Markle Commission's focus groups had seen or heard about the Bush ads criticizing the Dukakis record regarding the pollution of Boston harbor and prison furloughs for convicted murderers.

One would not want to assert that other factors -- religion, party affiliation, socioeconomic status -- may not be more important influences than television ads on the voting behavior of most Americans. But the ads can have a critical impact on influencing the wavering "swing voter" who can make the difference in a close election. "The commercials are aimed at the least interested voter who will be moved by an emotional issue in the final analysis," observes Rollins. Many of the ads created for this purpose are negative.¹⁰⁴ And, while some reformers propose measures designed to reduce the incentives for attack ads, these ads are otherwise likely to remain a powerful force on the

campaign trail for one simple reason: "Negative ads work," as Sen. Alan Simpson of Wyoming puts it.¹⁰⁵ Negative ads do work under certain circumstances --particularly if the charges aren't answered by the candidate or effectively debunked by the press; or if the subject of the attack isn't already well known to the electorate. The real problem of such ads may not be their negative orientation per se, however, but the distortions of truth and the hidden messages often embedded in them. Mark Crispin Miller, a persistent critic of such advertising, asserts that "...these images just kind of flash onto your consciousness. That's really all it takes, you see. Because you're not meant to really scrutinize these things....Once you do scrutinize them, then you can see just how destructive and inhumane this pitch has finally become." Because advertising is often based more on images than facts, on emotion rather than reason; because it is based more on the manipulation of symbols than on linear arguments, it is ideally suited to television.

Political ads are a lucrative business for television stations and networks. From half to two-thirds of all presidential campaign expenditures go toward television advertising, including research, production costs and time buys. It may well be that television advertising is actually cheaper, on a per-vote basis, than traditional, organization-based campaigning, in so far as ads have

replaced the thousands of paid party workers who used to get out the message and the vote. Even if the cost per vote is lower, however, there is an implicit negative in an advertising-based campaign: the modern candidate still needs huge amounts of campaign cash, largely for "media buys", but has less and less reason to involve "little people" in the campaign --another aspect of the central theme of this report, the "disconnect" between campaigns and the electorate.

Ads as News

The impact of advertising has been even further enhanced as a result of the fact that by dominating the political discourse, ads have become "news." This was dramatically true of the original "Willie Horton" (anti-prison furlough program) ad. The commercial, created by a political action committee independent of the Bush campaign, had an impact which was vastly increased when it became network television news. The actual ad "buy" was limited to cable television, where it reached about 5%, at most, of the national television audience.¹⁰⁶ As Martin Schram has recounted, the ad's producer, who had previously worked for Bush media adviser Roger Ailes lacked the money to buy time on the major networks. "He slipped a videotape of his ad featuring the Horton mugshot to the producers of (the

political talk show) 'The McLaughlin Group.' They aired the ad on the next show and the panelists discussed it. So now it was 'news.' Then the major network news shows aired it too -- again, for free -- by using it in stories about the ad. The message was out. The commercial TV news and talk shows did (producer Larry) McCarthy's work for him."

Ironically, McCarthy had been afraid the networks wouldn't run the ad which featured the face of a black furlough escapee, for which reason McCarthy believed it might spark charges that it played on racism (a charge which, eventually, was levelled). "The funny thing is, I don't think we could have cleared that spot with the commercial networks if we'd had the money to buy ad time with them," McCarthy has said. Wary of the racism charge, the Bush campaign itself later ran its own "official" version of the ad, one showing a revolving jailhouse door and mentioning escapee Horton's name, but not showing his picture. "We very carefully elected not to show him or mention him because we knew we'd be hit with racism," explained Roger Ailes. Yet news coverage of the previous "unauthorized" ad from McCarthy's independent pro-Bush group had already done the job --pointing out that Horton was black, and touching a major "hot button" in the electorate, a fact reinforced by the relatively santized ad which followed.

"Horton" producer McCarthy wasn't alone in getting journalists to amplify a campaign ad as news. Jamieson has

found that ad excerpts appeared in a full 160 evening broadcasts on ABC, CBS and NBC during the 1988 general election campaign, providing an extra 10.48 minutes of free ad time for Dukakis and 12.4 minutes for Bush.¹⁰⁷ William Carrick, a strategist in Democrat Richard Gephardt's 1988 campaign believes "that was an almost unique phenomenon started in this (1988) campaign: paid advertising as news. The unveiling of paid advertising started to drive the nightly news."¹⁰⁸ A campaign could get a 30 or 40% increase in attention out of an ad by getting it mentioned or shown on the news, according to Ailes, who notes additional advantages: "You get more viewers, you get credibility, you get it in a framework."¹⁰⁹ That framework was, however, often a limited one: journalists simply observed which ads were making a mark and which were falling flat -- providing "theater criticism" rather than fact-correction or other analysis related to the content of the ads. Adatto has found that, when showing ad excerpts on the evening news in 1988, the reporter addressed the veracity of the commercials' claims less than 8% of the time.¹¹⁰

Print journalism was not much better at tackling the ads in 1988. Jamieson, through content analysis of 75 articles on ads in the New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, Christian Science Monitor, Time and Newsweek between the 1988 conventions and election day, determined that 17.3% of the lines of newswriting repeated the ad

messages, while only 1.7% of the copy was devoted to accuracy checks.¹¹¹ The journalist's task was complicated: sometimes the "facts" in the ads could be verified as accurate but their context was distorted. Inferences and subliminal messages provided by the announcer's voice or the scary music often packed the biggest wallop. Michael Oreskes of the New York Times has described how difficult it was for journalists to cover ads. "The problem of television commercials...is that the words are, in many ways, the least important part of the commercial. That's very difficult for us, who make our living with words, to adjust to both in sort of an emotional sense and in a practical, technical sense."¹¹² Paul Taylor of the Washington Post, which like the Times stepped up its "ad watch" efforts during the 1990 election, agreed: "You really can't have much of a nourishing dialogue (between the candidates and the public) because the visual imagery makes the statement difficult to respond to."¹¹³ In the Bush campaign's official Willie Horton furlough ad, for example, the number 268 flashed on the screen while an announcer talked about furloughed murderers, encouraging viewers to leap to the incorrect conclusion that all 268 escapees from the Massachusetts furlough program were first-degree murderers and that a large percentage of these furloughed prisoners went on crime sprees while out on furlough. In fact, only 1% of Massachusetts furloughed inmates escaped and only four of

the escapees were convicted murderers -- too many, to be sure, but a lower number than 268.¹¹⁴

The "Ad Watch" and the 1990 Experience

If there is any trend which promises the public some help in making sense of political ads, it is the advent of the "ad watch", designed to follow ads as news but to critique in substantive, not merely theatrical, terms. The spread of such features in the 1990 election season appears to have caught the notice of campaign professionals. Democrat Robert Squier has said that the 1990 "ad watch" efforts succeeded in forcing ad producers to "talk in editing rooms about whether they'll pass the truth test or not."¹¹⁵ Yet the "ad watches" weren't so successful that they could persuade Squier himself to pull an ad in the 1990 Ann Richards gubernatorial campaign that appeared to misrepresent a newspaper headline. "If I pulled that (first) ad, then I couldn't get to the second ad in the sequence," he said, blaming that particular distortion -- identified in a KVUE-TV, Austin (TX) ad watch -- on a technical glitch. "You're absolutely right. We shouldn't have done it," he confesses, arguing nevertheless that the flaw wasn't big enough to warrant withdrawal of the ad from the airwaves.¹¹⁶ Carole Kneeland of KVUE-TV, who was part of the award-winning "ad watch" team which monitored the ads during

Richards' race against GOP candidate Clayton Williams, believes that the ads from both sides "were just as bad, if not worse, than what you saw in the 1988 presidential campaign." Given the limited time and staff her station could devote to politics, it made scrutiny of the television ads its top priority. The ad watch effort turned out to be less expensive than other kinds of political coverage, she said, "because all it requires is solid, old-fashioned reporting, fact-checking, analyzing, backgrounding."

The feature appeared to pay off for the station, both as political journalism and as a commercial product. KVUE succeeded in getting candidate Williams to stop running one ad which misrepresented state spending figures. "Viewers have called and written us thanking us, and we've had both candidates and political operatives tell us that in Austin anyway when they were going in to make commercials...that the question actually came up a few times, 'will this pass the KVUE truth test?' And that kind of preventive work is really what we are looking for in the first place. So we really feel like we're making a difference in that regard,"¹¹⁷ Kneeland says. Moreover, she notes, the ad watch feature brought new viewers to the station and actually prompted some politicians to buy more ad time because "they felt people were watching our station for political coverage because they knew we were being so

aggressive about it."¹¹⁸ Unfortunately KVUE, KRON in San Francisco and the few other television stations that did "Ad Watch" coverage were in the minority in their attempts to check the veracity of the ads, according to Jamieson's study of television ad coverage in 1990. Jamieson has found that, once again, network news coverage focused on strategy and advertising and only rarely on the truth or accuracy of the ads. She also found that most journalists didn't bother to check the positive ads, which also contained untruths and distortions.¹¹⁹

Newspapers were more aggressive than television in analyzing television ads in 1990, according to several studies, including one by William Sweeney, director of an American University project to train the next generation of political candidates. The ad watches created a new, activist role for the newspapers that left some uncomfortable, says Sweeney.¹²⁰ Still, the newspaper ad watches pose an opportunity for print journalists to play an important new role in campaign coverage, after years of losing ground to television. Rather than being able to neutralize the television ads effectively for the television audience, newspaper "ad watches" have a different impact: they can influence the campaign operatives by forcing them to maintain certain standards. In addition, they can influence the campaign discourse by providing the raw material for new campaign ads which quote the "ad watch" material.

Clearly the "ad watch" feature is an evolving one. There was little consistency to the newspapers' approaches in 1990, and many of the journalists involved felt more fine-tuning was necessary. Some newspapers analyzed only general election ads, missing the all-important primary spots. Others decided not to use any pictures, which may have made it hard for the viewers to connect the commentary with the television ad. Some newspapers declined to put bylines on the pieces, and many were reluctant to draw conclusions about the veracity of the ads. Understandably, many didn't even try to tackle the subliminal messages, which in some ways are the most important factors in the ads.¹²¹

The "ad watch" features in both television and print also failed in 1990 to meet several other challenges posed by the ads, including the repetition problem. Ads are constantly repeated while the correction pieces run just once or twice during the news. Secondly, only one newspaper in Sweeney's survey, the Louisville Courier Journal, focused on radio ad campaigns -- despite the fact that radio often serves as the test market where many negative commercials make their debut and have a significant impact. Thirdly, the quantity and timing of ads in some campaigns have made it impractical to cover them all; some were sneaked on the air just before the election.

One further problem that is much easier to correct is the lack of checks as to how extensively the ad actually is

being used by the campaign. "I have known of campaigns which have made ads and only bought one spot, but released them in major press conferences to get it onto the news. It's become a fairly common tactic," says Larry McCarthy, the Republican media consultant.¹²²

Generally, though the ad watch must be viewed as a positive trend. Bethany Rogers' study of newspaper ad watches in 1990 concludes that the successful ones allowed the journalist the freedom to point out when ad material was misleading, irrelevant or otherwise off-base -- at the same time demanding more of the journalist. Concludes Rogers: "The ad watch calls for a journalist who is politically astute and capable of drawing carefully-considered conclusions about the material. It is not simply a matter of deconstructing the ads, but of placing them within the framework of political context" that makes "ad watch" "a beneficial service to the political process."¹²³

Section V
The Gossip Culture

Politics as Scandal: An Historical Perspective¹²⁴

Adultery, homosexuality, mental health problems, plagiarism and other personal matters have so dominated recent political coverage that Walter Robinson of the Boston Globe has lamented that during the 1989 congressional leadership scandals he "felt like taking a bath" after a typical day of covering politics in Washington. Partisans on both sides of the 1988 campaign complained during and after the campaign that adultery and other "character" issues had turned reporters into amateur psychologists and "character cops," hounding public figures unfairly about their private lives and driving out more substantive analysis of the candidates' fitness for office and of the nation's challenges.

Certainly the public -- and the newsmongers who want to appeal to it -- have always been interested in scandal and gossip, particularly about their leaders. Plutarch wrote 2,000 years ago: "For not only are men in public life held responsible for their public words and actions, but people busy themselves with all their concerns: dinner, love affairs, marriage, amusement."

Throughout American history the peccadilloes of our politicians and their families have often been more interesting than their policies to the average citizen. All along, the press has played a central role in exposing their secrets.

In the early days of the American republic, for example, journalist James Thomson Callender specialized in spicing up his accounts of public officials' speeches and debates with insults and sexual innuendoes. He even exposed his friend, Thomas Jefferson, by publishing stories about his alleged relationship with a slave woman.¹²⁵

In those days such gossip was part of a partisan press war, and didn't carry the weight of "objective" observation. Nevertheless, press accounts often provided accurate, useful ammunition for political opponents. In the 1884 presidential contest between Grover Cleveland and James G. Blaine, the Buffalo Evening Telegraph reported how, as a young man, Grover Cleveland had had a son by a Buffalo widow, Maria Halpin, and that he was still supporting both of them. Cleveland acknowledged the facts. The New York Sun and New York Tribune took up the cry, calling Cleveland a "rake," "libertine," "father of a bastard," "a gross and licentious man," a "moral leper," "a man stained with disgusting infamy," and so forth. Republicans hounded Cleveland throughout the election with the phrase "Ma! Ma! Where's my pa?"¹²⁶

In 1890, Harvard Law Professor Louis Brandeis and his law partner Samuel D. Warren wrote their now-famous essay in the Harvard Law Review called "The Right to Privacy." Concerned about a string of stories in the New York and Boston papers that they felt crossed the line, they wrote: "gossip is no longer the resource of the idle and of the vicious, but has become a trade, which is pursued with industry as well as effrontery."

Brandeis and Warren were aware of both the weakness of human nature and the need to seek and find escape from the increasing complexity of American society. The requirement for diversion fed the natural curiosity of the people. Brandeis and Warren were ahead of their time in urging the press to be aware of its growing responsibilities in society -- to respect the right of people to be let alone -- because, first, a press obsessed by gossip has little time left for substance; second, First Amendment guarantees of freedom of the press were essential to the perpetuation of American democracy; and finally, legislators may be encouraged to move against the press.

"When personal gossip attains the dignity of print, and crowds the space available for matters of real interest to the community, what wonder that the ignorant and thoughtless mistake its relative importance," Brandeis and Warren wrote. "Easy of comprehension, appealing to that weak side of human nature which is never wholly cast down by the

misfortunes and frailties of our neighbors...triviality destroys at once robustness of thought and delicacy of feeling. No enthusiasm can flourish, no generous impulse can survive under its blighting influence."

In 1906, President Theodore Roosevelt, one of the greatest manipulators of the press ever to occupy the White House, also castigated what he considered the press's indiscriminate attacks on public officials. In his famous speech, "The Man With the Muckrake," he said: "Gross and reckless assaults on character, whether on the stump, or in newspaper, magazine or book, create a morbid and vicious public sentiment, and at the same time act as a profound deterrent to able men of normal sensitiveness and tend to prevent them from entering the public service at any price."

Yet a generation later, when his cousin Franklin was president, the political press corps had developed a different sensibility. "Photographers were careful to respect Roosevelt's wishes concerning his pictorial coverage," said historian Betty Winfield, and they voluntarily destroyed their own negatives when they showed FDR in poses that revealed his handicap.¹²⁷ Washington Post reporter Raymond Clapper wrote in his diary in 1933 that stories about Roosevelt and Lucy Mercer Rutherford "buzzed around Washington," but he did not pursue or print them. Clapper also didn't mention that the President fell just before he was to give his acceptance speech at the 1936 Democratic convention.¹²⁸

Reporters looked the other way as well when they learned of evidence of Democratic presidential candidate John Kennedy's extra-marital affairs. Jeff Gralnick, vice president and executive producer of special broadcasts for ABC, says that campaign reporting has gotten "better and better" since he started in 1960, partly because of the reporters' renewed attention to the candidate's behind-the-scenes behavior.

"I can remember a group of us standing in the Carlyle Hotel, watching the elevator come down, 9:15 in the morning. Everybody said 'Oh, that's Angie Dickinson and there she went.' And 10 minutes later, Jack Kennedy came down. And everybody knew what was going on. Nobody reported it. Did we not tell the truth or did we just not report it? We just didn't report it because we had not reached the point yet where the sex habits of the candidate were part of the reporting process and the analysis process," he said.¹²⁹

How and Why Have the Rules Changed?

Clearly something changed between then and the 1988 presidential campaign, during which Gary Hart was asked by Washington Post reporter Paul Taylor, in a televised press conference, "Have you ever committed adultery?" Taylor himself later asserted that 1988 was the year when reporters generally became "character cops," chasing sexual liaisons,

plagiarism and other stories so fervently that two candidates and various staffers were forced to drop out of the contest. The change was clearly evident to those waging the campaign. "My personal belief is that character...is the pre-eminent issue in a presidential campaign," concludes Dayton Duncan, a 1988 Dukakis press spokesman. The role conferred -- or appeared to confer -- great power. "Clearly the press decided that certain people couldn't be candidates for president and took them out of the election before a vote was ever cast," says Michael Oreskes of the New York Times of the 1988 experience.¹³⁰

Clearly, the role of the press has changed. This changed role reflects a retinue of changes in the political landscape: the role of the press in the political process, the television culture in which politics is played out, the status of women, economic and technological changes, and the candidates' focus away from governmental activism to a politics of personal image and values. Each of these factors has helped to create today's politics of character and gossip. So, too, has the decline of other political institutions -- the political party, in particular. Political party leaders used to know the candidates well, as a result of their having to work their way up the party ladder. Thanks to reforms, the parties have become more diverse but also too weak to exert much control over who runs for office. Presidential candidates Pat Robertson and

Jesse Jackson in 1988 ran outside their party establishments; such independent operators can become serious candidates simply by the amount of money they raise and the success of the image they project on television. In this environment, the stakes are raised for the press to examine the truth behind the candidates' packaged images.

"The days are gone when the political bosses, who knew the potential candidates well, screened them for drinking, gambling, womanizing, plagiarizing or patronizing psychiatrists," says Walter Cronkite. "With the candidates going directly to the people through the primaries, it's now up to the press to serve the public interest by doing the nasty but necessary job of screening through revelation."¹³¹

The press also has grown in credibility and influence. Unlike the Grover Cleveland scandal of 100 years ago, the newspapers involved in 1988 -- the Washington Post, New York Times and others -- couldn't be dismissed as partisan scandal-sheets. The print and electronic press have assumed "objective" standards apart from the two parties, and are now a central part of the political process.

The size of the political press corps has exploded so that as many as a hundred or more reporters and technicians may "stake out" a candidate's home or office, laying siege until the candidate addresses the questions they wish to ask. During such intense "feeding frenzies," journalists often lose perspective about the importance of the story they are pursuing.

The technology of television has changed politics.

Television as a medium has tended powerfully to personalize politics. The politics of image over fact, driven by the television culture, drives journalists to try to scrutinize the plastic made-for-tv candidates, to find out who they really are. In a time of instant, worldwide communications, people look for the latest hot news instead of an analysis of the latest issue in the campaign. The damage done by rumors and gossip in this instantaneous, world-wide media environment raises the ante for politicians to do one another in with leaks and rumors.

Economics has played a role in creating the politics of gossip and scandal. Competition among news organizations, which helped spur the gossip in Cleveland's day, has returned with a vengeance as newspapers and networks alike fight over a shrinking market. This competition has only grown worse since the 1988 election. The hotter the competition, the weaker the press's self-restraint, particularly when it comes to rumors. Networks, magazines and newspapers are scrambling to reach the largest number of consumers with the most sure-fire product. Gossip is easier to sell than serious issue stories.

Economics has transformed politics; candidates no longer can promise new government initiatives. Instead, afraid to raise -- or even talk about raising -- taxes, they must preside over a shrinking set of budget options. As a

result, many are ducking the serious policy choices they actually will face if they win. There is little left for them to run on, then, but painless platitudes and valence issues (values). These themes, including those connected with the personal lives of the candidates, have become a large part of the campaign agenda. Candidates who try to exemplify "family values," bringing their spouses and children into the campaign, open themselves up to hypocrisy charges if their family life isn't what it's supposed to be.

Cultural changes have had an impact too. In contemporary culture, intimate sexual matters are the mainstay of television soap operas, as well as talk shows and non-fiction news-based entertainment programs. Journalists, editors and producers have a difficult time weighing issues of candidate privacy, relevance and taste in this ever-expanding market for titillation and gossip.

The arrival of women in the political press corps in the 1970s undoubtedly played a role in bringing sexual mores and hypocrisy into the "character" debate. "In women's experience, how people with power treat people without power is a measure of their character -- therefore whether they are fit for public office," observes Democratic consultant Ann Lewis. "The experience of women tells us to beware of double standards."¹³²

At the same time, cynicism has deepened. Journalists who might have given public officials the benefit of the

doubt in the past have become both more skeptical and aggressive in the wake of experiences covering the Vietnam war, the Watergate scandal, the Iran-Contra affair, as well as other episodes of government dishonesty. "I suffer from fear of flacking," Paul Taylor has said. If a reporter abandons strict neutrality and passes on his assessment that a candidate is actually a good public servant, "it's risky. Suppose the ingrate embezzles the orphans' fund next Tuesday? Then who looks like a fool?"¹³³ Stephen Klaidman argues that campaign rhetoric is not as useful in estimating how a candidate will perform in office as are indirect indications of compassion and judgment which may be evidenced best in the candidate's private life.¹³⁴ Brooks Jackson, a former Wall Street Journal investigative reporter who now is part of the Cable News Network's investigative unit, views the "gossip culture" climate for campaign journalism as linked to the decline of the political party nomination mechanism. "We now have candidate-based campaigns in which it's the person that counts. That's supposed to be a good thing, but is it really? Candidates hire consultants, take polls, tell people what they think the people want to hear, and one of the things the polls will show is that voters pretty much think the politicians are all lying to them...Voters don't believe...that the party labels are much help in determining how they're going to act, so what are we left with? What is our politics based

on? Well, we're looking for clues to what kind of a person this man or woman is. What will they do in office? Well, if they cheat on their wife, maybe they're going to cheat on us. That becomes one of the few straws of information that we have left to judge our candidates by. I think that's the reason why the press seems so preoccupied by scandal; it's because the public really is looking for clues to character, having been left with nothing else."¹³⁵

Is "Character" Coverage Appropriate?

Among the nagging concerns about the 1988 "character" coverage were two major questions: First, was the trial-by-journalism accurate and fair to the candidates? And secondly, did the private life character flaws and virtues that they found have anything to do with performance in public life?

While those participating in the Campaign Lessons for '92 project agreed that the press should help the voters mediate between candidate truth and falsehood, both the style and the substance of the press's "character" coverage were troubling to many politicians and journalists alike. "I think there are a lot of us who felt somewhat trapped in a process that left us all feeling pretty sour about it," concludes Paul Taylor.¹³⁶ Part of the problem lies in defining what specifically about the politician's private

life is relevant to examining his or her character as a public leader. In 1988, "character" was defined narrowly, through a process of sensational revelations. The definition should also have included such issues as personal integrity and courage. "Whether a politician consistently and regularly votes on principle in the face of countervailing political winds tells you a lot more about his integrity than whether he will own up to having smoked marijuana in college," observes Los Angeles Deputy City Attorney John Emerson. Scholar Sabato similarly urges journalists to put more emphasis on public character than private behavior. He includes in this list "the degree to which a person tends to shade the truth or deny reality, and an individual's general openness or secretiveness."¹³⁷ While Sabato concludes that even a contemporary adulterous love affair, if handled discreetly, doesn't necessarily tell enough about a candidate to warrant press attention, a large number of Campaign Lessons for '92 participants disagree. Their argument for coverage grows much stronger if the affair involves public funds or job performance, is part of a pattern, involves bullying or cruelty, or if, perhaps most telling, the candidate hypocritically puts forward his private life as a model of family rectitude.

Klaidman observes that "each voter is entitled to information that will enable her to decide whether the candidate meets her standard for honesty in a President. She

is entitled to know, for example, whether a candidate has a significant history of deceiving his wife about almost anything. Like charitable giving, a pattern of deceptive behavior meets the relevance test even though it is not an infallible indicator of public performance."¹³⁸ Ann Lewis, whose brother, Rep. Barney Frank (D-Mass.) was subject to a House reprimand following revelations about his relationship with a male prostitute, stresses that such scandals are weighed with other factors by the voters. "If you offer the kind of political leadership that they care about, people have room for a wide variety in your private life," she says. "People are capable of holding more than one fact about a politician in their heads at one time."

Yet a serious problem with character coverage is not just the shifting standard for what is relevant, but the way the coverage is conducted: in the public spotlight, by a competition-driven press pack in full pursuit of a candidate. Often the voters don't have the chance, as they did in the case of Barney Frank's re-election, to vote on the matter. The candidate withdraws from the field, as both Gary Hart and Joe Biden did in 1988, to escape the relentless press pack.

"In the sort of hothouse atmosphere of presidential campaign reporting, character as an issue is too often defined by this whiff of scandal that is pursued with a frenzy that often overwhelms, I think, other judgments and

obliterates the larger context of character," concluded Dayton Duncan.¹³⁹ Ad industry executive Malcolm MacDougall compares the press's "feeding frenzies" to the politicians' attack ads. "Both are driven by the same deconstructionist dynamic: Find the wart; make the wart stand for the whole. Both are products of the culture of disbelief. Both are fed by -- and in turn feed -- the cynicism of their audience."¹⁴⁰

In contrast, the best character coverage in 1988 relied on factual research, put together carefully into a full picture of the candidate's voting record, statements, priorities, personal achievements, career, financial backing and personal relationships. This established the context for developments throughout the campaign. Examples of this kind of coverage included Barry Bearak's profile of George Bush in the Los Angeles Times in November of 1987, David Shribman's discussion of Pat Robertson's pre-conversion life in the Wall Street Journal in October of 1987, and Sherry Jones' documentary "The Choice", part of the PBS Frontline series, in October of 1988.

Obstacles to Thoughtful "Character" Coverage

A balanced biographical piece is harder to do on television, given time constraints, than in print. And when new revelations emerged during the 1988 campaign, there was

little air time to devote to anything but the new information. "These stories demand full explanation and a complete exposition of extenuating circumstances but television news seldom has time for that," notes Walter Cronkite.¹⁴¹ Even in quiet moments before the campaign gets underway, background research has not been enough of a priority for many news organizations. While they use up-to-date technology to transmit their news, many news organizations remain low-tech and understaffed in their research and data retrieval functions. Brooks Jackson of CNN has observed that "political consultants...have a dozen researchers on their staffs feeding stories to a reporter who still covers stories basically with a notebook and pencil. That is, I think, symbolic of the imbalance in research capability between the private sector, in this case represented by the political consultants, and we in the press," he said.

News organizations collectively do have, in one sense, enormous resources in the sheer number of journalists who are deployed to follow the candidates. But they are all covering the same story at the same time for different news organizations, Jackson notes. Few have the ability to leave the chase in order to research the story of the hour through other interviews or computer-access data bases back in the office.

"And we have too little expertise," Jackson concludes. "There are not enough of us who are attorneys or have

perhaps been trained as physicians to cover health care issues....We're used to letting other institutions organize data for us, organize the issues for us. We're very good at covering a congressional hearing. We're not good, for example, at going out and discovering secret Swiss bank accounts through which payments were made for arms and passed on to Nicaragua and the rebels."

Another problem with character coverage has arisen from the varying standards to which candidates have been held. Generally the candidates with the best chances to win and the candidates running for the highest offices are most closely scrutinized. Yet even in those groups, the treatment is uneven. Bernard Shaw of CNN asserts that the networks did not do the kind of tough character stories on Jesse Jackson that were done on other major candidates. He attributes this to "the fear of offending" and "of being called racist."¹⁴² Peggy Robinson of the MacNeil-Lehrer NewsHour concludes that journalists should "hold each candidate to the same set of standards so that we're somewhat consistent in how we approach each one of them."¹⁴³

Ironically, the "character cops" feel they didn't succeed in their most important mission in 1988: getting the candidates to reveal their true personas to the public. Instead, the man who won, George Bush, took on what was widely viewed to be a disingenuous new "macho" image which he dropped, to a large degree, once the campaign was over.

"George Bush had to prove to the press and through the press to the American public that he was not a wimp," reporter Paul Taylor has explained. "In the fall of 1988, he took on this Clint Eastwood 'read my lips' macho-man. That was a fake. I think everybody knew it was a fake. Here we were, engaged in this two-year process where the whole point of the exercise was to strip all these guys naked, take their masks away, and we elected the man who did the most effective job of putting on the most creative mask."¹⁴⁴

In addition, the activist "cops" earned the ire of many citizens, who decided the press had gone too far in hounding politicians about their private lives. The image experts for Bush and Vice Presidential candidate Dan Quayle adeptly turned the tables on the press, making them seem like unreasonable character assassins. Instead of winning the gratitude of the public for trying to sort out the truth from the political fiction about the candidates, polls showed that the press actually lost stature and credibility with the American people.¹⁴⁵

The effects have been difficult to track with certainty. More than two years after the election, as new waves of scandal hit Sen. Edward Kennedy's family, Sen. Charles Robb of Virginia and others, the press plunged full speed ahead in the face of widespread public skepticism. A poll taken by the Wall Street Journal and NBC News found that by at least a two-to-one margin, the public believed

the press had gone too far in writing about Kennedy and his family's conduct in the alleged Palm Beach rape case and by an even larger margin too far in publicizing questions about Sen. Robb's private life. But the survey found that the public makes a sharp distinction between such stories and those about misuse of public funds, as in the 1990 allegations that White House Chief of Staff John Sununu was improperly using government planes and cars for private trips. By a more than three-to-one margin, the public believed the media acted responsibly in pursuing the Sununu allegations. Peter Hart, one of the pollsters who conducted the survey, concludes that "the media have great latitude in the public's view to go after public wrongdoing. But when they go into private conduct, the public tends to turn against the media. The public seems to be saying: this far and no farther." News executives may smile at such conclusions, observing that the stories that "go too far" may do much better in a more important survey: the circulation and ratings figures for print and broadcast news.

Rumors

Perhaps the most dangerous territory for the "character cops" has been in the area of unproven rumors, which now are being published and broadcast simply because

they are reverberating around the "insider" political circles. This practice, says Larry Sabato, is "the single most disturbing development in modern journalism."¹⁴⁶

Recalling how a Newsweek report on rumors of Gary Hart's adultery had obsessed reporters traveling with the Senator long before he was actually spotted with Donna Rice at the Washington, D.C. townhouse during the 1988 campaign, Miami Herald political editor Tom Fiedler described how a Newsweek editor justified the printing of such rumors: "When Newsweek was asked about that later, why they chose to report the rumor that they hadn't substantiated, the answer was...that the rumor itself reached such a crescendo level that it had achieved a critical mass of its own. It had somehow become reality. The rumor had gotten so large that it was reality. So therefore the press was justified in printing it."¹⁴⁷

By passing on rumors that may or may not be true, journalists have allowed politicians to use them to get at their opponents. Particularly troubling in 1988 were the rumors about Michael Dukakis's alleged psychiatric treatments and his wife Kitty's alleged burning of an American flag. The Dukakis campaign was slow to respond to the mental health rumor, confident that such false accusations would not be given credence by the "impact" national press corps.

"Immediately after the Democratic Convention a rumor was spread that Michael Dukakis had seen a psychiatrist.

That shifted us (down) 8 points that week," recalled Dukakis aide Jack Corrigan. "That's the margin between defeat and victory...The most fundamental thing in this business -- I think in politics, in government, in journalism -- is facts and lies. That's a very fundamental distinction. There were lies told about Michael Dukakis...There were lies being spread about his wife burning the flag."¹⁴⁸

Unfortunately, instead of tracking down the source of the psychiatrist rumor and exposing the lie, the press felt it had a responsibility no more compelling than to report on the rumor as a political development. The news peg was provided by President Reagan, when he jokingly referred to the Democratic nominee as an "invalid."¹⁴⁹ "That certainly elevated it to the top political news story that day and the next several days," recalls Dayton Duncan. "...Every political reporter was buzzing about it....The sense was that everyone was afraid that everyone else was going to cop a big story and wanted to at least get on the record of saying this rumor is out and about, and we want to let you know that it is happening, and by the way it is not true."¹⁵⁰ ABC's Hal Bruno has described exactly how political dirty tricksters use the press to spread rumors about their opponents.

"I call it the politics of the nuclear strike. How to destroy an opponent overnight," Bruno said. "The technique is to plant the rumor and to get the media to ask a question

-- hopefully in a public forum that will legitimize what is a scurrilous unproven rumor....The way this technique works...is there are all these calls to a news organization and...and it is always that 'Organization X has the story and is about to break it and they have pictures.' "151

The press's fear of being beaten by the competition on such a hot scoop has led this ploy to work in the past, Bruno said. Yet Bruno also described how his own organization resisted such an effort during the 1988 campaign -- when calls came in trying to get ABC to publicize the rumor that George Bush had a mistress. "It was unbelievable the way the calls came in. They didn't only come in to Washington, they came into our far-flung bureaus...Very quickly it was clear that this was being orchestrated. Incidentally, the calls did not come from any of our usually reliable, trusted political sources....We assigned six reporters at least to start working on it. Nobody could find anything. Everybody we went to said 'oh, yes, that is true.' 'Well, how do you know it is true?' 'Well, everybody knows it is true.' The answer is that nobody knew it was true. Nobody had the slightest shred of evidence that it was true.

"I knew that there was something wrong the day that someone called up and said that ABC has the story and is going to break it. I said, 'This is ABC.'" Bruno recounted. "I explained to...the news executives at ABC, here is what's

happening. We have got to dig in and not be panicked by this thing. What they are trying to do is get us to ask a question in a public forum, a press conference or wherever it may be -- shout it at a photo opportunity and thereby legitimize something that cannot be proven. My bosses agreed. We are not going to be used that way."¹⁵²

Bruno went a step further: "I did something I've never done before. I conspired with my counterparts at the other networks. We talked to each other and even other news organizations. We said 'Hey, look, we don't have it, do you have it? No, we all agreed we were being pushed and we were going to dig in and not be used this way."

Bruno felt he had a safety net; he also was talking constantly to the Bush campaign and felt that if the rumor was going to be broadcast or printed by anyone, he would know beforehand. The theory was that whoever was about to print it would ask the Bush campaign for comment and they would tell Bruno. He also tried to find out who the source of the rumor was, but never got to the bottom of it.

The "impact press" continued to show extraordinary restraint, even when Newsweek obliquely referred to the Bush mistress rumor in a "Periscope" item, an alternative newspaper ran the story, and the stock market plunged because it thought the Washington Post was about to publish the story and damage Bush's prospects as a candidate.

The lesson, Bruno concludes, is that news organizations should handle rumors by first checking them

out thoroughly, and if they suspect it is an orchestrated smear campaign, to expose whoever is spreading the smears. "We must not allow ourselves to be panicked into asking a rotten question at a press conference...because that is exactly what these manipulators want us to do," he observed. In addition, "if we suspect manipulation, this is heresy, but I don't care -- then I think we should talk to each other." Finally, he concluded, "if a news organization prints or broadcasts an obviously bad story that is false or is using these unproven rumors -- I think it is up to the rest of us to knock it down and do it hard on page one, in prime time. An organization that does that deserves the maximum embarrassment."¹⁵³

Section VI

Conclusions and Recommendations

What is Wrong with Political Coverage Now?

The incentives currently at play in today's electoral process produce a campaign that does little to elucidate what is at stake for the voters. Instead, the current process rewards "images" and submerged emotional messages. At its worst, this practice builds cynicism and negative feelings about the candidates, the press and the process, and fails to provide a means for holding politicians accountable -- or for politicians to consider their mandate -- once they are elected.

Candidates contend that in order to win they must avoid discussing during the campaign the actual issues or choices they will face once in office. The traditional adversarial relationship with the press, which theoretically checks and balances the politicians' behavior, has become distorted; in some instances the press and the politicians are engaged in the same business of creating appealing images for the voters/viewers; in other cases the relationship breaks down into a combat situation that also fails to inform the public. Some candidates deliberately seek confrontations with the press, using journalists as

foils during debates and press conferences. Some journalists, when working in a "pack" on a hot story, pursue candidates so relentlessly that balance, fairness and more substantive issues are lost.

Journalists currently view their political coverage as having a two-fold mission: most feel they must report on the activities of the candidates' campaigns, including ads and other "manufactured news" because that is the political news of the day; yet they also feel they must tell the voters what is really going on behind the scenes. However well-intentioned or well-grounded in tradition and ethics, there is a general feeling that neither mission is being conducted effectively in contemporary campaign coverage. Instead of successfully analyzing the distorted or empty images of the campaigns, the press in 1988 unintentionally legitimized them. Journalists' attempts to pierce the candidates' "manufactured news" armor consisted too often of elevating the gaffe, the unguarded moment, the unexpected "tough" question beyond its real importance, partly because journalists felt these were the public's few opportunities to see the real candidates behind the propagandists' masks. Instead of being appreciated for representing the public interest, however, the press in 1988 alienated its own constituency: the voters/readers/viewers felt they saw a rude, elite group with its own agenda, "tearing down" the candidate in a gladiator showdown.

Many factors helped create this dynamic. As the principle medium of politics, television drives this negative cycle by highlighting image, drama and emotion. Economic constraints further encourage journalists and their managers to compete on "hot button" issues; politicians and journalists alike look for the "smoking gun" -- Gary Hart's adulterous affair; Joseph Biden's use of a speech originally delivered by British Labor Party leader Neil Kinnock; the way in which Dan Quayle avoided military service.

The gossip culture, with its emphasis on the private lives of celebrities, accelerates the search for candidate hypocrisies. Journalists' professional ethics -- dictating "balance" and objectivity in their political coverage -- can exacerbate the problem by discouraging journalists from clearly labelling lies and distortions. Attempts to discuss the candidates' images can backfire if journalists don't go beyond evaluating the effectiveness of the image in such a way as to apply accuracy and relevance tests.

Thus journalists in today's political process seem too intrusive in some ways and not intrusive enough in others. Journalists earn bad marks from the public for pushing candidates too aggressively about certain issues, to the exclusion of other kinds of coverage; by relying too heavily on polls that seem to replace the voters by announcing what the voters will do; and by talking about the "insider" marketing of the candidates rather than providing the kind

of information that connects the campaigns to voters' interests. On the other hand, these same seemingly aggressive journalists shrink from legitimate missions when they fail to mediate between truth and falsehood, when they cover the "manufactured news" without correction as the main content of the campaign, and when they reward candidates for successful image manipulation rather than for facing relevant issues and choices.

The goal of this study has been the identification of these problems and development of useful suggestions for improving the situation. It is our underlying hypothesis, as posed by Sissela Bok, that if one element of the system -- in this case, the press -- changes its behavior, it will affect the entire process. How, then, might the press change its own approach to political coverage to serve its own constituency better and at the same time help provide a more relevant and inclusive election discourse? The Campaign Lessons for '92 project team believes that the press can make significant improvements in both areas by rethinking the way it covers the electoral process. If voters believe that the press is on their side, rather than acting as some pugnacious, untouchable elite that is manipulating them as cynically as the politicians are, then political coverage can be more rewarding for all concerned. The press can strengthen its own audience appeal by more effectively offering the information voters need to make informed

choices, providing incentives for candidates to address tough issues, and by balancing the propaganda from the campaigns with fair and accurate depictions of the choices at hand. News organizations can enhance the credibility of the press, the politicians and the political process itself by providing news that is connected not just to the real options at stake but to the challenges of governing after the election is over.

The Campaign Lessons for '92 project has served as a clearinghouse for suggestions for meeting these goals. Some of these suggestions seem deceptively simple and some have been bandied about for years, implemented in part by selected news organizations. But as the 1988 presidential election and other subsequent races have illustrated, the approach to coverage outlined below is not common practice. Instead, the press's "insider" marketing approach to elections is getting more sophisticated without improving the political discourse. One exception, which is the "ad watch" innovation of the 1990 cycle, holds great promise if used effectively. But many organizations are not yet on firm footing about how to handle this new kind of coverage.

General Recommendations for Local and National Political Coverage

Our recommendations serve several specific goals. First, they aim to help journalists replace insider and

horserace coverage with news that is connected to voters' concerns. Second, they aim to get beyond "manufactured" news that focuses on image rather than relevant facts and issues; thirdly, they hope to help journalists deal more effectively with campaign ads, lies, distortions and rumors.

The Campaign Lessons for '92 project believes that news organizations, whether local or national, can rethink their political coverage in order to meet these goals without undermining the norms and ethics of their craft. Indeed, we believe that these suggestions will help journalists, editors and producers fulfill their own professional missions in a more satisfying and commercially successful way while also providing voters with a greater motivation for getting involved in the political system.

The suggestions assume that journalists have a fundamentally different mission from political candidates. The journalist's job is two-fold. First, it is to convey the immediate "news" of the day. Candidates and advertisers compete, thanks to television, and provide their own version of the "news." How can citizens determine how to evaluate these often conflicting versions of reality? It does not seem to be good journalism simply to pass on the candidates' assertions and manufactured news; the second, even more important mission of the political journalist, is to help voters/news consumers understand the facts and context of the candidates' assertions. This is part of the American

journalistic tradition even though it has become muddled in recent years. No other institution has the standing or resources to serve as a neutral, credible sounding board for the truth and relevance of the campaign rhetoric. Studies such as the Markle Commission's in 1988 find that citizens are unable to evaluate candidates and campaigns without some further help.

How, then, can news organizations perform this valuable role more effectively? By developing "relevance" and "truth" tests for election coverage and emphasizing enterprise journalism over "manufactured news." Here are suggestions for how news organizations might do this:

Establish a baseline agenda and coverage plan to monitor relevance and keep a balance in news coverage.

A proportion of campaign "manufactured" images, insider and horserace news is essential to good coverage, but in 1988 the amount was out of balance. To establish a better balance, each news organization might start out with a "relevant issues" baseline agenda reflecting ideas and concerns from diverse sources. It should include the issues, values and concerns expressed by voters through polls and interviews. Also part of this baseline agenda are matters that political experts and "insiders" acknowledge will be on the candidate's desk once he or she is elected, such as the savings and loan crisis in 1988 and the looming Gulf War in 1990. Another critical source of such agenda items is, of

course, the candidates themselves, including their own priorities and initial substantive campaign presentations. What are the main challenges each candidate thinks will be central to the job once he or she is elected?

This list of issues can be summarized in an initial story, identifying what the race is likely to be all about, and then used throughout the campaign as a "relevance" test for campaign discourse. The point of establishing this initial issues agenda is not to denigrate "values" or "character" as legitimate political subjects, nor is it to dismiss the new issues or themes that emerge during the campaign season. Instead, this baseline is a tool that can be used as needed by journalists, politicians and voters alike to hold candidates accountable for addressing serious, relevant matters affected by the election.

Washington Post columnist David Broder has suggested this baseline agenda be generated largely from voter interviews, polls and focus groups. An alternate idea has been developed by University of Texas government professor James Fishkin, whose "National Issues Convention" was planned for January, 1992 to develop the campaign agenda as part of the PBS election package. The project has now been dropped for lack of funding. Six hundred randomly-selected delegates from both parties were to have gathered with participating presidential candidates and national political leaders to create a "deliberative opinion poll." This tally

would have been the result of having the group interact for three days and then having the delegates vote for their preferences on both the candidates and the positions on the issues.

Still another idea comes from John Sharnik, a former documentary producer at CBS News, who suggests that PBS broadcast a series of panel discussions with the living past presidents, so they can spell out the issues they think should be addressed in the coming campaign.

However this agenda is established, it will backfire if it is seen as a "press agenda" supplanting the candidates' and voters' own themes. But if it is produced from a wide range of thoughtful people, it can become the backbone for election coverage, augmenting and placing in context the empty "manufactured news" of the campaign. This baseline also provides from the beginning the research agenda for journalists to prepare pieces in advance for use throughout the campaign season. The baseline agenda, updated throughout the campaign, will be a voters' and journalists' guide both to the quality of the candidates' campaigns and to the accountability of the winners afterwards.

The baseline agenda is most effective if it is used within the framework of a coverage plan. While coverage plans are almost always overtaken at some point by the events of the campaign, they nevertheless are useful in helping to maintain an overall balance in enterprise,

strategy, horserace and other kinds of coverage. Most national news organizations start with fairly detailed coverage plans. The Wall Street Journal, for example, begins the campaign season by soliciting ideas from political reporters, editors and outside sources and developing a coverage plan so that reporters have a good idea of the enterprise stories they will be working on throughout the campaign season. They "gather string" -- i.e. anecdotes, interview information and so forth -- on those themes and issues as the campaign progresses, turning the stories in on a steady basis so the political news is regularly enhanced by background pieces and other enterprise features.

Other mainstays of every coverage plan include biographies and interviews with the candidates; pieces on campaign finance and spending, "issue" pieces (which can be improved when tied to voters' concerns or the immediate issues facing the victor, rather than existing in isolation as they so often do now), strategy pieces on how the candidate plans to mount the campaign; profiles of key campaign aides and ratings of the candidates by peers, special interest groups and other sources, pieces on the world views of the candidates, i.e. who do they think are the good guys and bad guys; what have been the watershed decisions in their lives; what are their past and future priorities?

News organizations should redeploy their forces in order to replace "manufactured news" with research-based journalism.

This involves taking senior people off the campaign plane, and leaving most of the day-to-day campaign coverage to "pools" which provide a common set of spot news information, pictures and audio from the traveling campaign. This doesn't mean that the campaign shouldn't be covered; nor does it mean it should be covered only from headquarters; nor does it mean that senior journalists shouldn't periodically join the traveling campaign to interview the candidate, get a flavor of the campaign operation, and so forth. But news organizations have a hard time creating relevant, competitive coverage when they're all captives on the same hermetically-sealed campaign bus or plane, waiting for the theme-of-the-day to play itself out in the same generally available photos and sound bites.

One advantage of being on the campaign bus used to be access to the candidate. But in much of today's campaigning, candidates are avoiding such informal contact with the press. Campaigns instead provide "manufactured news" photo ops and sound bites because they are safe and will be easily digested by the media; the same story and picture tend to appear on all the networks and in all the newspapers that cover the campaigns this way. The edge that makes one news organization stand out in coverage comes not from

competitive coverage of the traveling campaign news, but instead from providing the context -- research, analysis, enterprise work that is very difficult to do on the campaign trail. Senior people are better deployed in research and enterprise projects to augment and analyze this daily campaign feeding, providing valuable insight into who's telling the truth and who's leveling the cheap shots; who's financing the election and who's facing the baseline agenda.

Some television and newspaper executives have said they're already implementing this suggestion in 1992 out of economic necessity.

Put "photo ops" and soundbites in context, declining to use them unless they are enhanced by the candidates' additional substance on the subject or by enterprise reporting.

Is the campaign's theme-of-the-day photo op or sound bite offering a real choice about values or policy issues? What message are they actually trying to get across, in order to further what objective? What else are they saying about these themes, and what does the candidate's record have to say about these subjects? Grounding the theme of the day in enterprise research, as anticipated by the baseline agenda and coverage plan, will bring journalists and their audiences the best of both worlds: the news of what the candidates are offering combined with information about what that campaign offering really means. Requiring

candidates to be accessible and discuss these values/themes/issues of the day as a prerequisite for using them in the news, as ABC news executives have said they will require in the future, is another way to turn manufactured news into real news.

Today's data bases make it easy to track campaign finances, the actual voting records of incumbents, past statements of candidates, and other measurements of their past performance. This kind of research remains the hallmark of good journalism; it is far more useful to voters/viewers/readers than the highly subjective commentary about candidate image manipulation or the day's photo op in a cornfield.

In addition, news organizations should stop quoting the "spin doctors." The quotes from these paid propagandists, praising their own candidates, rarely tell us anything. If an aide makes a controversial or questionable comment, or attacks the opposition candidate, that, of course, changes the situation and makes it news. But the quips of the day from aides, particularly after debates, are a waste of everyone's time.

Use polls differently, to tie campaign coverage to the baseline agenda and the voters' concerns as they develop.

The way horserace polls dominated coverage in 1988 crowded out other kinds of news and stirred resentment among

some voters, candidates and journalists. But if used differently, public opinion polls can be a key to involving voters and news consumers more effectively in the coverage. Polls can be used not only for setting the news organization's baseline agenda/coverage plan, but to update voters' views throughout the campaign. Major newspapers including the New York Times, Wall Street Journal and Washington Post accomplish this even more effectively by adding focus group insights to their poll analysis. However small or large the news organization, it can use polls well by resisting the temptation to overplay horserace polls as the most important news about the campaign, by being selective about the quality of polls used, and by keeping polls in context as mere snapshots of the moment. Poll stories are more interesting if they focus not just on who is winning but why.

Call-in and other "instant" polls are of dubious quality and should be treated with great caution, especially by downstream news organizations repeating others' findings. Local reporters have a special opportunity to raise new issues with national candidates if they can resist the tradition of focusing on poll standings and strategy questions.

Reach for more "outsider" perspectives and provide more incentives for voters to participate in the political discourse.

The so-called "Golden Rolodex" of political insiders frames too narrow a political discourse. Thoughtful people from a range of ideologies should be called on to contribute their perspectives. Community activists, corporate executives, law enforcement, health, legal and teaching professionals, the unemployed, religious practitioners, students, and other people from diverse races and backgrounds should be heard from during the campaign to define their election agenda.

Another way to involve a broader spectrum is to have voters provide questions for candidate debates. These questions can be screened and posed by the moderators during the debates. These questions also can enrich and update the baseline agenda. Candidates who might wish to denigrate the questions posed to them during a debate will have a harder time doing so if the questions are originated by individual voters who are so identified.

While character coverage is an important part of the political discourse, and will captivate coverage from time to time, it is better when the voters decide how important the character issues are. The press can continue to serve an important role in screening the candidates' biographies and records, but other issues may also be of importance to voters when election day comes. Instead of hounding candidates about the same "pack" issue day after day, journalists might do a more effective job -- and be better

received by their own audiences -- if they balance even intense, competitive character coverage with analysis, baseline agenda issues and other enterprise stories.

In assessing the different campaigns' assertions, work to be fair and accurate rather than artificially "balanced."

Voters need to know when one campaign is distorting the facts and the other isn't. It isn't fair for the press to provide a false symmetry simply because it will thereby avoid the charge of bias. Fairness requires, however, that news organizations apply similar standards to comparable candidates, and that candidates have opportunities to respond to journalists' critical analyses.

Many journalists feel they don't have the time or mandate from their producers and editors to mediate the accuracy or relevance of campaign assertions. Yet with proper research, made much easier with today's computer-access data bases, local as well as national journalists can readily check a candidate's voting record, prior statements and finances.

Journalists should resist providing simply "theater criticism," i.e., applauding the effectiveness of campaign images rather than their relevance and accuracy. This is especially important in post-debate analysis. The press can perform a valuable service by illuminating what messages, ideas and themes have been represented (or misrepresented) and letting voters/viewers/readers determine for themselves who "won" the debate.

Address the serious proposals of candidates. Is the candidate truly trying to tackle a problem?

Instead of allowing critics instantly to savage the solution as impossible, news organizations could initiate a broader discussion -- soliciting a range of views about how the idea is defined, how it may work, how much it may cost, and so forth. News organizations can be much more creative about initiating such discussions by tapping a range of experts, hosting televised public forums and soliciting op-ed page analyses. This kind of debate traditionally has been sparked by policy proposals offered outside the accelerated campaign setting, such as Senator Daniel Moynihan's suggestion about means-testing Social Security benefits. Time and space should be taken even during the hottest contest to test and listen to new ideas.

Reduce the emphasis on trivial and irrelevant material and improve the impact of "issue" stories.

A candidate will have a greater incentive to be accessible and candid if news organizations curb their current practice of jumping on the candidate for gaffes that don't signify anything more serious than campaign exhaustion (George Bush's misstatement about the date of Pearl Harbor, for example). Gaffes can provide a measure of relief from the tedium of the campaign trail, and humor is an essential part of politics. But the tendency to treat them as a serious measure of the candidate's strength or weakness is unfair and elevates the trivial over the substantive.

News organizations can put less important stories -- gaffes, miscellaneous polls, staff changes and other insider news into a political "stats box" or other sidebar feature. This can be a humorous feature on television or simply a boxed-off newspaper column using agate type to keep the insider political record going without swamping the rest of the coverage.

In order to strengthen the impact of important enterprise stories, news organizations should update and repeat them during the campaign. One problem with biographies, issue stories and other enterprise pieces is that they run only once and therefore are missed by many voters/readers/viewers. While it is anathema to news organizations under most circumstances to run a story that has been disseminated previously, many journalists who participated in this project suggested that this taboo might be suspended during an election campaign. Biographies and baseline agenda stories should be updated as needed and run periodically through the campaign season. Candidates make their mark with repeated ads; news organizations, particularly in television, might wish to repeat important enterprise pieces and ad watch features several times.

Give campaign ads special coverage, but avoid simply legitimizing and amplifying the ads' propaganda messages.

The best ad watch coverage in 1990 tracked the facts in the ads and labeled distortions as such. Yet

increasingly, the distortions aren't factual, they're inferential. Voices are slowed down; eerie music is played; numbers are flashed on the screen to imply they have some relationship to pictures being shown when they may not truthfully justify the implied connection. Michael Lipsky of the Ford Foundation suggests that one way to get at this kind of submerged and distorted message is to invite communications and advertising experts who aren't involved in the election to provide regular analysis of the ads. Turning to these neutral experts to decode the ads is a useful way to avoid stepping over the line from objective to overly subjective journalism.

In establishing their priorities for coverage, news organizations will have to be selective about which ads they have the time to study and analyze. Increasingly, campaigns will produce an ad simply to get news coverage. They may run the ad on the air very little or not at all. It is important, therefore, in analyzing the ads, to check the actual ad "buys" on the television stations. Radio should be included if possible in ad watch coverage, since new ad themes often are tested in radio spots.

Ideally, the ads should be handled as an integral part of the overall campaign, rather than as the sole focus of the fact-checkers. The ad themes should be treated in the context of the candidate's speeches, direct mail and other output, with which they almost certainly are being

coordinated. Positive ads can be as important -- and as distorted -- as negative ones, so they should not be overlooked in ad watch coverage.

Studies of the 1990 ad watches found that they were most effective in newspapers if they showed some pictures from the television ads, tried to measure truth and relevance, and were presented as special analysis pieces with reporters' bylines. Television ad watch coverage often simply transmitted the same propaganda, as pictures dominated the commentary. It was more effective when the pictures were frozen, shrunk or otherwise altered as the commentary progressed. The ad watch commentaries went over well as an editorial feature just before or after the newscast or as an analysis piece within the news. At least one television station said it repeated each ad watch feature twice, which isn't a bad idea since the ads generally are repeated many times.

Perhaps the worst journalistic practice involving ads was the "wallpapering" of television news spots with ad footage as illustrative pictures. This is propaganda, not journalism, and news policy-makers such as William Wheatley of NBC are right to propose banning the practice in 1992.

Give rumors more cautious treatment than they got in 1988 and 1990, and consider some countermeasures.

Journalists have become the pawns of political operatives, looking for ways to push rumors regardless of

their validity. Some news organizations will bite at almost anything, but others will maintain greater credibility by refusing to take the bait. The standard should be, as it once was, that unverified rumors don't get published or broadcast. Journalists can turn the tables on the rumor-mongers by identifying them whenever possible and consulting with each other, as Hal Bruno of ABC recounted in this report, when a concerted rumor-spreading effort is underway. When character issues take over the press pack, the best news organizations will maintain their standing by reporting factually and fairly, with as complete a context as possible. Serious "impact" and family news organizations have more to lose than to gain by getting down in the trenches with the tabloids. News organizations should be more critical of one another when they fail to meet fairness and accuracy standards.

These suggestions, particularly if they are taken together as a whole new approach to political coverage, can improve the quality of the political discourse during future electoral campaigns. The challenge may seem to some to be insurmountable, particularly since these changes rely on self-correction rather than regulatory action. Yet Sissela Bok observes that even changes at the margins, on one part of the equation, can make a difference: "The way to begin to break out of such vicious circles is to bring about forceful change at as many points as possible of their downward

spiraling. As social theorists have argued, vicious circles are dynamic systems, not static ones; by changing the direction and momentum of any one factor, all others will be affected. That is how one can help to turn a vicious circle into what they call a 'virtuous circle.'"

It is the project's hope that the suggestions summarized here will help the press change its own role in the 'vicious circle' of American electoral politics and, in so doing, will benefit all parts of the equation, from the press to the politicians and most important, to the American public.

Notes

1. Hess's remarks were delivered at Harvard's Joan Shorenstein Barone Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy (henceforth JSB Center) workshop on Television and the 1988 Campaign (henceforth "TV conference") in New York City on April 8, 1989.

2. Paul F. Boller, Presidential Campaigns (New York: Oxford University Press, 1984), 8.

3. Gary R. Orren and William G. Mayer, "The Press, Political Parties and the Public-Private Balance in Elections," in The Parties Respond: Changes in the American Party System, ed. L. Sandy Maisel (Boulder, Colorado: Westview Press, 1990).

4. See, for example: The history of the Los Angeles Times's Kyle Palmer, in David Halberstam, The Powers That Be (New York: Knopf, 1979), 113-119.

5. TV Conference transcript, 28.

6. JSB Center conference called "School for Scandal" (henceforth "Scandal conference"). Conference transcript, 37.

7. Curtis Gans, "Remobilizing the American Electorate," Policy Studies Review, Spring 1990, Vol. 9, No. 3, 527-538.

8. Ruy Teixeira, "Election '88: Registration and Turnout," Public Opinion, January/February 1989, 12.

9. Bruce Buchanan, Electing a President: The Markle Commission Research on Campaign 88 (Austin: University of Texas Press, 1991), 55.

10. Michael McGerr, The Decline of Popular Politics (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 123-126. See also: Thomas C. Leonard, The Power of the Press: The Birth of American Political Reporting (New York: Oxford University Press, 1986), 27-31, 89, 174-176, 196-199.

11. Joan Didion, "Insider Baseball," New York Review of Books, Oct. 27, 1988

12. Buchanan, 155.

13. Daniel Hallin, "Sound Bite News," in Blurring the Lines: Media and Elections in America, ed. Gary R. Orren (New York: The Free Press, in press).

14. Paul Taylor, See How They Run: Electing the President in an Age of Mediaocracy. (New York: Random House, 1990), 250.

15. Sissela Bok, JSB Center Research Paper D-4, April, 1990, 1.

16. David R. Runkel, ed., Campaign for President: The Managers Look at '88 (Dover, Mass.: Auburn House Publishing Company, 1989), 265.

17. Hunt's remarks were given at a JSB Center conference called "Campaign Lessons for '92." (henceforth "Lessons") on May 14, 1991. Conference transcript, 35.

18. Cronkite's remarks were given as part of the JSB Center's first annual Theodore H. White Lecture (henceforth T.H. White Lecture) at Harvard University in 1990. Lecture transcript, 24.

19. E.J. Dionne, Jr. "Consultants' Debate: Images v. News," Washington Post, April 4, 1991.

20. Austin Ranney, Channels of Power: The Impact of Television on American Politics. (New York: Basic Books, 1983).

21. Lessons conference transcript, 30-31.

22. Lawrence K. Grossman, "Reflections on Television's Role in American Presidential Elections," JSB Center Discussion Paper D-3, January, 1990, 3.

23. Halberstam, 593.

24. Jeffrey B. Abramson, Christopher Arterton and Gary R. Orren, The Electronic Commonwealth: The Impact of New Media Technologies on Democratic Politics. (New York: Basic Books, 1988), 78-81.

25. Scandal conference transcript, 94-95.

26. Hallin, "Sound Bite News." His study was based on a sample of 20 evening news broadcasts from September and October of each presidential election year from 1972 through 1984, and 25 broadcasts from the two end points of the study, 1968 and 1988. Hallin found 95% of the voters quoted were white and two-thirds were male.

27. "Key Findings," Markle Commission on the Media and the Electorate, May 6, 1990, 8.

28. Gans, 536.

29. Runkel, 52.

30. Grossman, 4.

31. T.H. White Lecture transcript, 44.

32. Gans, 536.

33. Michael Robinson and Margaret A. Sheehan, Over the Wire and On TV (Russell Sage Foundation, 1980), 222. See also: Taylor, Chapter 10, "Reporters in the Age of Television."

34. Bill Moyers, executive ed., "Illusions of News: The Public Mind." Public Broadcasting Service. November 22, 1989.

35. Lessons conference transcript, 30-31.

36. Ron Rosenbaum, "The Man Who Married Dan Rather," Esquire, November, 1982.

37. Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Eloquence in an Electronic Age: The Transformation of Political Speechmaking. (New York: Oxford University Press, 1988), 240.

38. T.H. White Lecture transcript, 11.

39. TV conference transcript, 68.

40. Moyers, "Illusions of News." For a full description of CBS correspondent Lesley Stahl's celebrated discovery that the Reagan images were overpowering her critical commentary, see Schram, Martin, The Great American Video Game: Presidential Politics in the Television Age. (New York: Morrow, 1987).

41. Randall Rothenberg, "Newspapers Watch What People Watch in the TV Campaign," The New York Times, Nov. 4, 1990.

42. Moyers, "Illusions of News."

43. Schram, 55.

44. Lessons conference transcript, 44-45.

45. Eleanor Randolph, "Extra! Extra! Who Cares?" The Washington Post, April 1, 1990, C1,4.

46. Evans Witt, "Here, There and Everywhere: Here Americans Get Their News," Public Opinion (August/Sept. 1983), 45-48; June O. Yum and Kathleen E. Kendall, "Sources of Political Information in a Presidential Primary Campaign," Journalism Quarterly (Spring 1988), 148-51, 177.

47. Both made their remarks at the JSB Center conference called "Public Figures and Private Lives" (henceforth "Public/Private" conference) on June 10, 1988.

48. Buchanan, 58.

49. The Center for Media and Public Affairs, "Quayle Hunt: TV News Coverage of the Quayle Nomination," Media Monitor 2 (September 1988), 1-4.

50. The survey was taken from Sept. 6-19, 1988. Buchanan, 76-77.

51. See E.J. Dionne, Jr. Why Americans Hate Politics (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1991).

52. Public/Private conference transcript, 141.

53. Runkel, 135-136.

54. Scandal conference transcript, 77.

55. Buchanan, 7.

56. Thomas Patterson, The Mass Media Election (New York: Praeger, 1980), 24,28.

57. Robert Kaiser, "The First Insider: How Teddy White Revolutionized Political Reporting in America," Washington Post Magazine, July 17, 1988.

58. Theodore White's obituary, Chicago Tribune, May 17, 1986, 10.

59. Taylor's remarks were given at the JSB Center's Polling conference (henceforth "Polling" conference) on February 8, 1989. Conference transcript, 91.

60. Daniel C. Hallin, "The Candidate and the Reporter, Whose Campaign Is It, Anyway?" Columbia Journalism Review, (January/February 1991), 46.

61. John Herbers, "Forcing the Issues," Nieman Reports, Spring 1991, 23-24.

62. Buchanan, 17.
63. Ibid, 58.
64. Lessons conference transcript, 25.
65. Polling conference transcript, 28.
66. Paul J. Lavrakas, Jack R. Holley and Peter V. Miller, "Public Reactions to Polling News During the 1988 Presidential Election Campaign," in Polls and Presidential Election Campaign Coverage: 1988, ed. Lavrakas and Holley, in press.
67. Polling conference transcript, 121.
68. Martin F. Nolan, "Swearing Off Polls--They Lead Press and Public Astray," Nieman Reports, Spring 1991, 37.
69. Polling conference transcript, 128.
70. Polling conference transcript, 156.
71. Runkel, 165.
72. Polling conference transcript, 24.
73. Polling conference transcript.
74. Lessons conference transcript, 256.
75. Lessons conference transcript, 227.
76. Polling conference transcript.
77. Adatto, 4-6; Hallin, "Sound Bite News."
78. T.H. White Lecture transcript, 11.
79. The figures were compiled by John Ellis and Roan Conrad of the NBC News Election Unit. During that month the NBC Nightly News was shortened for two weeks by the network's coverage of the 1988 Summer Olympics in Seoul, Korea; nevertheless, the figures are generally representative of the candidates' share of the news. "For the television journalist of the 1980s...the words of candidates and other newsmakers, rather than simply being reproduced and transmitted to the audience, are treated as raw material to be taken apart, combined with other sounds and images, and reintegrated into a new narrative," Hallin notes (op cit).

80. Lessons conference transcript, 104.
81. Ibid., 64.
82. Ibid., 80.
83. Adatto, 5.
84. Ibid., 8.
85. Ibid., 8.
86. Buchanan, 10.
87. Edward Fouhy, "TV--It's Time to Break the Rules," Nieman Reports, Spring, 1991, 35.
88. Runkel, 136.
89. Adatto, 12.
90. Ibid., 13.
91. Ibid., 13.
92. Buchanan, 44.
93. Lessons conference transcript, 63.
94. Scandal conference transcript, 47.
95. Ibid., 67.
96. Timothy Crouse, The Boys on the Bus (New York: Ballantine Books, 1972), 305.
97. Adatto, 12-14; Yet Wooten also did some of the best fact-correction work on television during the 1988 election. On Sept. 26, for example, in assessing the validity of each candidate's claims in the first 1988 presidential debate, Wooten followed a more pro-active standard, contrasting clips of the candidates' debate statements with factual corrections.
98. Buchanan, 13.
99. David Broder, "Ads that turn off voters," The Boston Globe, Sept. 5, 1990.
100. The Television Bureau of Advertising lists that political candidates nationwide spent \$24,580,100 on television in 1972, and \$227,900,200 in 1988.

101. Scandal conference transcript.

102. Runkel, 162.

103. Sixteen focus groups were conducted in four waves of four groups each, every two weeks between Labor Day and election day, in Elmsford, N.Y., Chicago, Ill., Houston, Tex. and Sacramento, Calif.

104. However, the news coverage may be distorting how negative the ads actually are, according to a study by Kathleen Hall Jamieson. "A negative ad is 12 times more likely to appear on television in some form than is any positive ads...What that means is that we are creating a sense in the electorate through reporting that campaigns are more negative than they are," she said. Lessons conference transcript, 173.

105. Scandal conference transcript, 39. Admaker Bob Squier suggests that many negative ads would disappear if America followed the example of Venezuela, barring candidates from referring to their opponents by name or by picture in their ads.

106. Cable is becoming a more significant factor in campaign advertising, particularly in primaries where the ads are targeted to specific geographic areas, as James Hoefler points out in "Advertising on Cable Television in the Presidential Primaries: Something to Look for in '92", PS: Political Science and Politics, March 1991, 45.

107. Kathleen Hall Jamieson, "Ads/News/Debates and the Emergence of the News-Ad," in Blurring the Lines: Media and Elections in America, ed. Gary R. Orren (New York: The Free Press, in press).

108. Runkel, 162.

109. Ibid., 142.

110. Adatto, 8.

111. Jamieson, "Ads/News/Debates and the Emergence of the News-Ad."

112. Scandal conference transcript, 74.

113. Ibid., 103.

114. Taylor, 214.

115. Lessons conference transcript, 180-183.

116. Squier's company, Squier, Eskew, Knapp Communications Co., was also responsible for the ad for gubernatorial candidate John Silber in Massachusetts which distorted the Boston Globe headline about opponent Frank Bellotti's "corruption record."

117. Lessons conference transcript, 164.

118. Ibid., 170.

119. Ibid., 173-175.

120. Ibid., 189.

121. A different study, examining the content of major newspaper ad watches in 1990, reached these conclusions: "Stronger ad watches were found in the Washington Post and the Miami Herald, which both did a good job of fact-checking and setting the ad into the broader political context. Both as well used hard-hitting and straightforward language in their assessments. The Washington Post did a better job of addressing the visual/visceral elements, which the Miami Herald neglected, but even the Post could have done more to deconstruct the images that so influence voters. The Los Angeles Times provided the most thorough fact-checking and context for the ads, but neglected to address the visual (other than to explain in words the action on the screen). Further, the Los Angeles Times relied on a style devoid of implications or judgement -- leaving the reader in doubt perhaps in cases where the deception was subtle. Finally, the styles of the New York Times and the Boston Globe proved the most difficult to evaluate. Both were less consistent and less definitive than the other styles compared, and both relied on accompanying articles to fully examine the issues involved in the ad review. The fact-checking in the New York Times was selective, and negligible in the Globe. Visuals were never addressed in the New York Times, and addressed in the Globe with varying success." Unpublished study by Bethany Rogers, Kennedy School of Government, April 22, 1991, 39.

122. Randall Rothenberg, "The Journalist as Maytag Repairman," Gannett Center Journal, Spring 1990, 101.

123. Rogers, 25.

124. This section of the report draws extensively on a paper presented by Marvin Kalb at the JSB Center conference, "Public Figures and Private Lives: What Lines Should be Drawn?"

125. Leonard, 70.
126. Boller, 148-149.
127. Betty Winfield, FDR and the News Media (Chicago: University of Illinois Press, 1990), 16.
128. Ibid., 61.
129. TV conference transcript, 53.
130. Scandal conference transcript, 101.
131. T.H. White Lecture transcript, 23.
132. Public/Private conference transcript, 110.
133. Taylor, 25.
134. Klaidman, "Changing News Standards: Media as Character Cops," an unpublished paper for the "Campaign Lessons for '92" project, February 1990.
135. Scandal conference transcript, 167-68.
136. Public/Private conference transcript, 67.
137. Sabato, 220.
138. Ibid., 16-17.
139. Ibid., 13.
140. The words are Paul Taylor's, describing MacDougall's analysis in See How They Run, 212.
141. T.H. White Lecture transcript, 24.
142. TV conference transcript, 121-122.
143. Ibid., 229.
144. Public/Private conference transcript, 81.
145. For a discussion of how reporters, particularly print reporters, get into trouble by looking aggressive on television when questioning officials, see Broder, Behind the Front Page, (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1987), 145.
146. Sabato, 222.

147. Public/Private conference transcript.

148. Runkel, 60.

149. The rumor apparently was circulated at the Democratic convention by followers of the right-wing cult leader Lyndon LaRouche, and then made its way into the Boston press because of Dukakis's seemingly equivocal response to a reporter's question about it, and then was picked up by two avowedly conservative (anti-Dukakis) voices, the Washington Times newspaper and the Wall Street Journal's editorial page. The rumor became mainstream political news when President Reagan, responding to a question by a LaRouche follower at the White House news briefing, joked that he didn't want to pick on "an invalid" by criticizing Dukakis. For a full discussion of this series of events, see Larry J. Sabato, Feeding Frenzy: How Attack Journalism Has Transformed American Politics (New York: The Free Press, 1991), 152-156.

150. Public/Private conference transcript, 14.

151. Ibid., 61-62.

152. Ibid., 63.

153. Ibid., 66; Print and television reporters at the conference also confessed that they had called each other informally to see if anyone was publishing rumors about House Speaker Tom Foley's private life. Everyone held off until a Republican party operative went too far, referred obliquely to the rumor in a press release. The rumor backfired because Foley's colleagues and the press turned the spotlight on the rumor-monger, who had to resign in the ensuing flap.

154. Bok, 1.

