



Newsday / Bernie Cootner

Voters Don't Fall For TV's Images

THE power of the mass media over American political life has been vastly overrated. As this argument is being made not long after a memorable TV confrontation between George Bush and Dan Rather, it may sound like an attempt to praise the safety of trans-oceanic navigation the morning after the Titanic ran into the iceberg.

Nonetheless, after a decade spent in political life as a speech writer and as one of those dreaded political media consultants, and after another decade spent in writing about politics, I

And candidates were packaged long before the tube came along.

By Jeff Greenfield

hold firmly to two premises:

- The mass media, TV in particular, have changed politics less than most smart people think.
- The media, TV in particular, have

far less to do with the outcome of an election than most smart people think.

I think it is important to put this argument out because we are already in a campaign in which the assumption of massive media power has become part and parcel of campaign coverage — and indeed, of campaign strategy — itself. Now I am not so

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dense as to argue that television has made no change in political life.

Of course our politicians look different. Of course it has enabled a direct pseudo-intimacy to have sprung up between politician and voter. Of course television has become the stage on which our political life is played out.

But, in many if not in most cases, what happens on TV is quite consistent with the broad pattern of our political life stretching back more than a century and a half. Television has absorbed, rather than changed, these patterns.

Consider some of the more common assertions about TV's impact on politics:

"It has created a politics of symbolism." The candidate with his jacket off. Jimmy Carter with his garment bag. Ronald Reagan on a horse. All are said to be devices of the mass media age.

Yet we have had a symbolic politics literally since the days of the first "real" campaigns when Andrew Jackson went into battle in 1824 and 1828. He was known as "Old Hickory" and during rallies for him, his followers erected hickory poles . . . so many of them that for years after his time as president, travelers from Europe going down country roads would wonder at the endless array of hickory poles.

And when the followers of an upper-class politician named William Henry Harrison wanted to establish his link to the populace in 1840, they dubbed him the candidate of "the log cabin and hard cider" and put replicas of those symbols on display across the country.

Now I hate to do this to the sainted memory of Abraham Lincoln, but even this figure of probity was not beyond some pre-TV symbolism. His "rail-splitter" image was followed by years of well-paid work as a lawyer for railroads. But Americans don't like railroad lawyers — they like rail-splitters.

And so obvious was Lincoln's image-making that a humorist, Artemus Ward, wrote this after Lincoln was nominated, and an official committee went to notify him: "Honest Old Abe was not in. Mrs. Honest Old Abe said Honest Old Abe was out in the woods, splitting rails . . . it was a grand, a magnificent spectacle. There stood HOA in his shirt-sleeves . . . leather home-made suspenders holding up a pair of home-made pantaloons . . .

"Mr. Lincoln, sir, you've been nominated, sir, for the highest office, sir —"

TV's Mythical Power May Harm Us Yet



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minds of his conservative opponents by counter-punching Rather with striking effect.

Indeed, we take our clue about a politician's character from such moments as these — often, it is said, to misleading effect. Jimmy Carter's reliance on his daughter as a nuclear weapons expert, Gerald Ford's premature liberation of Poland and his alleged clumsiness are all supposedly based on these refractions, these splintered images.

Well, I am not at all sure that what we see is always that fragmented. For example, Carter's invocation of his daughter was, in my view, an accu-

non-theological sense Peter Jennings is everywhere, if you slander one group, every group including your target will see it.

The more basic point, however, is how consistent these patterns are: TV changed the form, but not the patterns.

The more substantial question is whether this clearly significant medium has really become a key determinant of who wins and why?

Here I want to offer some examples from recent history.

For six years we had Ronald Reagan, an actor known, owing to his prowess on television, as the "Great Communicator." Except that in 1982, at the depth of the recession, the Great Communicator was at the lowest popularity point of any postwar president.

Could it be that something else was at stake here? Something we might call reality? That economic hardship renders presidents unpopular, while recovery makes them admired? That people have a sense of how their lives are going, independent of what TV tells them?

Or take Ted Kennedy and the fateful interview with Roger Mudd in the 1979-80 campaign. Mudd raised two key questions: Chappaquiddick, which comes down to a basic moral issue — either you think Kennedy explained it, or overcame it with his work in the Senate, or you don't. The smartest media type in the world can't change that. And Mudd asked, "Why do you want to be president?" That's only a tough question if, as with Kennedy in the fall of 1979, you haven't figured out the underlying rationale for running. That's not media failure, but a political failure.

Reagan, in the fall of 1979, goes on TV shows to announce his presidential candidacy. He is asked about age, and to all questioners he says, "If elected, I'd be younger than any head of government

except Margaret Thatcher." Tom Brokaw asks, "What about Giscard d'Estaing?" And Reagan says of the French president, "Who?"

All through the spring of 1980, on all the networks, over and over questions are raised about Reagan's factual flubs, his misstatements. Why no impact? Because, after 16 years as the conservative avatar, Reagan had built a "constituency," relatively indifferent to these media events.

Finally, consider the most recent events involving the media's power to raise the character issue. Gary Hart? He was hurt because, in my view, the

“Mr. Lincoln, sir, you’ve been nominated, sir, for the highest office, sir —”

“Oh, don’t bother me,” said HOA. “I took this job this morning to split three million rails afore night, and I don’t want to be bothered til I git it done.”

“And the great man went right on splitting rails, paying no attention to the committeee what ever.”

Pretty cynical stuff for 1860, but it makes the point. We’ve had candidates stressing ties to the land since we’ve had politics, because that runs deeply into our Jeffersonian tradition, not because of TV.

Another assertion about TV: “Politics has created a demand for handsome, good-looking candidates.” First, life being unfair, good-looking people have always had an advantage in politics, from George Washington (the tallest man in public life) to Teddy Roosevelt and his vigorous image. Second, the notion that movie-star good looks is key misses the point entirely. Look at Ed Koch, who ran successfully for mayor on the slogan, “after eight years of charisma and four years of the clubhouse, why not try competence?” Subtext: I have to be qualified, because I’m sure not running on looks.

Another assertion: “TV has created a politics where the image of the moment can be decisive.”

We all know of such examples: John Kennedy in 1960 appearing cool and calm in that first debate while Richard Nixon looked as if he were waiting for root canal work. Ronald Reagan in 1980 telling George Bush, “I paid for this microphone.” Walter Mondale asking Gary Hart in 1984, “Where’s the beef?” or the exchange with Dan Rather in which George Bush won at least some of the hearts and

Jeff Greenfield is a political and media analyst for ABC News and a syndicated columnist. This is adapted from a speech given at the Gannett Center for Media Study at Columbia University.

always fragmented. For example, Carter’s invocation of his daughter was, in my view, an accurate reflection of the relentless personalization that marked his essential approach to public policy; Nixon’s demeanor on TV in 1960 provided a telling clue to his public character. And after the Bush-Rather furor dies down, the question — what did Bush know about arms sales to Iran — will remain.

Yet another assertion: “TV has created a negative politics, which demeans the process.”

Every columnist who is late on a deadline writes this stuff sooner or later. And yet, no one who knows American political history can seriously hold this view. This is the Marquess of Queensberry age compared with the dear, dead days pre-TV.

Was it TV in 1804 that had the president of Yale University declare of Thomas Jefferson that his reelection would mean that “our wives and daughters would become the victims of legalized prostitution”? Or that had John Quincy Adams’ supporters in 1824 accuse Andrew Jackson of murder and bigamy while Jackson’s supporters accused Adams of pimping for the czar of Russia during his tenure as envoy?

Or that in 1928 had Al Smith’s opponents use a picture of him in front of the Holland Tunnel and declare in a pamphlet that this was the underground tunnel to the Vatican?

Or that in 1950 had Sen. Joe McCarthy’s friends take a picture of Sen. Millard Tydings, a picture of a Communist Party chief, and airbrush out the border to make it appear as if they were in friendly conversation?

Indeed, one thing TV has done, in my view, is to make real mudslinging unworkable — because in a

ing the media’s power to raise the character issue. Gary Hart? He was hurt because, in my view, the story revealed a sense that this guy was simply too dumb, too reckless to be president. And even here, Hart’s re-entry didn’t fully begin to collapse until at a debate he showed he had no basis on which to run.

Look at what happened to Albert Gore and Bruce Babbitt on marijuana use. Nothing. Who decided that? Citizens.

What happened to Pat Robertson and Jesse Jackson after the stories of children conceived out of wedlock? Nothing.

In other words, even when the media flog an issue to death, the judgment of how that character issue plays cannot

be gauged by that fact alone. There has to be a responsive chord with the citizenry or the issue will not cut.

One last point, if I am right that the power of TV is substantially mythical, is it a harmful myth? Some myths, like the Easter Bunny, are harmless enough, although past the age of 18 or so they would raise credibility problems.

But this myth, I think, is dangerous, because it misreads the power of the people to govern themselves. In our time, every major movement — from civil rights to the women’s movement to the environmental movement to the antitax and traditional values movements — has taken place, was born and grew, beneath the radar screen of the mass media. Only when these movements reached critical mass did the media effects begin.

But if our citizens believe that the myth is true, then it will become true by default. And that will be a tragedy for the mass media, for the citizenry and for the country.

‘Good-looking people have always had an advantage in politics.’
