

Example Outline

Media Coverage of the 1992 Presidential Campaign

I. Introduction

A. The national news media, particularly television, has become the main source of political campaign information for voters trying to reach a decision on candidates, usurping the control over information once held by the political parties.

B. The criticism of the 1988 presidential campaign coverage by the media led to an effort in the 1992 campaign to attempt reforms, with varying degrees of success.

II. Body

A. Neither journalists nor politicians were satisfied with the process of the 1988 coverage.

1. Journalists disliked the news managing techniques employed by the politicians.
 - a. They felt manipulated by the staged visual events
 - b. TV news coverage of misleading advertising only served to give more free air time to the negative ads as well as amplify them.
 - c. Commentary on negative ads also included political analysis of their effectiveness, which also gave broader exposure to the negative messages.
2. Politicians claimed their behavior was framed by the journalists' preference for brief, "attention grabbing" stories, forcing the candidates to stage events and soundbites.
 - a. Politicians disliked the journalists' emphasis on a "horse race" among the candidates rather than the issues.
 1. This forced the politicians to rely on ads to present the candidates policies and concerns.
3. The public and critics disliked the shrinking of political discussions to 30 second ads and 9 second news soundbites.

B. Two new formats for campaign coverage were developed in the 1999 presidential campaign to answer these complaints brought or. by the 1988 campaign.

1. Journalists developed a new approach to scrutinize the political ads for truthfulness called "Ad Watches."

- a. David Broder expressed the sentiment behind the idea, "We need to treat every ad as if it were a speech, and not be squeamish about saying in plain language when a candidate is lying."
 - b. This "policing" of ads changed the relationship between candidates and reporters; the press was not simply reporting the political events, but shaping them.
 - c. Reformers understood the actual issue wasn't the deliberate use of false facts or inferential inaccuracies, but the fear the reporters had that technically true information would be misinterpreted by the public.
 - 1. The danger of this campaign journalism was that reformers saw no need to stop journalists from making judgemental commentary about the candidates.
 - d. There were two styles of ad watches: the "watchdog" and the "campaign process."
 - 1. Watchdog ad watches focused on the factual claims of the ads.
 - 2. Campaign process watches commented on the effectiveness of the ads.
2. The ad watches were seen to have varying degrees of success.
- a. Simply by describing and analyzing the ads, the message was amplified.
 - b. Ad watches weren't systematic, but depended on time allowed by the reporting of the daily news.
 - c. Ad watches seemed to hurt the Bush campaign the most, due to the public's prior knowledge of his "broken promises" and reputation for negative campaigning.
 - d. The effect of ad watches on Clinton seemed to be lessened, as shown by a focus group, as the participants tended to ignore criticisms of Clinton's ads by arguing that "both sides do it"- an underlying assumption of the ad watches.
 - e. On the whole, the ads were relatively acceptable, so reporters tended to fall back to analyzing the ads for strategic value.
 - f. Ad watches did have some success in exposing and preventing false information.
3. The candidates made efforts to get their messages across to the public by interview appearances .
- a. Media professionals and audiences asked candidates questions which they could answer directly.
 - b. Although interviews had been used in previous campaigns, the new approach in 1992 increased the frequency of exposure on "hard and soft" TV news programs.
 - c. Candidates used the new format with differing strategies.

- d. The interview format addressed the problems of the free media which usually focused on the "horse race" rather than issues the candidates thought important.
 - e. The soundbite problem was solved by the extended time allowed with the interviews.
4. The interviews were regarded, for the most part, as a success for the public and politicians.
- a. The public was enthusiastic about the interviews as a way to hear the candidates at length
 - b. People, as well as politicians, liked the "unfiltered" qualities of the information.
 - c. Through the programs, more diverse audiences were targeted, giving access to people who might not ordinarily watch a news program.
 - d. The public enjoyed the chance to directly interact in the interviews.
 - e. Some journalists thought the talk shows had a positive effect on the campaign.
 - f. However, other journalists felt that the non-news format gave the candidates access to large TV audiences without the "filter" of news experts
 - g. Some interview questions were criticized as being too soft.
 - h. Talk shows, critics believed, were too infrequent to replace conventional coverage.
 - i. The conversations on talk shows were criticized for being too one-sided, unless both candidates appeared.

III. Summary

- A. Both the interview programs and ad watches gave the candidates and media journalists greater communication with the voters.
 - 1. Interviews created interest and information, and may have contributed to the increased interest in the election and voting.
 - 2. The ad watches were considered somewhat less successful.
 - a. While the watchdog efforts are necessary, the overuse of adversarial coverage desensitized the public and left them as annoyed with the media as the politicians.