



Sound Bite Democracy: Network Evening News Presidential Campaign Coverage, 1968 and 1988

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**SOUND BITE DEMOCRACY:
NETWORK EVENING NEWS
PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN
COVERAGE,
1968 AND 1988**

by

Kiku Adatto

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June 1990

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PREFACE

Kiku Adatto is a Harvard sociologist who has been a Fellow at the Joan Shorenstein Barone Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy for the past two years, researching a comparative study of weekday evening newscasts on the three major commercial networks from Labor Day to Election Day in 1968 and 1988. With a sense of dogged dedication, a trained eye for visual detail and a stopwatch in hand, Dr. Adatto studied 280 newscasts and concluded that there were dramatic changes in the way television covered presidential politics, affecting, as she put it, "the discourse of democracy."

"The average 'sound bite,' or bloc of uninterrupted speech, fell from 42.3 seconds for presidential candidates in 1968 to only 9.8 seconds in 1988," she writes in the accompanying study. "In 1968, almost half of all sound bites were 40 seconds or more, compared to less than one percent in 1988. In fact, it was not uncommon in 1968 for candidates to speak, uninterrupted, for over a minute on the evening news (21 percent of sound bites); in 1988, it never happened."

Dr. Adatto clearly did not intent to convey the impression that 1968 was the "golden age" of presidential TV coverage; nor, for that matter, that 1988 represented the "dark ages," though in retrospect many Americans were left wondering about the quality of presidential politics after observing the "Hortonized" TV ads and the banality of the televised debates. Her research in this study focused on two presidential elections—1968 and 1988—and not on the elections in between; so that if the difference between 42.3 seconds in 1968 and 9.8 seconds in 1988 was gradual, or suddenly down between 1968 and 1972, and then slowly leveling off with each successive election until 1988, as a different study by Daniel Hallin of the University of California at San Diego suggests, then that sort of gradation is not discussed here, because it is beyond the scope of this paper.

Similarly beyond its scope are the revolutionary changes in technology, which, in this 20-year period, allowed candidates to be up- and down-linked to anchors and special audiences around the country, and the much richer menu of network broadcast opportunities available to campaigning candidates. In 1968, for example, there was no Newshour on PBS, no Nightline on ABC and, most important, no CNN or other cable outlets. Therefore, though a candidate's uninterrupted air-time on the evening newscasts was decidedly down in

1988, it is possible that his or her air-time overall might actually have gone up if appearances on these new outlets had been taken into account. But such a study, to the best of my knowledge, has not yet been done.

The special significance of Dr. Adatto's study is that it focuses on the three major evening newscasts on ABC, CBS and NBC, those newscasts that, for better or worse, remain the prime targets of presidential campaigning. And while it is true that audiences for these broadcasts have been dropping in the past decade, it is also true that most Americans (depending on the time of the year, between 60 percent to 65 percent) still get their news from these broadcasts. Candidate handlers and managers still plot their campaigns with this simple statistic in mind. The mark of a good day on the campaign trail is measured by the time devoted to the candidate's activities that gets on the air. A sound bite added to the picture is an extra elixir. The tightest bonds develop in the course of a presidential campaign between the network field producer and the candidate's handlers, a relationship that is often carried over from the campaign into the White House. Susan Zirinsky, a senior CBS producer, acknowledges in the Adatto study: "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."

Dr. Adatto's research is important in explaining what has happened to television news coverage of presidential campaigns in the last 20 years. My own belief is that the politicians began to get super-sophisticated about manipulating television news during the 1968 campaign and they reached the highwater mark 20 years later. Maybe Dr. Adatto's research can help correct the imbalance between shadow and substance.

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TABLE OF CONTENTS

Introduction: Shrinking sound bites and the discourse of democracy	4
I. Political reporters as theater critics: Covering the construction of images for television	6
Media events: Constructing and deconstructing television images	6
Political ads as news: Free time for paid media	8
Media advisors as celebrities	11
“Failed images” as news: Gaffes and gutterballs	12
II. The loss of objectivity: When the facts do not speak for themselves	13
Balance versus objectivity: The problem of false symmetry	13
The blurring of commentary and political reporting	15
Words and images at war	16
III. The media goes modernist: The Warholization of the news	18
Tables	22
Notes	31
References	34

Introduction

SHRINKING SOUND BITES AND THE DISCOURSE OF DEMOCRACY

Standing before a campaign rally in Pennsylvania, the 1968 Democratic Vice Presidential candidate Edmund Muskie tried to speak, but a group of anti-war protesters drowned him out. Muskie offered the hecklers a deal. He would give the platform to one of their representatives if he could then speak without interruption.

Rick Brody, the students' choice, rose to the microphone where, cigarette in hand, he delivered an impassioned if disjointed case against the establishment. Those who saw the demonstrators as "commie, pinko, rads" were wrong. "We're here as Americans." To cheers from the crowd, he denounced the candidates the 1968 presidential campaign had to offer. "Wallace is no answer. Nixon's no answer and Humphrey's no answer. Sit out this election!"

When Brody finished, Muskie made his case for the Democratic ticket. That night, Muskie's confrontation with the demonstrators played prominently on the network news. NBC showed 57 seconds of Brody's speech, and over a minute of Muskie's.

Twenty years later, things had changed. Throughout the entire 1988 campaign, no network allowed either presidential candidate to speak uninterrupted on the evening news for as long as Rick Brody spoke in 1968.

By 1988, television's tolerance for the languid pace of political discourse, never great, had all but vanished. An analysis of all weekday evening newscasts by the three major networks from Labor Day to Election Day in 1968 and 1988 (more than 280 newscasts) reveals dramatic changes in the way television covers presidential politics.¹

The average "sound bite," or bloc of uninterrupted speech, fell from 42.3 seconds for presidential candidates in 1968 to only 9.8 seconds in 1988. In 1968, almost half of all sound bites were 40 seconds or more, compared to less than one percent in 1988. In fact, it was not uncommon in 1968 for candidates to speak, uninterrupted, for over a minute on the evening news (21 percent of sound bites); in 1988, it never happened.²

The 1968 style of coverage enabled not only the candidates but partisans and advocates from across the political spectrum to speak in their own voice, to develop an argument on the nightly news. Lou Smith, a black activist from Watts, spoke for almost two minutes without interruption on NBC (Chancellor, October 22).³ Another

network newscast aired over two uninterrupted minutes of Chicago Mayor Richard Daley's attack on media coverage of riots outside the Democratic convention.⁴ In 1988, George Bush and Michael Dukakis sometimes spoke less in an entire week of sound bites than Lou Smith or Mayor Daley or Rick Brody spoke on a single night in 1968.⁵

Troubling as it is, the case of the shrinking sound bite is but one part of a larger change in the way television covers presidential politics. This larger change is the tendency of television itself to become the subject matter of political reporting. As television news has grown impatient with political speech in recent years, it has become preoccupied with political image-making, with the efforts by campaigns to produce pictures that will play on the evening news.

While the time the networks devoted to the candidates' words sharply declined over the past twenty years, the time they devoted to visuals of the candidates unaccompanied by their words increased by over 300 percent.

In 1968, most of the time we saw the candidates on the evening news, we also heard them speaking. In 1988, the reverse was true; most of the time we saw the candidates, someone else, usually a reporter, was doing the talking. In a three-week period in the midst of the 1968 campaign, for example, the candidates spoke for 84 percent of the time their images were on the screen. In a comparable three-week period in 1988, the candidates spoke only 37 percent of the time their images appeared on the screen. The rest of the time, we saw their pictures—not only posing in media events, but delivering speeches—without hearing their words.

Television's growing impatience with political speech raises serious questions about the democratic prospect in a television age: What becomes of democracy when political discourse is reduced to sound bites, one-liners, and potent visuals? And to what extent is television responsible for this development?

Since the Kennedy-Nixon debates of 1960, television has played a pivotal role in presidential politics. The Nixon campaign of 1968 was the first to be managed and orchestrated to play on the evening news. With the decline of political parties and the direct appeal to voters in the primaries, presidential campaigns became more adept at conveying their messages through visual images,

not only in political commercials but also in elaborately staged media events. By the time of Ronald Reagan, the actor turned President, Michael Deaver had perfected the techniques of the video presidency.⁶

For television news, the mastery of television imagery by the politicians posed a temptation and a challenge. The temptation was to show the pictures. What network producer could resist the footage of Reagan at Normandy Beach, or of Bush in Boston Harbor?

The challenge was to keep reality in focus, to avoid being entangled in the artifice and imagery the campaigns dispensed. In 1988, the networks tried to have it both ways—to meet the challenge even as they succumbed to the temptation.

On the one hand, they showed the images the campaigns produced—not only their media events but even their commercials. Indeed the most striking images, such as Bush's "revolving door" furlough ad, appeared repeatedly in network newscasts throughout the campaign. At the same time, the networks sought to retain their objectivity by exposing the artifice of the images they showed, by calling constant attention to their self-conscious design.

The language of political reporting was filled with accounts of staging and backdrops, camera angles and scripts, sound bites and spin control, photo opportunities and media gurus. So attentive was television news to the way the campaigns constructed images for television that political reporters began to sound like theater critics, reporting more on the stagecraft than the substance of politics.

Theater criticism as a style of political reporting took four different forms in 1988: The first was the tendency to cover media events as contrivances designed for television; the second was to cover political commercials as news in their own right; a third was to cover media advisors as experts, even celebrities; a fourth was to dramatize trivial incidents—microphone failures or slips of the tongue—that assumed an importance only because they could be used by the press to spoil the images the politicians intended for the screen.

So familiar is this image-conscious style of coverage that it is difficult to recall the transformation it represents. The heightened attention to the construction of images for television, so prominent in 1988 coverage, was all but absent only twenty years ago. Only six percent of reports in 1968 were devoted to theater criticism compared to 52 percent in 1988.

Reporters in 1968 were well aware of the politicians' growing mastery of television. As Eric

Sevareid observed, "the important figure in the crowd is the television cameraman. He provides the significant audience." John Hart revealed the facets of image manipulation from timing rallies to play on the evening news to setting up photo opportunities. Ted Koppel exposed the contrivances of Nixon's citizen panel shows. Sevareid noted, "the fingerprints of Madison Avenue are all over this operation."⁸

Yet even as they reported the first presidential campaign "made for television," reporters continued to reflect the print journalist traditions from which they had descended. In the marriage of theater and politics, politics remained the focus of reporting. The media events of the day—mostly rallies and press conferences—were covered as political events, not as exercises in impression management. Reporters covered what the candidates said, not the image they sought to create for the evening news. And newscasts featured political commentary segments in which members of the press offered their analysis and opinions.

When political correspondents probed behind the scenes of the rallies and public statements, it was to report on political strategy, not to expose the apparatus of image-construction. Roger Ailes, who in 1988 was a celebrity in his own right, labored in obscurity as a Nixon media man. In 1968, his name was never mentioned on the evening news.

By 1988, television campaign coverage was transformed. Television displaced politics as the focus of coverage. Like a gestalt shift, the images that once formed the background to political events—the setting and the stagecraft—now occupied the foreground.

Time and again reporters called attention to the politicians' use of television imagery. And yet, for all their efforts, they did not escape their entanglement or recover their independent voice. Instead they became conduits for the very images they criticized. They showed the potent visuals even as they attempted to avoid the manipulation by "deconstructing" the imagery and revealing its artifice.

Beguiled by the pictures, they often forgot about the facts. Whether the pictures came from media events or political commercials, the networks covered them as news, often with little attempt to correct the distortions they contained. Alerting the viewer to the construction of television images proved no substitute for fact correction, no way back to objectivity.

A superficial "balance" replaced objectivity as the measure of fairness, a balance consisting of equal time for media events, equal time for com-

mercials. Rather than confront the image with the facts, or with the candidates' actual records on the issue at stake, the networks simply balanced perceptions, setting one contrived image alongside another. Bush posed with his policemen today, Dukakis with his. The candidates' actual records on crime did not necessarily figure in the story.

To be sure, image-conscious coverage was not the only kind of political reporting to appear on network newscasts in 1988. Some notable "fact correction" pieces, especially following the presidential debates, offered admirable exceptions. But the turn of television news to "theater criticism" set the tone of the 1988 coverage, and defined a new and complex relation between politics and the press.

This new relation, between image-conscious coverage and media-driven campaigns, raises with special urgency the deepest danger for politics in a television age. This is the danger of the loss of objectivity—not in the sense of bias, but in the literal sense of losing contact with the truth.⁹ It is the danger that the politicians and the press become caught up in a cycle that leaves the substance of politics behind, that takes appearance for reality, perception for fact, the artificial for the actual, the image for the event.

I. POLITICAL REPORTERS AS THEATER CRITICS: COVERING THE CONSTRUCTION OF IMAGES FOR TELEVISION

Media events: Constructing and deconstructing television images

One morning in September, 1968, Hubert Humphrey took a walk on the beach in Sea Grit, New Jersey. Shoes off, pants rolled up to avoid the surf, Humphrey paused to pluck a shell from the sand and toss it into the ocean.

This being a presidential campaign, Humphrey's stroll was no solitary idyll. Humphrey was soon surrounded by a swarm of reporters and camera crews, who invited him to hold forth on Nixon, the Supreme Court, crime, and education. The candidate was happy to oblige.

That night on the evening news, the story of Humphrey on the beach played in two different ways. Don Oliver of NBC (September 13) played it straight, as a news conference by the sea. The beach was in the background, but the story was the substance, what Humphrey said. Oliver showed

the crowd of reporters and cameras, but made no mention of television's presence.

For David Schoumacher of CBS (September 13), the story was less the substance than the setting. He covered Humphrey's appearance by the sea as an exercise in image-making, a way of posing for television. "It used to be kissing babies," Schoumacher began, "now candidates like to have their pictures taken walking alone on the beach. Apparently it is intended to show the subject at peace with himself and in tune with the tides."

In Schoumacher's report, Humphrey's statements scarcely mattered. The story was the media event itself. "Reporters struggled through the sand trying to keep up and hear over the sound of the surf. Hours later they were still comparing notes to figure out what the Vice President had said. Mostly they said his campaign was going well."

These two versions of Humphrey's walk on the beach hint at the transformation that network campaign coverage would undergo over the next two decades. Oliver's version, which focused on the candidate and what he said, was traditional political reporting that in 1968 was still the norm for television news. Schoumacher's version, which focused on the construction of images for television, was a novelty in 1968, but an intimation of things to come.

By 1988, presidential campaigns had become adept at crafting images for television, and the networks covered them with frequent reference to this fact. They often portrayed the candidates as rival image-makers, competing to control the picture of the campaign that would play on the evening news. The traditional focus on the candidates' statements and strategies gave way to a style of reporting that focused on the candidates' success or failure at constructing images for television.

When Bush kicked off his campaign with a Labor Day appearance at Disneyland, the networks covered the event as a performance for television. "In the war of the Labor Day visuals," Bob Schieffer reported (CBS, September 5), "George Bush pulled out the heavy artillery. A Disneyland backdrop and lots of pictures with the Disney Gang." Dukakis's appearance that day in a Philadelphia neighborhood did not play as well. His entry in the "war of the Labor Day visuals" was marred by a squealing microphone, an incident highlighted in the image-conscious coverage of all three networks. By contrast, in 1968, television showed the balloons dropping for Nixon and the

ticker tape showering Humphrey, with little mention of images contrived for television. Reporters focused instead on political issues and strategies.¹⁰

Time and again, reporters covering the 1988 campaign reminded viewers that the political events we were witnessing were contrived events designed to produce a certain image on television. This self-conscious coverage of media events, all but absent in 1968, set the tone in 1988. The networks faithfully covered the media events the campaigns staged, but then, as if to avoid being accomplices, tried to puncture the pictures by revealing their artifice.

When Bruce Morton (CBS, September 13) showed Dukakis riding in a tank, the story was the image. "In the trade of politics, it's called a visual," Morton observed. "The idea is pictures are symbols that tell the voter important things about the candidate. If your candidate is seen in the polls as weak on defense, put him in a tank." Even when Morton turned to the speech that followed the ride, it was with an eye to the television image the candidate sought to project. "Dukakis, against a backdrop of tanks and flags, used the word 'strong' eight times."

When Bush showed up at a military base to observe the destruction of a missile under an arms control treaty, Brit Hume (ABC, September 8) began his report by telling his viewers they were watching a media event. "Now here was a photo opportunity, the Vice President watching a Pershing missile burn off its fuel." He went on to describe how the event was staged for television, how the pictures were created. Standing in front of an open field, Hume reported, "The army had even gone so far as to bulldoze acres of trees to make sure the Vice President and the news media had a clear view."

In 1988, the networks covered even the Presidential debates as occasions for television image-making. Two days before the first debate, Peter Jennings (September 23) began ABC's coverage by noting, "Today, Bush and Dukakis have been preparing, read rehearsing." There followed a report by Brit Hume, describing a Bush meeting with Soviet Foreign Minister Eduard Shevardnadze as "unquestionably a campaign photo opportunity." Hume alerted his viewers to listen as the television microphones picked up the sound of Bush whispering to Shevardnadze, "Shall we turn around and get one of those pictures in?"

Jennings then announced that Dukakis too had found time for "a carefully staged photo opportunity." In the report that followed, Sam Donaldson

drove home the point again. Showing Dukakis playing catch with a Boston Red Sox outfielder, Donaldson described the event as "this morning's made-for-television, pre-debate photo opportunity."

The hyper-consciousness of television image-making by networks and campaigns alike, so pervasive in 1988, was scarcely present only twenty years ago. While Nixon and Humphrey both sought to use television to their advantage in 1968, Nixon with considerable sophistication, their media events consisted for the most part of traditional rallies, parades, and press conferences. And the networks, for their part, rarely drew attention to the image-making apparatus of "visuals" or "backdrops." Throughout the entire 1968 campaign, only once did a reporter use the term "photo opportunity."¹¹

In the last twenty years, the politicians, assisted by a growing legion of media advisors, have become more sophisticated at producing pictures that will play on television. The networks, meanwhile, have been unable to resist the temptation to show the pictures. Vivid visuals make good television, and besides, the networks might argue, if the candidate goes to Disneyland or rides in a tank, does not covering the campaign mean covering those events?

Even as they film the media events and show them on the evening news, however, television journalists acknowledge the danger of falling prey to manipulation, of becoming accessories to the candidates' stagecraft. One way of distancing themselves from the scenes they show is to turn to theater criticism, to comment on the scenes as a performance made for television, to lay bare the artifice behind the images.

The problem with theater criticism, or image-conscious coverage as a style of political reporting, is that it involves showing the potent visuals the campaigns contrive. Reporters become conduits for the very images they criticize. Lisa Myers's (NBC, September 19) report on Bush's use of television is a case in point.

"It is a campaign of carefully staged events and carefully crafted images," Myers began. A sequence of Bush images then appeared on the scene. "George Bush, friend of the working man" (Bush wearing a hard hat). "Bush the patriot" (Bush saying the Pledge of Allegiance). "Bush the peacemaker" (Bush watching the Pershing missile destruction).

Even as Myers describes the artifice of Bush's political theater, she provides additional airtime for some of his most flattering images. Further-

more, the political message the pictures are intended to convey is presented uncritically. Myers focuses on the effectiveness not the truthfulness of the images. The photo of Bush in a hardhat, for example, is simply presented as a testimonial to Bush's image-making skill. There is no mention of the fact that Bush's labor policies were unpopular with workers, or that he had been booed by workers at an earlier campaign stop, as all three networks reported at the time (September 6).

Myers concludes by observing that the Bush campaign, by limiting reporters' access and "carefully scripting each event," is skillfully "managing the news." But in giving Bush's "carefully crafted images" another television run, her own report falls prey to the manipulation she documents.

Even more critical versions of image-conscious coverage can fail to puncture the pictures they show. When Bush visited a flag factory in hopes of making patriotism a campaign issue, Brit Hume (ABC, September 20) reported with some cynicism that Bush was wrapping himself in the flag. "This campaign strives to match its pictures with its points. Today and for much of the past week, the pictures have been of George Bush with the American flag. If the point wasn't to make an issue of patriotism, then the question arises, what was it?"

Though he showed Bush's potent visuals, Hume reminded viewers that Bush's purpose was implicitly to question the patriotism of Dukakis, who had vetoed a law mandating the Pledge of Allegiance. But the very pictures that Hume tried to debunk would live to run again on the evening news, as file footage, or stock imagery illustrating Bush's campaign.

Only three days later, the staged image of Bush at the flag factory appeared without comment as background footage for a report by Jim Wooten (ABC, September 23) 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.

Political ads as news: Free time for paid media

In the final week of the 1968 campaign, the Nixon campaign aired a television commercial showing a smiling Hubert Humphrey superimposed on scenes of war and riots. The Democrats cried foul, and the Nixon campaign agreed to withdraw the ad. The next night on the evening

news, Walter Cronkite (CBS, October 29) and Chet Huntley (NBC) reported briefly on the withdrawal, though neither showed any of the ad itself.

It was one of the few times that a political ad received even passing mention on the network news that year. Political ads were not considered news in 1968. Although both Nixon and Humphrey spent heavily on television commercials, only two clips from paid political ads appeared on the evening news, both from a staged Nixon "panel show" in which the candidate answered questions from a studio audience.¹² Not once did the network newscasts run excerpts from the candidates' thirty- or sixty-second spots.

Twenty years later, television ads were a staple of television news campaign coverage. Network newscasts showed 125 excerpts of campaign commercials in 1988, and ran some so repeatedly that they became visual motifs, recurring video stand-ins for the candidates themselves (Tables 6-9).

The attention the networks gave to political ads in 1988 illustrates their growing preoccupation with imagery made for television. As with their coverage of media events, so with political ads, the danger is that reporters become unwitting conduits of the television images the campaigns dispense. No matter how critical the narrative, to show commercials on the news runs the risk of giving free time to paid media, of letting the visuals send the message they were designed to convey.¹³

And most of the time, the narrative was not critical. For all their use of commercial footage, the networks rarely corrected the distortions or misstatements the ads contained. Of the 125 excerpts shown on the evening news in 1988, the reporter addressed the veracity of the commercials' claims less than eight percent of the time.

The few cases where reporters corrected the facts illustrate how the networks might have covered political commercials but rarely did. When Richard Threlkeld (ABC, October 19) ran excerpts from a Bush ad attacking Dukakis's defense stand, he froze the frame at each mistaken or distorted claim.

Bush ad: "Michael Dukakis has opposed virtually every defense system we've developed."

Threlkeld: "In fact, he supports a range of new weapons systems, including the Trident Two missile."

Bush ad: "He opposed anti-satellite weapons."

Threlkeld: "In fact, Dukakis would ban those weapons only if the Soviets did the same. The same principle incorporated in the INF Treaty which George Bush supports."

Bush ad: He opposed four missile systems including the Pershing Two Missile deployment."

Threlkeld: "In fact Dukakis opposes not four missile systems but two as expensive and impractical and never opposed deploying Pershing Twos."

In another notable case of fact correction, Lesley Stahl (CBS, October 25) corrected a deceptive statistic in Bush's "revolving door" furlough ad. The ad showed criminals entering and leaving a prison through a revolving door as the narrator said, "[Dukakis's] revolving door prison policy gave weekend passes to first degree murderers not eligible for parole." The words "268 escaped" then appeared on the screen.

Stahl pointed out that "part of the ad is false. . . . 268 murderers did not escape. . . . [T]he truth is only four first degree murderers escaped while on parole." She concluded by observing, "Dukakis left the Bush attack ads unanswered for six weeks. Today campaign aides are engaged in a round of fingerpointing at who is to blame."

But the networks were also guilty of letting the Bush commercial run without challenge or correction. Only four days earlier, Stahl's CBS colleague Bruce Morton had shown the revolving door ad and the deceptive statistic without correction. Even after her report, CBS and ABC ran excerpts of the ad without correction, just days before the election. In all, network newscasts ran excerpts from the revolving door ad ten times throughout the campaign, only once correcting the deceptive statistic.¹⁴

It might be argued that it is up to the candidate to reply to his opponent's charges, not the press. But this argument is open to two objections. First, if the job of the press is to report the truth, then airing misleading commercials without challenge or correction does not amount to objective reporting. Second, the networks' frequent use of political ads on the evening news creates a strong disincentive for a candidate to challenge his opponent's ads. As Dukakis found to his misfortune, to attack a television ad as unfair or untrue is to invite the networks to run it again.

Two weeks before the election, the Dukakis campaign accused the Republicans of lying about his record on defense, and of using racist tactics in ads featuring Willie Horton, a black convict who raped and killed while on furlough from a Massachusetts prison. In reporting Dukakis's complaint, all three networks ran excerpts of the ads in question, including the highly charged pictures of Horton and the revolving door of convicts. Dukakis's response thus gave Bush's potent visu-

als another free run on the evening news.

As they appeared on the evening news, the Bush ads on crime enjoyed a heightened impact due to the networks' readiness to combine them with material from a Willie Horton ad produced by a group not formally tied to the Bush campaign (Table 11). This link was so seamless that many viewers thought the revolving door furlough featured Willie Horton, when in fact it never mentioned him.

Bruce Morton (CBS, October 21), for example, showed the pictures of the revolving door furlough ad while recalling the Horton story as a voice-over. "The Bush campaign has scored big on television ads on crime, especially on the Massachusetts furlough program under which Willie Horton on furlough committed rape and assault."

Even as he reported the Bush campaign's disavowal of the Horton ad, Brit Hume (ABC, October 25) highlighted the racial dimension of the Horton story as images from the revolving door ad filled the screen. "They also denied any racial intent in television spots about black murder convict, Willie Horton, who raped a Maryland woman and stabbed her husband, both white, while on prison furlough from Massachusetts."

The Republicans also succeeded in getting Willie Horton's picture on the news. Not only did four reports show the Horton ad, but other reports juxtaposed the pictures of Willie Horton shown in the ad with official Bush commercials on crime. A special report by Jackie Judd on crime (ABC, September 22) for example, opened with a photograph of Willie Horton filling the screen.¹⁵ Even though her report tried to provide some perspective on the furlough issue, her images reinforced the Willie Horton ad. Although Bush campaign ads never showed him, Willie Horton's picture appeared nine times on the evening news.

The Republicans not only choreographed their commercials, they choreographed their media events on crime to play with their commercials. Horton's victims, for example, were shown having a press conference by all three networks (October 7) in addition to their appearance in commercials broadcast on the evening news on other occasions.¹⁶ Bush stressed the theme of prison furloughs in media events, often flanked by police officers endorsing his stand.

The networks' coverage of campaign commercials reached its greatest intensity on October 25, when Dukakis attacked Bush's negative ads, and Bush replied. That night on the evening news, the networks not only reported the candidates' charges and counter-charges, but showed no fewer than

twenty excerpts of campaign commercials to dramatize the dispute. Although the story of the day concerned competing claims about the veracity of the ads, the networks focused on the effectiveness, not the truthfulness, of the ads they showed. Leslie Stahl was the only reporter who provided independent fact correction.

In defense of their ads, Bush campaign officials called a press conference that day to offer evidence and display charts "documenting" the facts in the Bush campaign commercials. All three networks covered the press conference, but none of the reporters substantially challenged the "facts" so dramatically displayed. Instead, they treated the press conference as one more media event, with sound bites from John Sununu ("The data speaks for itself") and Dan Quayle ("Every statement is accurate and can be documented"), and supporting charts as backdrops to yet another exercise in image-making.

Lisa Myers's report for NBC gestured toward fact correction by noting that the Bush defenders' argument on the stealth bomber was "a little shaky." But instead of substantiating her claim and clarifying the issue for her viewers, Myers's report cut to John Tower defending Bush. Myers also used the occasion to show two controversial Bush commercials (the tank ad attacking Dukakis's defense record and a new ad attacking Dukakis's pension fund policy) without offering any fact correction.

Similarly, the report by ABC's Brit Hume cut from the Bush camp's "fact charts" to Bush commercials; first the revolving door furlough ad, and then the new Bush commercial attacking Dukakis's management of his state's pension fund. Far from clarifying old charges, Hume and Myers were conduits for new charges. The Bush pension fund ad they showed ended with the sweeping claim, "Michael Dukakis says George Bush is running a campaign of lies. Michael Dukakis is unbelievable."

The networks became, in effect, electronic billboards for the candidates. Not only were Bush's furlough ads featured, but so were Dukakis's "handlers ads," attacking Bush as a packaged candidate (Tables 7, 10). Political commercials that were not even aired on network television nonetheless reached a national audience via the evening news.¹⁷

The networks might reply that the ads are news, and thus need to be shown, as long as they generate controversy in the campaign. But this rationale leaves the networks open to manipulation. By 1988, the campaigns had become highly adept at generating controversies about ads to

attract network coverage. As Larry McCarthy, producer of the Willie Horton ad observed, "I have known campaigns that have made ads and only bought one spot, but released them in major press conferences to get it into the news. It's become a fairly common tactic."¹⁸

And controversy or not, by repeatedly showing ads, the networks risked being conduits for the campaigns' contrivances. Oddly enough, the networks were alive to this danger when confronted with the question of whether to air the videos the campaigns produced for their conventions. "I am not into tone poems," said Lane Venardos, the executive producer in charge of convention coverage at CBS. "We are not in the business of being propaganda arms of the political parties."¹⁹ But they seemed blind to the same danger during the campaign itself, airing 125 clips of the candidates' political ads.

The networks' use of commercial footage on the evening news was not restricted to days when ads were at issue in the campaign itself (Tables 8, 9). From Labor Day to election day, network newscasts drew freely on commercial images to illustrate an issue or to represent the candidates themselves. Commercial images became part of television's stock of background visuals, or file footage, aired interchangeably with news footage of the candidates.

To illustrate the candidates' appeals to Hispanic voters, for example, Peter Jennings (ABC, October 28) juxtaposed a clip of Dukakis speaking to a Hispanic audience in Texas with an excerpt of a commercial showing Bush with his Hispanic grandchildren. A John Cochran (NBC, October 18) report comparing Bush and Dukakis's foreign policy stands included sound bites from the presidential debates along with an image from a commercial showing Bush shaking hands with Gorbachev.

Tom Brokaw (NBC, September 30), reporting on the political leanings of blue collar workers in the industrial Midwest, interspersed interviews with actual workers with an excerpt from a Dukakis commercial showing actors playing workers saying, "I voted for the Republicans but that doesn't make me a Republican." Following the "sound bite" from the workers in the ad, and while the images from the Dukakis ad were still on the screen, Brokaw reported, "They blame the administration for the loss of more than half the steel jobs in the district." Whether "they" referred to the actual workers or the ones depicted in the ad seemed almost beside the point, so seamless was the movement between real speech and commercial image.

So successful was the Bush campaign at get-

ting free time for its ads on the evening news that, after the campaign, commercial advertisers adopted a similar strategy. In 1989, a pharmaceutical company used unauthorized footage of Presidents Bush and Gorbachev to advertise a cold medication. "In the new year," the slogan ran, "may the only cold war in the world be the one being fought by us." Although two of the three networks refused to carry the commercial, dozens of network and local television news programs showed excerpts of the ad, generating millions of dollars of free air time.

"I realized I started a trend," said Bush media consultant Roger Ailes. "Now guys are out there trying to produce commercials for the evening news."²⁰ When Humphrey and Nixon hired Madison Avenue experts to help in their campaigns, thoughtful observers worried that, in the television age, presidents would be sold like products. Little did they imagine that, twenty years later, products would be sold like presidents.

Media advisors as celebrities

A week before the first 1988 presidential debate, ABC led its nightly newscast with a story about the 1984 campaign. The network had acquired an audio tape of a meeting of Reagan's image-makers, and though the tape contained no significant revelations, ABC made it the lead story of the day.

Noting that the 1988 campaign consisted of "carefully crafted speeches, staged events, and expensive commercials," anchor Barry Serafin (September 19) announced, "Tonight we have a rare look behind the scenes, where the image-shaping begins." The story that followed played audio excerpts of the meeting four years earlier, in which Reagan media advisors cynically discussed the dearth of ideas coming from the White House, their hopes for a small audience for the presidential debates, and Reagan's ability to run against government. "He just believes that he's above it all," said one participant to general laughter. "He believes it, that's why they believe it. I can't believe it but they do."

Although the report contained scarcely any news, its prominent place on the evening news aptly reflected the networks' preoccupation with image-making. Along with the attention to stagecraft in 1988 came an unprecedented focus on the stage managers themselves, the "media gurus," "handlers," and "spin-control artists." They were the people paid to manipulate the candidates'

images for television, and in 1988, television news elevated them to celebrity status.

In 1968, neither political ads nor the men who made them were news. There were a few references to "advancemen," fewer still to "communications experts," but reporters rarely interviewed them and did not seek their "expert" opinion on the campaign itself. Only three reports featured media advisors in 1968, compared to twenty-six in 1988. And the numbers tell only part of the story.

The stance reporters took toward media advisors changed dramatically over the last twenty years. In *The Selling of the President*, McGinniss exposed the growing role of media advisors with a sense of disillusion and outrage. By 1988, television reporters covered image-makers with deference, even admiration. Media advisors and advertising professionals, some partisan, some independent, frequently appeared on the evening news as authorities in their own right. Sought out by reporters to analyze the effectiveness of campaign commercials, they became "media gurus" not only for the candidates but for the networks as well.

By 1988, Roger Ailes, as media advisor to Bush, was a featured figure on the news, credited with crafting Bush's television image. One flattering report, for example, showed Ailes watching Bush on a television set as Lisa Myers (NBC, September 23) reported that the celebrated "media guru" supplied Bush his best one-liners.

As if reveling in the spotlight, the image-makers dispensed with the traditional pretense of concealing their role. In one of the rare 1968 reports on television image-making, Nixon television advisor Frank Shakespeare denied managing his candidate's image. "We don't advise him at all what to do. We put the cameras on him close and that's it" (Kaplow, NBC, October 25).

In 1988, by contrast, media experts described their manipulative craft without embarrassment or evasion. Before the first presidential debate, Republican consultant Ed Rollins told Leslie Stahl (CBS, Sept. 23), "These are very staged events, and anyone who says they're not is kidding themselves." He told Lisa Myers (NBC, Sept. 23), "I think the image and how he (Bush) looks is as important as the words he says." Recalling the preparations for Walter Mondale's debate with Reagan, Democrat Bob Beckel told Stahl, "We spent more time talking about ties than East-West relations."

Like the reporting of media events and political commercials, coverage of media advisors focused on theater over politics, perceptions over

facts. Rather than correct the facts in the political ads they showed, reporters sometimes solicited the "testimony" of rival media advisors instead. For example, Jim Wooten (ABC, October 10) did an entire report on negative campaign advertising without ever assessing the veracity of the commercials. Instead, he interviewed media advisors from both sides who insisted their ads were accurate.

In a practice unheard of twenty years ago, reporters also aired the opinions of media experts not associated with either campaign to evaluate the candidates' political ads. Wooten (ABC, October 10) reported that the Dukakis commercials had not "impressed the advertising community." Stan Bernard (NBC, October 25) interviewed an "impartial" advertising professional who testified that Dukakis was a "cry baby" for complaining about negative ads, and his advertising campaign in general left voters "totally confused and totally turned off." Another media expert pronounced Dukakis's "advertising ineptitude almost unparalleled," and suggested this was a reason to doubt his ability to "manage the country" if elected.

So prominently did media advisors figure in network campaign coverage that their role became the subject of interviews with the candidates themselves. Interviewing Dukakis, Dan Rather (CBS, October 27) wanted to know which image-maker was to blame for arranging a media event that backfired. "Governor, who put that helmet on you and put you in that army tank?" When Dukakis sought to deflect the query, Rather persisted. "But who put you in?" Dukakis replied, "Michael Dukakis put me in."

"Failed images" as news: Gaffes and gutterballs

Early in the 1988 campaign, George Bush delivered a speech to a sympathetic audience of the American Legion, attacking his opponent's defense policies. In a momentary slip, he declared that September 7, rather than December 7, was the anniversary of Pearl Harbor. Murmurs and chuckles from the audience alerted him to his error, and he quickly corrected himself.

The audience was forgiving but the networks were not. Despite its irrelevance to the contest for the presidency, all three network anchors highlighted the slip on the evening news. Dan Rather introduced CBS's report on Bush by declaring solemnly, "Bush's talk to audiences in Louisville was overshadowed by a strange happening." On NBC, Tom Brokaw reported, "he departed from

his prepared script and left his listeners mystified." Peter Jennings introduced ABC's report by mentioning Bush's attack on Dukakis, adding, "What's more likely to be remembered about today's speech is a slip of the tongue."

So hyper-sensitive were the networks to television image-making in 1988 that minor mishaps—gaffes, slips of the tongue, even faulty microphones and flat tires—became big news. The networks' disproportionate attention to incidental campaign slips reflects the more general turn of campaign coverage to theater criticism. Their heavy focus on the construction of images for television led naturally to a focus on images that went awry.

As with the turn to theater criticism in general, the emphasis on "failed images" reflected a kind of guerrilla warfare between the networks and the campaigns, an attempt by the networks to resist manipulation by puncturing the images the campaigns dispensed. The more the campaigns sought to control the images that appeared on the nightly news, the more the reporters tried to beat them at their own game, to deflate their media events by magnifying a minor mishap into a central feature of the event itself.

In 1968, before the preoccupation with television imagery had taken hold, such mishaps were rarely considered newsworthy. Only once in 1968 did a network insert a negative image into a report unrelated to the content of the campaign, when David Schoumacher (CBS, September 13) noted that Humphrey lost a footrace on the beach "to an out-of-shape reporter." In 1988, by contrast, some twenty-nine reports made mention of failed images.

It was hardly the case that politicians were without mishaps in 1968. Rather, the trivial slips they made did not count as news. For example, Vice Presidential candidate Spiro Agnew, addressing a Washington press conference, made a slip at least as embarrassing as Bush's Pearl Harbor remark. Accusing the Democrats of being soft on defense, Agnew accidentally attacked his own running mate, saying "Mr. Nixon is trying to cast himself in the role of a Neville Chamberlain." Like Bush, Agnew quickly corrected himself, saying it was Humphrey who reminded him of Chamberlain. "Mr. Nixon, of course, would play the opposite role, that of Winston Churchill."

On the evening news that night, Agnew's slip of the tongue went without mention. The networks showed his remarks, including his misstatement and correction, but focused on the substance of his attack on the Democrats.²¹ None

of the anchors or reporters made the slip itself the story, or for that matter, even took note of it.

Some of the slips the networks highlighted in 1988 were not even verbal gaffes or misstatements, but simply failures on the part of candidates to cater to the cameras. In a report on the travails of the Dukakis campaign, Sam Donaldson (ABC, October 17) seized on Dukakis's failure to play to ABC's television camera as evidence of his campaign's ineffectiveness. Showing Dukakis playing a trumpet with a local marching band, Donaldson chided, "He played the trumpet with his back to the camera." As Dukakis played "Happy Days Are Here Again," Donaldson's voice was heard from off-camera calling, "We're over here, Governor." Donaldson completed the picture of futility by showing Dukakis at a local bowling alley throwing a gutter-ball.

Interestingly, the other networks also covered the bowling scene, but without showing the gutter-ball. Chris Wallace (NBC, October 17) showed a more successful Dukakis ball, greeted by cheers from the crowd. "In these tough times," he concluded, "it's the kind of encouragement that keeps the candidate going." Bruce Morton's (October 17) report for CBS split the difference. "When you're losing, everything is a symbol," he said, "whether you throw a gutter ball or knock down some pins."

Perhaps the most memorable media event that failed in 1988 was Dukakis's tank ride. In one form or another, the much ridiculed image of Dukakis in an M-1 tank appeared 18 times on network newscasts during the 1988 campaign. So often did it appear, that it became a symbol of Dukakis's failure to be the master of his image as a presidential candidate.

Memorable though the tank ride became as a media event that backfired—indeed the Bush campaign used it in one of its own campaign commercials—initial television coverage of the event was not wholly negative. Both Bruce Morton (CBS, September 13) and Chris Wallace (NBC, September 13) covered the event with light-hearted humor. "Biff, bang, powee!" Morton began, over pictures of a helmeted Dukakis riding in the tank. "It's not a bird. It's not a plane. It's presidential candidate Michael Dukakis in an M-1 tank as staff and reporters whoop it up" (From off-camera come voices calling, "Go Duke!" "That a boy, Duke!"). On NBC, Chris Wallace began, "Don't call Michael Dukakis soft on defense. Today he rolled across the Michigan plains like General Patton on his way to Berlin."

Only eight days later, in another report, Morton (CBS, September 21) aired the visual of Dukakis

in the tank again, this time portraying it as a failed image. "Sometimes, even in sophisticated 1988, the visuals fail. Reporters hooted when Dukakis drove up in a tank." The picture was the same, but the interpretation had changed. So had the audio track. This time, sounds of laughter accompanied the visuals of the tank ride, replacing the cheers that were heard the first time the event was aired.

Several days later, a CBS report on an unrelated issue aired the Dukakis tank ride again, also with a negative audio track. Reporting the candidate's views on the budget deficit, Bill Whitaker (September 27) opened with a shot of Dukakis in the tank, accompanied by a barely audible voice saying, "put 'em up" followed by laughter.

As the treatment of the tank ride illustrates, the networks' focus on failed images not only exaggerates trivial aspects of the campaign; it also invites editorializing with images.

Campaign officials from both sides see in this tendency an unhealthy entanglement between politicians and the press. "The press is fascinated by the frequency of faux pas," noted Kathryn Murphy, Director of Communications for the Republican Party during the campaign. "The response of the campaigns is to minimize mistakes. Then reporters complain that the campaigns are too tightly controlled." Dayton Duncan, press secretary to Dukakis agreed. "Public officials have to be error-free actors. 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."²²

II. THE LOSS OF OBJECTIVITY: WHEN THE FACTS DO NOT SPEAK FOR THEMSELVES

Balance versus objectivity: The problem of false symmetry

The focus of television news on media events, political commercials, media advisors and failed imagery, reflects the turn of political coverage to theater criticism. But this image-conscious coverage did not succeed in avoiding the manipulation of the campaigns. Instead, it shifted attention from the substance to the stagecraft of politics, and eroded the objectivity of political reporting.

Rather than report the facts, or the actual records of the candidates, there was a tendency simply to balance perceptions, or to air an oppos-

ing image. Fairness came to mean equal time for media events, equal time for political commercials. But this left the media hostage to the play of perceptions the campaigns dispensed.

The problem is best defined by those few instances when reporters went beyond the play of perceptions to refer to the record or report the facts. For example, Robert Bazell, reporting on the issue of the environment, (NBC, October 21), began by showing how Bush and Dukakis used media events and contrived backdrops to portray themselves as ardent environmentalists. Rather than simply juxtaposing pictures of Bush riding a boat in Boston Harbor and Dukakis posing against backdrops of mountains and beaches, Bazell related their actual records and positions on such issues as global warming, acid rain, off-shore drilling, and pesticide use.

In another notable example, ABC's Jim Wooten (September 26), assessed the validity of each candidate's claims in the first presidential debate. He interspersed clips of the candidates' statements with a correction of their facts:

Dukakis: "I was a leader in the civil rights movement in my state and in my legislature."

Wooten: "Well, he did propose an anti-discrimination commission once, but that was about it."

Bush: "I want to be the one to banish chemical and biological weapons from the face of the earth."

Wooten: "But he was the man who cast three tie-breaking Senate votes for new chemical weapons."

Bush: "The Governor raised taxes five different times."

Wooten: "The Governor also cut taxes eight times, and people in 33 other states pay a greater part of their income in taxes than citizens of Massachusetts."

On defense, Bush offered to cancel three weapons systems that had already been eliminated. Dukakis suggested that Bush himself was once sympathetic to a nuclear freeze. He wasn't. He simply said it shouldn't be a partisan issue.

Unlike Wooten's reports after the first and subsequent debates, most coverage did not attempt to assess or correct the facts, but rested instead with the play of perceptions. 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.

After ABC (September 22) showed a Bush media event with Boston police, Peter Jennings

made explicit what the networks often did reflexively, equating fairness with a balancing of images. "In the interest of fairness," he announced, viewers would now see a scene of Dukakis posing with police officers too. In the piece that followed, Sam Donaldson reported that Dukakis "surrounded himself with his own sea of blue today...in a made-for-television appearance." To its credit, ABC followed this juxtaposition of media events with an issue-oriented report on the candidates' positions on crime. Much of the time, however, the networks settled for a balance of campaign imagery alone.

The most flagrant instance of this tendency was in the presentation of the candidates' political ads. Reports were balanced in that they showed commercials from both sides. But setting the candidates' ads side by side, however balanced, does not necessarily make for objective reporting. It simply trades off the images the campaigns dispense. This leaves the viewer victim to the distortions the images may contain.

Furthermore, even when the reports did make some attempt to evaluate the candidates' rhetoric and imagery, the concern for "balance" (in the sense of not taking sides) led reporters to equate different orders of distortions or mistakes. In the name of balance, the reports created a false symmetry.

For example, in the final weeks of the 1988 campaign, the nightly newscasts often cast both campaigns as "dirty," even though the false accusations and smear tactics they actually reported were mostly perpetrated by Republicans (including some not formally tied to the Bush campaign). By showing excerpts of commercials such as the Willie Horton ad, the networks gave national exposure to inflammatory ads produced by local Republican groups, ads the Bush campaign could claim to renounce.

When Dukakis attacked these ads, the networks treated his attacks as one more chapter in a dirty campaign, as if Dukakis's criticisms of these commercials were on a par with the smears themselves. "We begin with a presidential campaign that is going through an especially mean phase," said Peter Jennings (October 24), opening an ABC newscast. Tom Brokaw (October 24) began NBC's nightly news in a similar vein: "Election day, two weeks from tomorrow, and it's getting very nasty again." The next night, Jennings (October 25) announced, "It's becoming difficult in this campaign to keep abreast of the accusations.... There are certainly some who wonder what all this has to do with running the country in the 1990s, but

whatever happens, this kind of charge and counter-charge is the hallmark of the campaigns at this point."

Introducing one newscast that week, Brokaw (October 25) seemed to promise the kind of reporting that would examine the content of the accusations and sort fact from falsehood: "Campaign commercial wars: Who's lying and who's not?" But the coverage that followed failed to answer this question. It focused instead on the effectiveness of the candidates' ads, and on the way they were perceived by voters and media experts.

In 1968 by contrast, fairness took a different form. Rather than seek symmetry within each broadcast, the networks sought fairness over the course of the campaign by covering a wide range of views, and allowing people to speak for themselves in sustained segments. This was true not only for candidates but also for critics drawn from across the political spectrum.

When a candidate made a major statement, the networks showed his opponent's reply. For example, when Humphrey gave an important speech on Vietnam, the networks aired Nixon's response. But they showed no similar compulsion to balance media events and images. When Humphrey took a walk on the beach, or when Nixon rode a hydroplane, the networks made no effort to show a rival image. Often, they ignored the gimmick altogether. And since they did not show excerpts of political commercials, the problem of balancing advertising images did not arise. They avoided entanglement with the candidates' image-making, and so avoided the need to "balance" coverage of their respective gimmicks.

It might be replied, in defense of the networks, that media-conscious campaigns require media-conscious coverage, that changes in television news simply reflect changes in the nature of presidential campaigns. To be objective in 1988, the argument might go, to report the "facts" of the campaign, is unavoidably to cover media events and political ads. That, after all, is what modern campaigns are all about.

But this reply confuses two different aspects of objective reporting. The first consists in accurately representing public statements or claims. The second consists in assessing the veracity of the statements themselves. Reporting the facts in the first sense alone may not be sufficient. For example, to report night after night that Pentagon officials claimed the Vietnam War was going well was factual in that it faithfully represented the officials' statements. But without some independent assessment of the truth of those statements, the press could not be credited with objective

coverage of the Vietnam war.

In a similar way, simply to report the "facts" of claims and counterclaims by presidential candidates, or to give equal time to the pictures they produce, is not enough. Objective coverage requires that reporters assess the substance of the claims, not just "balance" them.

The blurring of commentary and political reporting

It might seem that reporters' reluctance to answer Brokaw's question, "Who's Lying and Who's Not?," reflects a healthy instinct for the sidelines, a refusal to take sides. But notwithstanding their penchant for "balance" in 1988, reporters intervened more frequently in the stories they covered, and injected their opinions more freely than did their predecessors twenty years earlier.

In 1968, reporters intervened less in the story, allowing the candidates and their critics to speak more for themselves. The newscasts themselves distinguished sharply between reporting and commentary. Looking back twenty years later at the 1968 coverage, one is struck by how detached and dispassionate were anchormen and reporters alike in presenting the daily story. Coverage still partook of an unadorned "wire-service" style of reporting, emphasizing description not interpretation. Opinions and analysis were reserved for explicitly designated commentary segments, which resembled spoken "op-ed" pieces. Two of the three networks offered campaign commentary in 1968, with Eric Sevareid on CBS, and Frank Reynolds and various guest commentators on ABC.

In 1988, by contrast, explicit political commentary had all but vanished from the networks' evening newscasts. Only NBC offered even an occasional commentary segment. In 1968, the networks broadcast some 57 political commentaries during the general election campaign. In 1988, only eight appeared, all by John Chancellor of NBC.

Of course, the absence of explicit commentary in 1988 did not mean that anchors and reporters refrained from offering their opinions—far from it. They inserted them freely in their reporting, blurring the line between fact and opinion. In 1968, the treatment of fact and opinion more closely reflected the practice of print journalism, with news and editorials at least nominally on separate pages. By 1988 it was common practice for news and opinion to comingle in the campaign story of the day.

In 1968, network newscasts consisted of two clear and distinct voices—one reportorial, the other opinionated. A designated place for commentary coincided with a more restrained, dispassionate style of reporting. This demarcation had the effect of enhancing the credibility of the television journalist in both realms. In the role of reporter, he enjoyed the credibility that goes with detached, straightforward reporting. In the role of commentator, he was able to offer analysis and opinion at sufficient length to develop an argument, as in a traditional newspaper column or op-ed piece.

In 1988, by contrast, the television journalist's voice was more ambiguous. Lacking a separate vehicle for commentary, anchors and reporters often injected their opinions in their reporting. But despite the increased intervention of television journalists in the stories they covered, the blurring of reporting and commentary actually diminished their authority, in two ways. On the one hand, their authority as witness diminished as they departed from the unadorned narrative style of traditional reporting. At the same time, their authority as commentator diminished as their occasion for commentary became cramped, reduced to a kind of sniping at the sidelines.

In 1968, commentary segments averaged two minutes in length; by 1988, the shift from explicit to injected commentary had reduced the reporter's critical voice to a tag line, a passing snide remark. The compressed pace of 1988 coverage forced not only the candidates but also the reporters to deliver their opinions in sound-bites and one-liners.

In 1968, for example, Frank Reynolds devoted two minutes and 15 seconds to a hard-hitting commentary on how Nixon, Humphrey, and Wallace were all exploiting the theme of "law and order." When, twenty years later, Brit Hume sought to make a similar point, he was reduced to a twelve-second tag line at the end of a report on a Bush campaign stop in New York: "Bush is running for President, not sheriff, but some days it is hard to tell. His polls show he's hurt Dukakis on crime. And if he can use the issue to hurt him in a state Dukakis once thought was his, so much the better."

The explicit commentaries of 1968 typically addressed large themes—the Vietnam war, protest and dissent, law and order, the condition of American cities. The "injected commentaries" of 1988, by contrast, compressed as they were into a few seconds in the daily story, often amounted to little more than fleeting jibes or ad hominem remarks.

For example, after covering a speech in which

Dukakis attacked his opponent in strong terms, Sam Donaldson shifted suddenly from reporting Dukakis's words to undercutting them. "Unless you're Harry Truman—and Dukakis is not—the strategy of giving them hell runs the risk of sounding shrill and unpresidential. But Dukakis figures Bush started it, and he has no choice but to join in" (ABC, September 12). Ten days later, Donaldson (September 20) criticized Dukakis again in a "tag-line" commentary, this time for dealing with the issues: "Thirty-six years ago, Adlai Stevenson insisted he was talking sense to the American people, and Ike won in a landslide."

The enlarged role of the reporter in the story is reflected in another contrast, subtle but telling. In 1968, the photographs of the candidates virtually filled the screen, with the anchormen occupying a relatively small corner of the screen. By 1988, it was the anchormen who filled the frame, while photographs of the candidates had shrunk to cameo size.

Words and images at war

In 1968, the reporter spoke from the sidelines, allowing the candidates time to tell their story. By 1988, the narrative structure of political reporting had become more complex, consisting of a tension, even a struggle, between the stories the campaigns and the reporters sought to tell.

The candidates sought to construct their story through the use of media events and catchy one-liners. The networks used their own juxtaposition of images, sound bites, and reporting. On both sides, the staccato language of sound bites and fast-paced visuals had replaced the familiar pace of ordinary speech. As a result, the presidential campaign on the nightly news came to look and sound less like traditional political discourse and more like commercial advertising.

This change can be seen in the contrast between Charles Quinn's report on Muskie's encounter with anti-war demonstrators in 1968 (NBC, October 25) and Bruce Morton's coverage of Dukakis's encounter with anti-abortion demonstrators in 1988 (CBS, September 9).

In Quinn's coverage, there are few cuts in either the pictures or the words. Quinn speaks only at the beginning and end of the report, briefly and off-screen. He sets the context for the drama—"It was the worst heckling Senator Muskie has faced so far in the campaign"—then backs off to show it unfold. The camera lingers at a medium distance on both Muskie and the demonstrators,

later moving in for close-ups of Muskie and student spokesman Rick Brody. The words of candidate and protester are the heart of the story. Over half of the report is devoted to Muskie's or Brody's speech.

In 1988, by contrast, the story on the evening news was not about what the candidate or the protesters said, but about the television image the confrontation produced. "Most of what candidates do is aimed at your television screen," began Bruce Morton in his report on Dukakis's confrontation with anti-abortion demonstrators. "The Dukakis campaign would have liked to have these pictures of his appearance before a mostly Polish audience today, but there were these pictures too." As Morton speaks, the report cuts quickly from favorable pictures of Dukakis to a woman sitting on the floor with her children yelling, "Do we have to destroy our children?"

In contrast to the coverage of the Muskie-Brody confrontation, the focus of Morton's report was not political speech, but the disruption of speech, and the television image the disruption created. Dukakis was relegated to a two-second sound bite addressing the protestors, and a seven-second sound bite delivering his economic message. An anti-abortion demonstrator shouted for four seconds, and a National Right to Life representative interviewed later spoke for seven. Morton concluded the report by talking about television, and the balance of images that television conveyed. "What happened today was that the camera saw both realities. The few demonstrators with their issue, the vast majority of the crowd applauding Dukakis."

But the "reality" the camera "saw" was one in which no one spoke for more than nine seconds. It was a "reality" consisting of fast-moving images but little political discourse.

The same could be said of the 1988 coverage as a whole. The 9.8 second sound bite was one measure of this change. The decline of total candidate speaking time was another. The speaking time of presidential candidates on the nightly news was 56 percent greater in 1968 than in 1988, even without counting third party candidate George Wallace (Tables 1-5).²³

The tendency to detach the candidates' pictures from their words was a characteristic feature of the "theater criticism" style of reporting, in which reporters drew attention to the self-conscious design of the images the campaigns produced. While this style of coverage might seem to give the reporter the upper hand in the contest for control of television words and images, it does not always work this way.

In order to play the role of theater critic, the reporter has to show the theater, to put the potent images on television. Moreover, it puts reporters in the paradoxical position of criticizing the very theater they help produce. The campaigns stage the media events, but the networks take the pictures. And the more dramatic the pictures, the more likely the story will run on the evening news. Reporters thus have a stake in the power of the visuals they go on to criticize. More than mere conduits, the networks help produce and promote the political theater they cover. The networks' stake in potent visuals also draws them to the most vivid imagery of the candidates' commercials, which they run throughout the campaign as recurring motifs.

Campaign coverage under these conditions is beset by conflicting impulses. This conflict is reflected in a tension between the visual and the narrative elements of the report. The visuals offer the most arresting images the campaigns dispense, while the narrative attempts to deconstruct these images, to reveal their artifice. This sets the reporter's narrative in competition with the campaign pictures, a competition the pictures are likely to win.

This competition was illustrated in a 1984 piece on Ronald Reagan by Leslie Stahl (CBS, October 4). After airing a long piece criticizing Reagan's manipulation of television imagery during the 1984 campaign, Stahl was surprised to find that the Reagan White House loved the story. Grateful that the piece included almost five minutes of potent Reagan visuals, a presidential aide seemed oblivious to Stahl's critical narrative. "They don't listen to you if you are contradicting great pictures," the aide told Stahl. "They don't hear what you are saying if the pictures are saying something different."²⁴

Stahl concluded from her experience that television images swamp words, that pictures speak louder than the reporter's critical voice. But Stahl's lament, which is often recited in complaints about the 1988 campaign, overlooks a deeper lesson about the use of words and images in political reporting.

Like many examples of theater criticism, Stahl's words often reinforced the images she intended to undercut. The opening of her piece was a paean to Reagan's image-making skills: "How does Ronald Reagan use television? Brilliantly." Aside from a few instances of fact correction, most of Stahl's report illustrated her opening statement. Far from being critical, her words were captions for the images she showed.

Stahl's conclusion, like her opening, was less critical than congratulatory. "President Reagan is accused of running a campaign in which he highlights the images and hides from the issues. But there is no evidence that the charge will hurt him, because when people see the President on television, he makes them feel good, about America, about themselves, and about him."

Unlike most examples of theater criticism, Stahl's report did, to its credit, make some attempt to confront Reagan's imagery with his record. In this respect, her narrative offered a critical counterpoint to his pictures. But her counterpoint lacked force because it spoke in no images of its own. While Stahl noted that Reagan used backdrops that contradicted his own policies on aid to the disabled and elderly, she showed no pictures depicting the consequences, only Reagan's visuals. Similarly, while she observed that Reagan distracted public attention from the bombing of the U.S. Marine headquarters in Beirut by offering patriotic images of the Grenada invasion, Stahl showed no images of Beirut, focusing instead on Reagan's pictures celebrating Grenada.

It might be argued that for reporters to use pictures to dramatize their points risks violating the line between reporting and editorializing. But this argument ignores the visual language of television, a language the campaigns have mastered to a highly sophisticated degree. It also ignores what is already a familiar practice in television reporting. Some of the best reporting on the facts and issues of the 1988 campaign—Jim Wooten's fact correction pieces after the debates, Robert Bazell's report on the environment and Leslie Stahl's piece on the forgotten issue of homelessness—made effective use of "counter images," illustrating discrepancies between candidates' rhetoric and record in ways that words alone might not have conveyed.

Most of the time, reporters rested with the campaigns' pictures. They revealed the artifice behind the images, but reproduced them nonetheless. So skillful were they in documenting the theater that it became difficult to distinguish the play from the real thing.

III. THE MEDIA GOES MODERNIST: THE WARHOLIZATION OF THE NEWS

"The artificial fascinates me." (Andy Warhol)

"There's nothing really there—it's just the way you see it. Your perception." (Tom Stoppard)

One way of understanding the turn to image-conscious coverage in 1988 is to see how television news came to partake of the post-war modernist sensibility, particularly the pop art movement of the 1960s.²⁵ Characteristic of this outlook is a self-conscious attention to art as performance, a focus on the process of image-making rather than on the ideas the images represent.

During the 1960s, when photography and television became potent forces for documentation and entertainment, they also became powerful influences on the work of artists. Photographers began to photograph the television set as part of the social landscape. Newspapers, photographs, and commercial products became part of the collage work of painters such as Robert Rauschenberg. Artists began to self-consciously explore their role in the image-making process. For example, Lee Friedlander published a book of photography, *Self Portrait*, in which the artist's shadow or reflection was included in every frame. As critic Rod Slemmons notes, "by indicating the photographer is also a performer whose hand is impossible to hide, Friedlander set a precedent for disrupting the normal rules of photography."²⁶ These movements in art and photography foreshadowed the form television news would take by the late 1980s.

By 1988, the look and feel of the news began to resemble the pop art of Andy Warhol. Warhol is perhaps best known for his paintings of Campbell Soup cans, Brillo pads, Marilyn Monroe and other icons of popular culture. By making products like soup the subject of art, Warhol changes our way of seeing them. Where an actual ad for Campbell Soup would direct our attention to the product, a Warhol painting of the same soup can, however realistic, directs our attention less to the product than to the packaging of the product. It makes us aware of the image as an image.

In a similar way, the networks' repeated airing of images from political commercials and media events also directed our attention away from the content and toward the packaging of politics. It too made us aware of the image as an image.

And like Warhol's art, the image-conscious coverage of the 1988 campaign placed the reporter in an ambiguous relation to his subject matter. On the one hand, Warhol accurately represented the commercial products he depicted—be they soup cans, Coca-Cola bottles, or photographs of celebrities—much as the networks accurately reproduced the commercial excerpts they aired. In this respect, both Warhol and the networks could make a certain claim to objectivity.

At the same time, however, the very act of reproducing, rearranging, and repeating these images suggests an ironic or critical stance. Is a painting of a Campbell Soup can the ultimate realism, or testimony to the power of illusion? The same could be asked of the commercial excerpts the networks aired repeatedly on the evening news.

Warhol's paradoxical point is that, in our highly commercialized society, appearance has become reality; the boundary between reality and illusion is less secure than we think. In the political realm, it is this boundary, still intact in the 1968 coverage, that the 1988 campaign coverage called into question.

Warhol once remarked, "The artificial fascinates me."²⁷ In 1988, network reporters and producers, beguiled by the artifice of the modern presidential campaign, might well have said the same. Reporters alternated between reporting campaign images as if they were facts and exposing their contrived nature. Like Warhol, whose personality was always a presence in his work, reporters became part of the campaign theater they covered—as producers, as performers, and as critics. They showed the politicians' imagery even as they called attention to the artifice.

Some moments of 1988 campaign coverage bear an almost eerie resemblance to modernist drama, with reporters self-consciously enacting the roles of critic and actor. For example, an exchange between CBS anchor Dan Rather and correspondent Leslie Stahl discussing Bush's debate performance seemed to echo the view of politics offered by a character in Stoppard's *The Real Thing*: "There's nothing really *there*—its just the way you see it. Your perception."²⁸

Dan Rather: What about this perception, the extraordinary jump in the perception that George Bush has very human qualities?

Leslie Stahl: Well, last night in the debate that was a very calculated tactic and strategy on the part of his handlers. They told him not to look into the camera. [She gestures towards the camera as she speaks.] You know when you look directly into a camera you are cold, apparently they have determined.

Rather [laughing]: Bad news for anchormen I'd say.

Stahl: We have a lot to learn from this. They told him to relate to the questioner, to relate to the audience if he could get an opportunity to deal with them, to relate to the opponent. And that would warm him up. Michael Dukakis kept talking right into the camera. [Stahl talks directly

into her own camera to demonstrate.] And according to the Bush people that makes you look programmed, Dan [Stahl laughs]. And they're very adept at these television symbols and television imagery. And according to our poll it worked.

Rather: Do you believe it?

Stahl: Yes, I think I do actually.

In this exchange, the reporters are drawn fully into the entanglement in which impressions become reality, the mask becomes the man, and the impression managers are treated as respectfully as the directors of an award-winning play.

The assumption that the creation of appearances is the essence of political reality pervaded not only the reporting but the candidates' self-understanding and conduct with the press. This was epitomized in Dan Quayle's response to being labeled in the press as a highly-managed candidate. Instead of rejecting the whole notion of "impression management," he proclaimed his independence from his handlers by resolving publicly to become his own handler and "spin doctor." To Jackie Judd of ABC (October 11) Quayle observed, "The so-called handlers story, part of it's true. But there will be no more handlers stories, because I'm the handler and I'll do the spinning." Surrounded by a group of reporters on his campaign plane, Quayle announced "I'm Doctor Spin and I want you all to report that." (Ken Bode, NBC: October 11).

It may seem a strange way for a politician to talk, but not so strange in a media-conscious environment in which authenticity means being master of your own artificiality. Dukakis also sought to reverse his political fortunes by seeking to be master of his own image. This attempt was best captured in a Dukakis commercial shown on network news in which Dukakis stood beside a television set and snapped off a Bush commercial attacking his stand on defense. "I'm fed up with it," Dukakis declared. "Never seen anything like it in twenty-five years of public life. George Bush's negative television ads, distorting my record, full of lies, and he knows it..."

The Dukakis commercial itself shows an image of an image—a Bush television commercial showing (and ridiculing) the media event where Dukakis rode in a tank. In his commercial, Dukakis complains that Bush's commercial showing the tank ride misstates Dukakis's position on defense.

As it appeared in excerpts on the evening news, Dukakis's commercial displayed a quintessentially modernist image of artifice upon artifice upon artifice: television news covering a

Dukakis commercial containing a Bush commercial containing a Dukakis media event. In a political world governed by images of images, it seems almost natural that the authority of the candidate is depicted by his ability to turn off the television set.

Dukakis's act of turning off the Bush commercial is an inverted version of Quayle's claim, "I'm Doctor Spin." On the one hand, Dukakis wants to set the record straight, to identify and disclaim the "lies" of his opponent. But he is trapped, helplessly entangled in the television images that came to define the campaign. Like reporters turned theater critics, Dukakis shows the very image he criticizes. But he is even more implicated, because at the core of the image he turns off is a media event he fabricated in the first place, an image that came to symbolize the futility of his campaign.

Television News and the Modernist Sensibility

Although the modernist turn of television news, fully realized in 1988, was but a minor strain in 1968, elements of modernism have shaped television news from its inception. The very idea of news, especially the visual, fast-paced, episodic style of television news, is inconceivable without the culture of modernism. For modernism, in contrast to the cultural movements that preceded it, prizes novelty and speed as values in themselves. As Daniel Bell has observed, the modernist mentality attempts to "eclipse 'distance'—psychic distance, social distance and aesthetic distance—and to insist on the 'absolute presentness,' the simultaneity and immediacy of experience."²⁹

Modernism arose around the turn of the twentieth century as a cultural force catalyzed by technological innovations—the telegraph, railroads, high speed printing and photographic reproduction—that accelerated the speed of communication and broke down the old boundaries of time and place. As early as the 1920s the Russian novelist Eugene Zamyatin captured the modernist mentality that over a half century later would be expressed in the "sound bite": "The old, slow soporific descriptions are no more. The order of the day is laconicism—but every word must be supercharged, high voltage. Into one second must be compressed what formerly went into a sixty-second mixture."³⁰

The rise of radio, mass advertising and the picture magazine in the 1920s and 1930s, and finally television in the post-war period, not only

intensified the appetite for news and novelty but facilitated the interplay of modernist tendencies in "high" culture and popular culture.

Another aspect of modernism incorporated in the structure of television news from its inception is the emphasis on the power of the concrete image to provide instant understanding. Television news rests on the assumption that images convey understanding. Moreover, the news reflects the modernist confidence that, in viewing the world, we can readily accept fragmentation, discord, and discontinuity. The way television news organizes images invites the viewer to take up two seemingly opposed stances. The images it offers are at once intensely real, and yet we are simultaneously asked to disclaim them, to remain detached, to treat them as if they were mere illusion. The rapid movement from story to story, from news story to commercial break and back again, enforces a certain detachment. This is facilitated by the news anchor, whose task is not only to anchor us in reality, but to disengage us from it.

A final aspect of modernism that shaped television news since its inception is its adversarial stance, its impulse to expose and unmask political authority. Lionel Trilling identified this impulse as the hallmark of modernism.³¹ Like other modernist impulses, the adversarial stance has been held in check by the more conventional tendencies of network news, such as its need to sell to advertisers and its dependence on government sources for news.

Because the networks were part of the establishment, the newscasts never could carry the adversarial stance to the extremes of the avant-garde in art or in politics. But by 1968, television news not only reported on the social, political and cultural movements that challenged the conventional wisdom, but the news itself was shaped by the adversarial culture. In the late 1960s and early 1970s, the unmasking of authority was bound up with the great political issues of the day, most notably the Vietnam War and the Watergate scandal. Exposure meant sorting the lies from the truth, as the Pentagon Papers and the Watergate hearings so dramatically revealed. But in the 1988 campaign coverage, the impulse to unmask authority took a different form. It fueled the tendency to cover politics as a performance, in which the mask of the political actor became as much of the story as the politics behind the mask.

To argue that television news has become infused with the modernist sensibility is not to deny the powerful economic and technological changes that are also at work, notably the in-

creased pressure on network news divisions to compete for ratings and advertising revenue. Cultural and economic pressures worked together to produce the fast-paced, image-conscious style of coverage that predominated in 1988.

The modernist turn in network campaign coverage can be traced to changes in presidential politics during the 1970s and 1980s. The decline of political parties, the increasing personalization of presidential campaigns, the rise of political consultants, and the sophisticated use of television by candidates to appeal directly to the electorate, placed television image-making at the center of the electoral process.³³ While Nixon's 1968 campaign laid the groundwork for managing the news, the Reagan administration mastered the use of television imagery for political purposes. More than a campaign technique it was an instrument of governance.³³

Changes in the structure and economics of network news in the 1980s also contributed to the modernist turn in campaign coverage. In the 1950s, Edward R. Murrow noted that broadcast news was "an incompatible combination of show business, advertising and news."³⁴ Still, in its first decades, the organization and ethos of television news continued to reflect a sharp distinction between the roles of the news and entertainment divisions of the networks.³⁵

But by the 1980s, network news operations came to be seen as profit centers for the large corporations that owned them, run by people drawn less from journalism than from advertising and entertainment backgrounds.³⁶ As media analyst Edwin Diamond observes, "The ABC, CBS and NBC news organizations are now recasting themselves—not, as in the past, because of the imperatives of journalism,...but because the network's new owners demand it."³⁷

Commercialization led to further emphasis on entertainment values, which heightened the need for dramatic visuals, fast pacing, quick cutting, and short sound-bites. Given new technological means to achieve these effects—portable video cameras, satellite hook-ups, and sophisticated video-editing equipment—the networks were not only disposed but equipped to capture the staged media events of the campaigns. Reporters themselves became more oriented to performance. As Peter Boyer (1988:141) notes, "In the new CBS News, correspondents were told that it was no longer just what they said that mattered, but the way they said it; they were part of the message—performers, in a sense—and they were encouraged to affect a more casual and relaxed style."³⁸

The search for dramatic visuals and the premium placed on showmanship in the 1980s led to a new complicity between the White House image-makers and advancement. As Susan Zirinsky, a top CBS producer acknowledged, "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."³⁹ In 1968 such complicity in stagecraft was scorned. As Sanford Socolow, senior producer of the CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite in 1968 recently observed, "if someone caught you doing that in 1968 you would have been fired."⁴⁰

In a telling moment of reflection (September 21, 1988), two CBS correspondents expressed their frustration with image-driven campaigns. "It may seem frivolous, even silly at times," said Bob Schieffer. "But setting up pictures that drive home a message has become the number one priority of the modern day campaign. The problem, of course, is while it is often entertaining it is seldom enlightening."

Dan Rather shared his colleague's discomfort. But what he found troubling about the modern presidential campaign is equally troubling about television's campaign coverage. "With all this emphasis on the image," he asked, "what happens to the issues? What happens to the substance?"

**TABLE 1
"SHORT SOUND BITES"
PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES, 1968 AND 1988***

	5 sec. or less	10 sec. or less	15 sec. or less	20 sec. or less
1968	2% (5)	7% (19)	13% (34)	23% (58)
1988	28% (202)	66% (470)	86% (612)	93% (660)

*Figures are for Democratic and Republican candidates on ABC, CBS and NBC weekday evening newscasts, Labor Day to Election Day.

**TABLE 2
"LONG SOUND BITES"
PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES, 1968 AND 1988***

	30 sec. or more	40 sec. or more	50 sec. or more	60 sec. or more	90 sec. or more
1968	63% (162)	49% (127)	33% (84)	21% (55)	6% (16)
1988	2% (15)	0.5% (4)	0.1% (1)	0	0

*Figures are for Democratic and Republican candidates, on ABC, CBS and NBC weekday evening newscasts, Labor Day to Election Day.

**TABLE 3
NUMBER AND LENGTH OF SOUND BITES
PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES, 1968 AND 1988
ON WEEKDAY NETWORK EVENING NEWSCASTS**

	1968			1988		
	Nixon	Humphrey	Total*	Bush	Dukakis	Total
Number of Sound Bites	113	144	257	342	369	711
Average Length of Sound Bites in Seconds	39.3 sec.	44.6 sec.	42.3 sec.	10.1 sec.	9.5 sec.	9.8 sec.
Total Speaking Time in Minutes	74:02	107:09	181:11	57:30	58:28	115:58

*1968 total figures for Nixon and Humphrey only (not Wallace).

**TABLE 4
WEEKLY NETWORK SPEAKING TIME
OF 1968 AND 1988 PRESIDENTIAL CANDIDATES
IN MINUTES**

	1968			1988		
	Nixon	Humphrey	Weekly Total	Bush	Dukakis	Weekly Total
Week 1*	1:51	0:00	1:51	7:49	7:35	15:24
Week 2	8:37	16:40	25:17	3:43	4:37	8:20
Week 3	5:20	13:00	18:20	4:06	4:08	8:14
Week 4	9:44	17:40	27:24	4:16	4:26	8:42
Week 5	8:11	15:19	23:30	3:44	3:10	6:54
Week 6	5:40	10:29	16:09	4:17	3:53	8:10
Week 7	7:27	7:03	14:30	6:35	8:12	14:47
Week 8	12:33	17:36	29:49	6:27	6:09	12:36
Week 9	11:25	9:32	20:57	14:48	14:39	29:27
Week 10*	3:14	1:30	4:44	1:45	1:39	3:24
Campaign Total	74:02	107:09	182:31	57:30	58:28	115:58

*Weeks 1 and 10 are partial weeks. Week 1, beginning at Labor Day, contains only the subsequent four days. Week 10, ending at Election Day, contains only Monday and Tuesday.

TABLE 5
WEEKLY NETWORK PRESIDENTIAL CAMPAIGN COVERAGE, 1968 AND 1988
IN MINUTES

	1968				1988			
	ABC	CBS	NBC	Total	ABC	CBS	NBC	Total
Week 1*	25	42	28	95	22	39	23	84
Week 2	51	44	36	131	22	18	15	55
Week 3	44	45	35	124	32	36	25	93
Week 4	47	41	36	124	23	23	22	68
Week 5	62	50	33	145	32	35	34	101
Week 6	44	47	43	134	39	38	43	120
Week 7	27	50	45	122	24	24	31	79
Week 8	45	68	46	159	37	62	38	137
Week 9	62	70	45	177	64	45	42	151
Week 10*	35	31	29	95	24	22	26	72
Campaign Total								
in hours	7 hrs	8 hrs	6 hrs	21 hrs	5 hrs	5 hrs	4 hrs	16 hrs
and minutes	22 min.	8 min.	16 min.	46 min.	19 min.	42 min.	59 min.	0 min.

*Weeks 1 and 10 are partial weeks. Week 1, beginning at Labor Day, contains only the subsequent four days. Week 10, ending at Election Day, contains only Monday and Tuesday.

TABLE 6
1988 CAMPAIGN ADS PLAYED ON NETWORK EVENING NEWSCASTS
BY CANDIDATE

Network	Bush	Dukakis	Total
ABC	17	18	35
CBS	21	17	38
NBC	27	25	52
Total	65	60	125

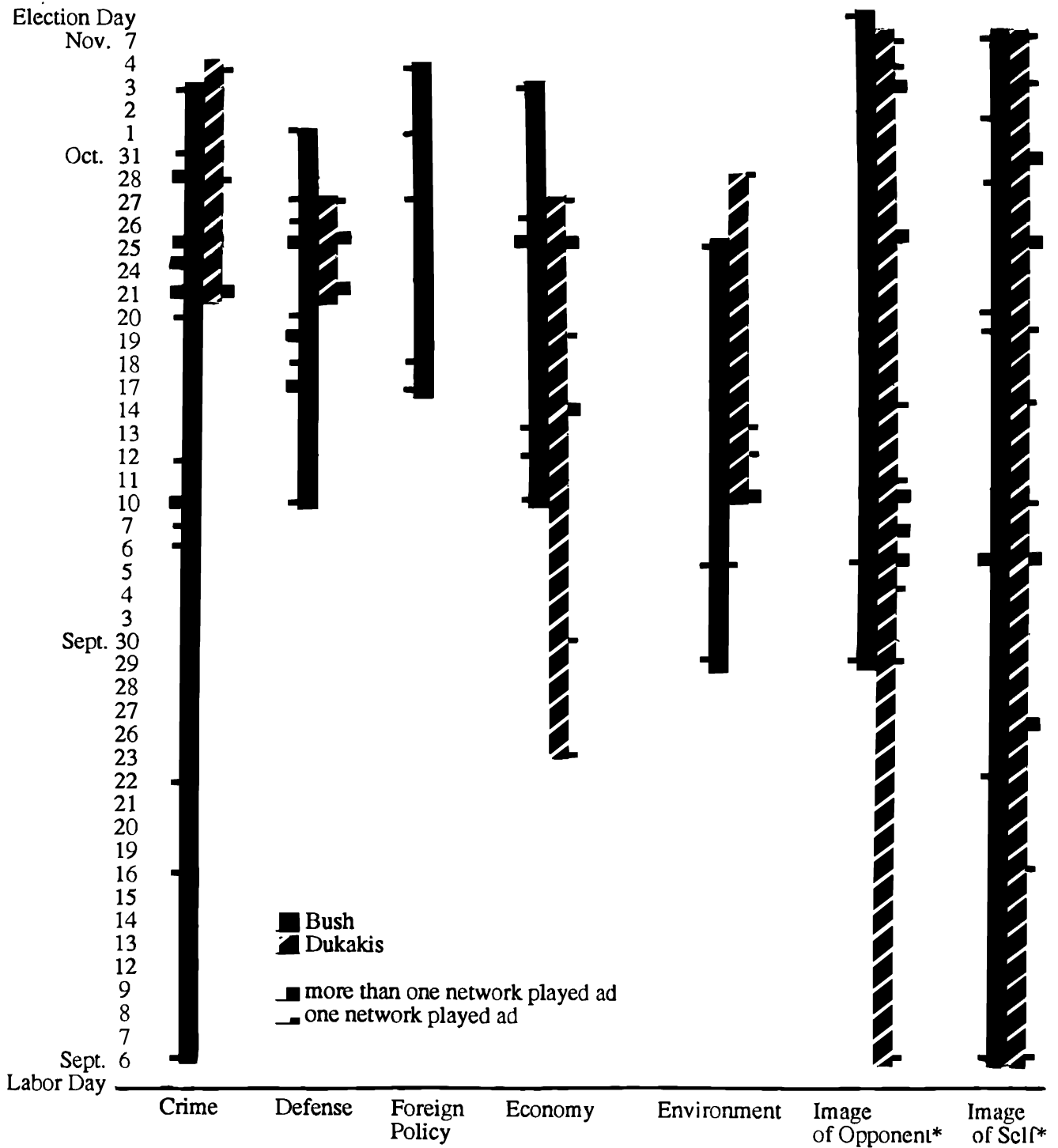
TABLE 7
TOP-PLAYING 1988 CAMPAIGN ADS ON NETWORK EVENING NEWSCASTS
BY CANDIDATE

Bush	Total	Dukakis	Total
Revolving Door	10	Handlers	9
Tank Ride	6	Our Concern/Best America	5
Gorbachev	5		

TABLE 8
1988 CAMPAIGN ADS ON NETWORK EVENING NEWSCASTS
BY CANDIDATE AND THEME

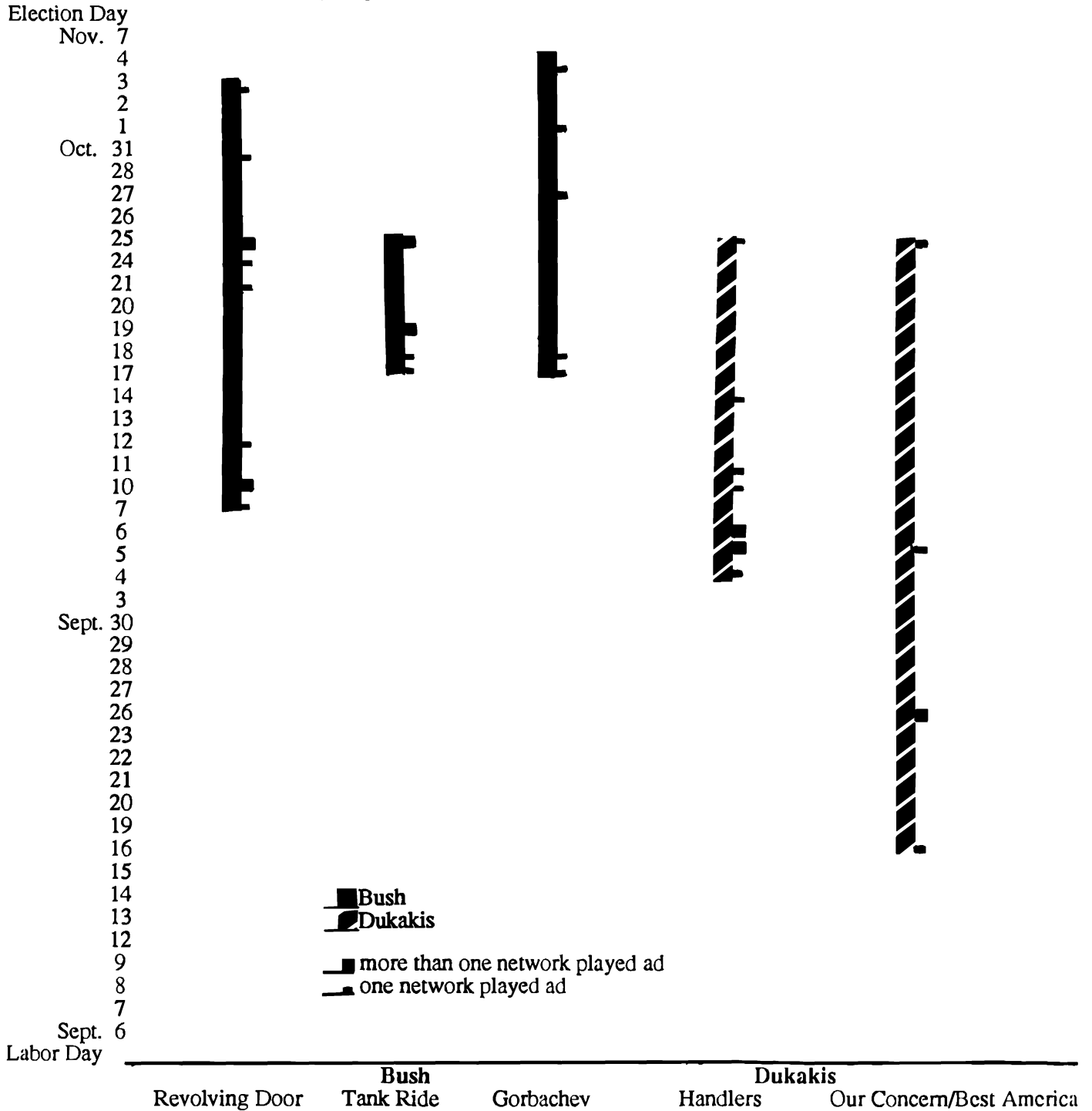
Theme	Bush	Dukakis
Crime	22	4
Defense	12	5
Foreign Policy	5	-
Economy	7	8
Environment	3	4
Image of Opponent-- no other themes	3	20
Image of Self-- no other themes	13	19

**TABLE 9
CAMPAIGN AD THEMES ON WEEKDAY NETWORK EVENING NEWSCASTS
BY CANDIDATE AND LENGTH OF PLAY**



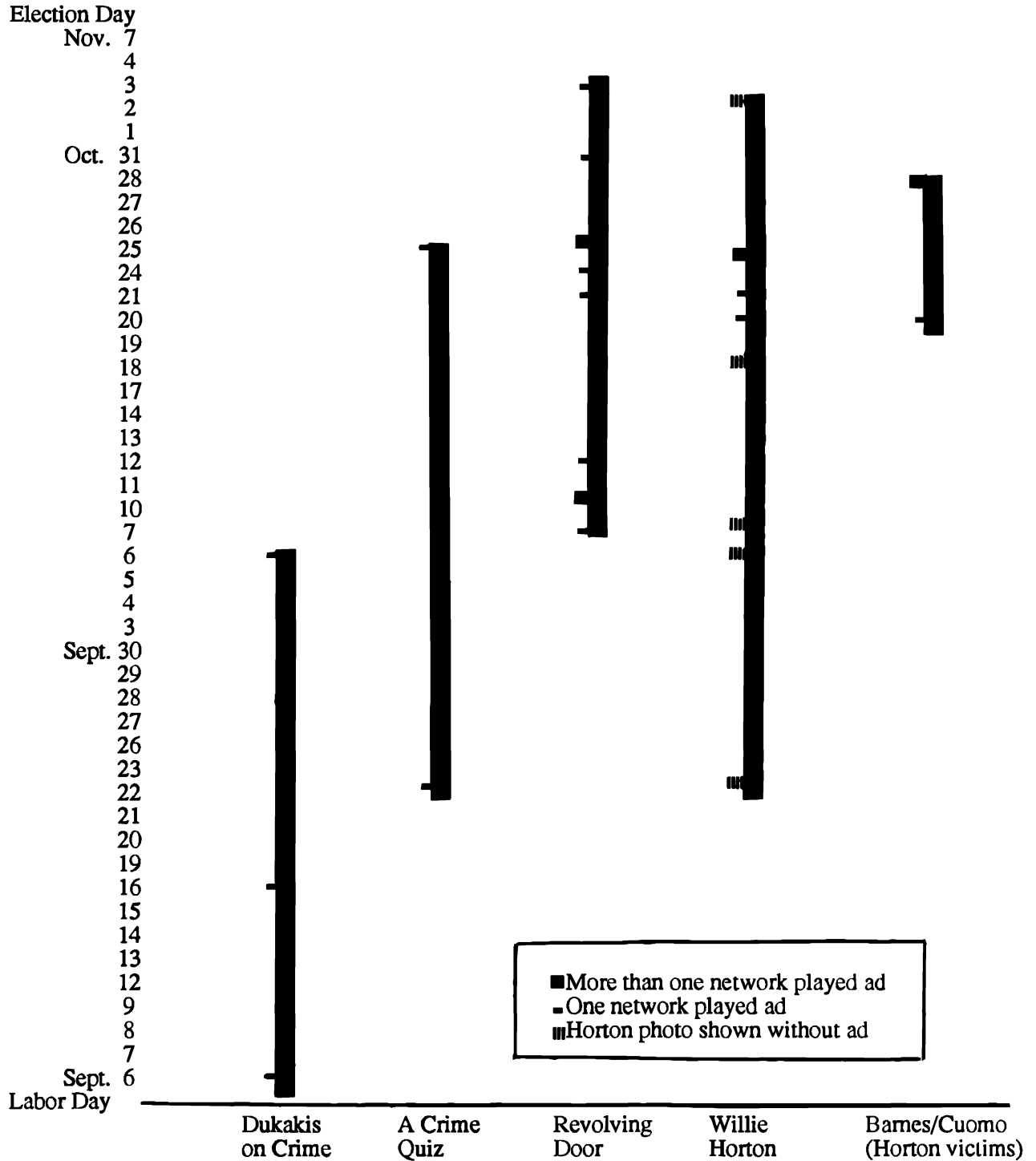
*Ads were listed under image themes if no specific issue was addressed.

TABLE 10
TOP-PLAYING ADS ON WEEKDAY NETWORK EVENING NEWSCASTS
BY CANDIDATE AND LENGTH OF PLAY



*Top-playing Dukakis ads are thematic; variations of master ad use same visuals.

**TABLE 11
REPUBLICAN ADS ON CRIME*
BY LENGTH OF PLAY ON WEEKDAY NETWORK EVENING NEWSCASTS**



*The Bush-Quayle Campaign produced "A Crime Quiz" and "Revolving Door." The others were produced by other Republican groups.

NOTES

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1. The videotapes used in the study were provided by Vanderbilt University Television News Archives and Media Services of the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

In order to insure comparability between the networks, weekend newscasts were omitted because all three networks did not offer evening newscasts on Saturday and Sunday during the period studied.

2. See Tables 1, 2, 3, and 4 for statistics on "sound bites" or length of time the presidential candidates spoke without interruption on network evening newscasts. Table 5 provides an overview of the overall time devoted to presidential campaign coverage in 1968 and 1988.
3. Watts community leader Lou Smith's two minute "sound bite" was part of a report by John Chancellor on how African-Americans responded to the candidates. In all, Smith was given a total of five minutes to speak on the evening news. Not only does the length of time Smith spoke provide a dramatic contrast with 1988. NBC enlarged the political discourse of the campaign by providing time for the expression of anti-establishment views:

"We have Humphrey who is running, talking about if you little colored people or Negroes would act like white people, I may be able to give you a bigger crumb off the table. To the Wallaces and Nixons who are kinda talking about well, we just want to kind of repress you all because it is a White Anglo Saxon Protestant nation and its value system is built on that. And if you guys would just stay down there, in the house of your choice down there, and work in a job of your choice— just as long as you don't talk about plant management or plant ownership or talk about getting too high up in the industry we will tolerate you. . . We're waiting to see what you all are going to do to us, because we're not going to stop moving on you in the sense that we're not going to stifle our kids again by telling them you've got to be nice

to white folks and scratch your head and shuffle your feet and you might get somewhere. We know we can't do that. . . ."

4. All three networks gave Chicago's Mayor Daley ample air time on several occasions to criticize press coverage of the riots outside the Democratic convention. On September 9, for example, ABC gave Daley over two minutes of uninterrupted speaking time, and both CBS and NBC gave over a minute to Daley's press conference speech. The speech included such memorable lines as "I think all your men missed the most important point of this convention. No one lost their lives in Chicago . . . I've never tolerated brutality, whether it's from newsmen or protestors."

Third party presidential candidate George Wallace was given ample speaking time throughout the campaign. He often punctuated his speeches with criticisms of the press.

5. During the entire week before the first presidential debate on September 25, Bush spoke for only 64 seconds and Dukakis for 69 seconds on ABC. During the entire week after the debate, NBC allotted Bush only 47 seconds and Dukakis only 68 seconds.
6. Michael Deaver, a public relations man in charge of Reagan's media, gives an account of his work in his own book, *Behind the Scenes* (1987). Accounts of Deaver's role are contained in Schram (1987) and Hertzgaard (1988).
7. Accounts of the advertising campaigns of Nixon and Humphrey are available in Diamond and Bates, *The Spot* (1988), Jamieson, *Packaging the President* (1984). Excellent general accounts of the 1968 campaign are in White, *The Making of the President 1968* (1969) and Chester, Hodgson and Page, *An American Melodrama* (1969).
8. The first quote from Severeid is from a commentary (CBS, October 11, 1968). Ted Koppel's report on Nixon's use of television aired on ABC (September 25, 1968). John Hart analyzed Nixon's use of television in reports for CBS (September 9 and 20, October 15 and 28). Severeid's last quote is from a report on a Nixon rally (CBS, October 24).
9. The political philosopher Hannah Arendt wrote in *Crises of the Republic* (1969):

Factual truths are never compellingly true. The historian knows how vulnerable is the whole texture of facts in which we spend our daily life, it is always in danger of being perfo-

rated by single lies or torn to shreds by the organized lying of groups. . . Facts need testimony to be remembered and trustworthy witnesses to be established in order to find a secure dwelling place in the domain of human affairs. From this, it follows that no factual statement can ever be beyond doubt—as secure and shielded against attack as, for instance, the statement that two and two make four.

10. Jack Perkins's story for NBC (September 9) of Humphrey's official campaign opening parade and rally in Philadelphia is typical of 1968 reporting. The report begins with a dramatic long-shot of the parade with Perkins providing a narrative to accompany the visuals. Then, like Don Oliver's report on Humphrey's walk on the beach, the images of the rally become part of the background as Perkins discusses the ideas and strategy that will shape the Humphrey campaign.

The same style characterizes Frank Reynolds's (September 11) report for ABC on Nixon's campaign opening. The story Reynolds tells is strictly political with no attention to images contrived for television. The report lingers on a rally in which Nixon shares the stage with his former rivals: Rockefeller, Lindsey, and Javits. It is political theater, but Reynolds emphasizes the politics, not the theater.

11. The only time the word "photo opportunity" was used during the 1968 campaign coverage was in a report on Nixon's appearance with television star Jackie Gleason on a golf course in Florida. John Hart (CBS, October 15) observed, "Nearly everything Nixon does these days is programmed. The last three days of guarded privacy and deliberately casual moments...moments his programmers have labeled 'photo opportunities.'"
12. The Nixon panel shows were a special case because they were designed not to look like ads in order to combat the image of Nixon as a packaged candidate. The shows had the aura of public affairs programs, with the candidate engaged with voters on the vital issues facing the country.

The one occasion in which the image-making apparatus of the Nixon panel shows was revealed in detail was in a report by Ted Koppel (ABC, September 25). It is interesting, both for the respects in which it is a precursor of the theater criticism so prevalent in 1988, and the ways it provides a perspective on the differences in the coverage of the media-driven campaigns of 1968 and 1988.

The report opens by revealing the artifice of Nixon's staged television show. A polished emcee is shown warming up the audience, cueing them when to

applaud, "sound like ten thousand people." Koppel then begins his narrative, "Across the country...the same jovial emcee warms up one studio audience after another for the most successful television personality since Ronald Reagan washed his hands of 'Twenty Mule Team Borax.' In 1960, television was a prime factor in defeating Nixon. This year it may be his most effective vehicle on the road to the White House."

The way Koppel's coverage of the Nixon commercial differs from the 1988 style of covering ads is that the ad never fills the screen. We see it only from afar, displayed on television monitors as people are shown watching it in different settings. Far from giving free air time to the Nixon ad, the report focuses on how the images were made and what Nixon was trying to achieve.

A telling image from the Koppel report is a picture of reporters isolated in a screening room, barred not only from being members of the panel, but even from being members of the studio audience. This circumvention of the press was a harbinger of things to come.

13. Negative political commercials were prominent in both the 1964 and 1968 presidential campaigns [see Diamond and Bates (1988)], Jamieson (1984), but were not shown on evening newscasts. In 1968 there had to be a special reason for considering ads newsworthy. By 1988 the campaigns have succeeded in setting the news agenda by limiting access to candidates. Instead of offering traditional press conferences, the campaigns offered press conferences to unveil their new ads as a calculated strategy to get free air time on the news for their paid media. As Sanford Socolow, senior producer for the CBS Evening News with Walter Cronkite during the 1968 presidential campaign, recently observed, "In 1988, an ad agency staging a glamorous opening was enough to get their political ads on the evening news. In 1968, we would have turned our backs on it" (interview with the author, December 1989).
14. Although the revolving door furlough ad is perhaps the best known Republican commercial on crime, there were actually five additional Republican ads on crime (focused on or including the furlough theme) that were shown on network newscasts. The most notable was the Willie Horton ad produced by an independent Republican group. This constellation of crime ads, evoking different images but making the same points, ran 22 times on network evening newscasts from September 6 through November 3, with only three instances of fact correction.

In order to insure that the overall statistic on fact correction was accurate, the 125 ad excerpts shown on network evening newscasts were submitted to an outside coder. Intercoder reliability (agreement between coders) was 98.4 percent. The outside coder missed an instance of fact correction in which the reporter devoted only a sentence or two to questioning the candidate's claim (Donaldson, ABC, October 26). The outside coder included an ad excerpt in which a reporter showed a Dole commercial attacking Bush in the primaries, which was used in a report on Bush's resume (Bob Fall, CBS, September 22). Even including this instance, the percentage of fact correction remained below eight percent.

15. Most reporters showed the same photograph of Horton used in the Republican ad. Judd used a different one, but like others, showed the photograph as well as an official Bush ad entitled, "A Crime Quiz."
 16. On October 7, both ABC and NBC showed Willie Horton's photograph in their reports on the press conference held by his victims. CBS used the occasion to show an excerpt from Bush's revolving door furlough ad.
 17. For example, the Willie Horton ad was shown on national cable, but not on the networks, according to its producer, Larry McCarthy.
 18. Quoted in "Rift Over Campaign Films," *The New York Times* (August 11, 1988):D19.
 19. Quoted in an article by Randall Rothenberg, "Controversy in Commercials Used to Gain Extra Publicity," in *The New York Times* (January 8, 1990:D8).
 20. Ibid.
 21. The quotations from Agnew are from Bruce Morton's report for CBS on September 10, 1968. In his attack on the Democrats, Agnew accused Humphrey of being "squishy soft" on crime and communism. This may have made him look bad in some people's eyes, but it is different from the "failed images" reporters concocted in the 1988 coverage. Agnew's attack was no unintended slip. Later in the campaign Agnew made a racial slur against a reporter that also received a lot of publicity. But reporters did not cover this as a failure to contrive a good image for television. They covered it straight: the controversy the remark generated and Agnew's apology.
 22. Quoted in interviews with the author, May 1989.
 23. The contrast is even greater if one sets aside the week before the election, when the 1988 figures were inflated by extended candidate interviews with anchors. This week aside, the speaking time accorded the candidates was 85 percent greater in 1968 than in 1988.
- This decrease in total speaking time is missed by one recent study, which sampled only the last week of the campaign. See William Edward Smith, "The Shrinking Sound Bite," unpublished manuscript, August 13, 1989. For another study based on a small sample of broadcasts, see Daniel C. Hallin, "The Coming of the Ten-Second Sound Bite: Changing Conventions in Television News, 1965-1985," unpublished manuscript.
24. The presidential aide is quoted in Schram (1982:26).
 25. I leave aside the question, much discussed but unresolved in the scholarly literature, whether a distinction should be made between "modernist" and "post-modernist" culture. See Steinberg (1972), Howe (1967), Taylor (1987), Trilling (1965), Bell (1980), and Cantor (1988).
 26. Stoppard (1982:58).
 27. Coplans (1970:10).
 28. Coplans (1970:5).
 29. Bell (1980:276).
 30. Quoted in Howe (1967:20).
 31. Slemmons (1989:112).
 32. Trilling (1965), *Beyond Culture*.
 33. See Sabato (1981), Neuman (1986), Nie, Verba and Petrocik (1979), Graber (1980) and Smith (1988).
 34. See Schram (1987), Hertsgaard (1988), Smith (1988).
 35. See Bagdikian (1982), Mickelson (1989), Jamieson and Cambell (1983), Graber (1980), Neuman (1986).
 36. Murrow is quoted in MacNeil (1968:18).
 37. Bagdikian (1982), Boyer (1988).
 38. Diamond (1987:30-33).
 38. Boyer (1988:141).
 39. Zirinsky is quoted in Schram (1987:55).
 40. Interview with author, December 1989.

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