

The History of Communications

The 2016 election took place against the backdrop of a recovering economy but a chaotic world scene. Voters faced a stark policy choice between Democrat Hillary Clinton and Republican Donald Trump. After serving as Secretary of State to President Barack Obama, Clinton sought to frame the campaign as a contest between two radically different temperaments. Through advertisements, social media, and campaign appeals, she portrayed Trump as a divisive man who was too erratic to be president. If elected, she claimed, he would pose tremendous risks for the country and the world.

New communications technologies were a big part of the outreach. The media environment included old channels, such as newspapers, radio, and television, but also a dizzying array of novel options such as Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, Snapchat, YouTube, and Google. Campaigners had to blend campaign appeals through various channels to an electorate highly segmented into different niches.

Billionaire Trump meanwhile called his opponent “crooked Hillary” and claimed she was not trustworthy and would not exercise good judgment as president. He promised to repeal Obamacare, build a wall along the southern border with Mexico, cut corporate and individual taxes, and rip up existing trade agreements. The former television reality star had over 12 million followers on Twitter and complained about Clinton’s use of a private e-mail server. In an outcome that shocked the experts, Trump lost the popular vote but defeated Clinton in the Electoral College.

In this as in other years, there were many efforts at campaign mobilization, targeting, turnout, and persuasion. However, not all communications produced the same results. Some ads and social media outreach efforts worked, whereas others did not. To determine which activities are effective, analysts must look at candidate strategies, media responses, and voter reactions. Through detailed studies of campaigns over the past several decades, this book shows how to assess political messages and their impact on the electorate.

FROM NEWSPAPERS AND TELEVISION TO THE INTERNET AND SOCIAL MEDIA

From the earliest days of the Republic, communications have been essential to political campaigns. During his races, Thomas Jefferson was accused of being

the “anti-Christ.” In 1828, handbills distributed by Andrew Jackson’s supporters portrayed John Quincy Adams as “driving off with a horsewhip a crippled old soldier who dared to speak to him, to ask an alms.” A circular distributed by Adams’s forces, meanwhile, attacked Jackson for “ordering other executions, massacring Indians, stabbing a Samuel Jackson in the back, murdering one soldier who disobeyed his commands, and hanging three Indians.”¹

The method, though perhaps not the tone, of communicating with the electorate has changed dramatically since 1828. Handbills have virtually disappeared. Radio became the most popular vehicle in the 1920s and 1930s. After World War II, television emerged as the advertising medium of choice for political candidates. And in the twenty-first century, the media marketplace has fragmented into a bewildering variety of communication options such as talk radio, the World Wide Web, social media, and late-night entertainment shows.

A new digital lexicon has appeared that distinguishes banner ads (large boxes that span the top of a website), interstitial ads (spots that flash while a website is being loaded), pop-up ads (spots that appear after a website is loaded), transactional ads (spots that allow viewers to make a purchase or request information), rich media ads (spots that have audio, video, or motion embedded within them), and vapor ads (spots that disappear quickly after airing).² Somehow, in this multifaceted situation, candidates must figure out how to reach voters who will decide key election contests.

The 1952 presidential campaign was the first one to feature television ads. In that year, each party ran television and print ads evoking World War II memories. Republicans, in an effort to support Gen. Dwight Eisenhower and break two decades of Democratic control, reminded voters in a *New York Times* ad that “one party rule made slaves out of the German people until Hitler was conquered by Ike.” Not to be outdone, Democratic ads informed voters that “General Hindenburg, the professional soldier and national hero, [was] also ignorant of domestic and political affairs. . . . The net result was his appointment of Adolf Hitler as Chancellor.”³

In the 1960s, television spots highlighted differences in candidates’ personal traits. The 1964 presidential campaign with Lyndon Johnson and Barry Goldwater was one of the most negative races since the advent of television. Johnson’s campaign characterized Goldwater as an extremist not to be trusted with America’s future. One five-minute ad, “Confession of a Republican,” proclaimed, “This man scares me. . . . So many men with strange ideas are working for Goldwater.”⁴ Johnson’s “Daisy” ad made a similar point in a more graphic manner. Along with speeches and news coverage, the visual image of a mushroom cloud rising behind a little girl picking daisies in a meadow helped raise doubts about Goldwater’s fitness for office in the nuclear age, even though a firestorm of protest forced the ad off the air after only one showing.

Ads in the 1970s and 1980s took advantage of public fear about the economy. When the United States started to experience the twin ills of inflation and unemployment, a phenomenon that led experts to coin a new word,

stagflation, campaign commercials emphasized economic themes. In 1980, Republican challenger Ronald Reagan effectively used ads to criticize economic performance under President Jimmy Carter. When the economy came roaring back in 1984, Reagan's serene "Morning in America" ad communicated the simple message that prosperity abounded and the United States was at peace.

The 1988 presidential contest was the zenith of attack politics in the post-World War II period. This campaign illustrated the powerful ability of ads to alter impressions of a candidate who was not well known nationally. Early in the summer of 1988, Massachusetts governor Michael Dukakis held a 17 percentage-point lead over his Republican rival, then vice president George H. W. Bush. Women preferred Dukakis over Bush by a large margin, and the governor was doing well among blacks, elderly citizens, and Democrats who previously had supported Reagan.

Meanwhile, Republicans were test marketing new advertising material. Over Memorial Day weekend in Paramus, New Jersey, Bush aides Jim Baker, Lee Atwater, Roger Ailes, Robert Teeter, and Nicholas Brady stood behind a one-way mirror observing a small group of so-called Reagan Democrats. Information concerning Willie Horton, a convicted black man who—while on furlough from a Massachusetts prison—brutally raped a white woman, was being presented, and the audience was quite disturbed. Atwater later boasted to party operatives, "By the time this election is over, Willie Horton will be a household name."⁵ Bush went on to beat Dukakis 53 percent to 46 percent.

The 1992 campaign represented the dangers of becoming overly reliant on attack ads and the power of thirty-minute "infomercials" by Reform Party candidate Ross Perot. Throughout the race, Bush used ads to attack Democratic nominee Bill Clinton's character and his record as governor of Arkansas. But unlike in his 1988 race, Bush did not prevail. The poor economy, the backlash that developed against Bush's advertising attacks, and Clinton's quick responses to criticisms led to Clinton beating Bush 43 percent to 38 percent. Perot finished in third place with 19 percent, the best showing for a third-party candidate since Theodore Roosevelt in 1912.

In 1996, President Clinton coasted to reelection through the help of ads broadcast more than a year before the election. With the advice of political strategist Dick Morris, Clinton defied the conventional wisdom arguing against early advertising. He ran ads both on television and over the Internet that positioned him as the bulwark against GOP extremism. Linking Republican nominee Bob Dole to unpopular House Speaker Newt Gingrich, Clinton portrayed the Republican Party as insensitive to women, children, and minorities and not to be trusted with important issues such as Social Security, Medicare, and education.

In 2000, Al Gore and George W. Bush ran in the closest presidential election in decades. Featuring advertising and websites that played to undecided voters, each candidate, along with outside groups, ran commercials that challenged the integrity and experience of the other. Bush emphasized education reform and what he called "compassionate conservatism," whereas Gore

focused on health care and Social Security. One Bush ad, popularly known as “RATS,” featured the use of a subliminal message when the word *RATS* was superimposed over a few frames criticizing Gore’s prescription drug plan.⁶ The election even saw a remake of the infamous 1964 “Daisy” ad (“Daisy II”), when a group of Texans paid for an ad with an image of a girl plucking petals off a daisy while an announcer complained that because of Clinton-Gore deals with “communist Red China” in return for campaign contributions, Democrats had compromised the country’s security and made the nation vulnerable to Chinese missile attacks.

In 2004, Bush used images of firefighters carrying victims away from the World Trade Center to explain how he was a “tested” individual who could provide steady leadership in turbulent times. At the same time, he characterized his opponent, Democrat John Kerry, as an unprincipled and untrustworthy “flip-flopper.” The campaign produced a commercial showing Senator Kerry windsurfing while a narrator intoned, “In which direction would John Kerry lead? Kerry voted for the Iraq War, opposed it, supported it, and now opposes it again. . . . John Kerry: Whichever way the wind blows.”⁷ Kerry, meanwhile, attacked Bush’s economic record and complained about Bush’s foreign policy. One advertisement said, “Only Herbert Hoover had a worse record on jobs.” Another spot showed a picture of Saudi Crown Prince Abdullah and suggested that “the Saudi royal family gets special favors, while our gas prices skyrocket.”⁸

The 2008 presidential campaign represented one of the most wide-open races in decades. There was no incumbent or heir apparent on the ballot of either major party. The result was that eight Democrats and nine Republicans sought their party’s nomination. These included a woman (Hillary Clinton), an African American (Barack Obama), a Hispanic (Bill Richardson), a Mormon (Mitt Romney), and a former prisoner of war (John McCain).

Candidate Barack Obama pioneered several innovative uses of digital technology. With the help of the Internet, he raised \$745 million. He made use of social media platforms such as Facebook and MySpace to identify and communicate with supporters around the country. And through Meetup.com, he launched virtual get-togethers with voters in many different locales simultaneously.⁹

Obama said McCain represented “Bush’s third term” and that his GOP rival was not the party maverick he claimed to be. Noting that the country was mired in a financial meltdown and engulfed in controversial wars in Iraq and Afghanistan, Obama broadcast advertisements explaining that he represented “Change We Can Believe In.” His commercials linked McCain to unpopular GOP president George W. Bush with the slogan “More of the Same.” Employing McCain’s own words from the nominating process, Obama criticized the Arizona senator for supporting Bush 90 percent of the time.

For his part, McCain ran a scorched-earth strategy that characterized Obama as a tax-and-spend liberal whose philosophy bordered on socialism.

One ad hammered Obama with the attack of “Higher Taxes. More Spending. Not Ready.” In the end, though, people’s fears about the national economy led Obama to a win over his Republican rival and thereby allowed him to become America’s first African American president.

The 2012 election took place against the backdrop of high unemployment, polarized rhetoric, and a stark policy choice between incumbent president Barack Obama and Republican Mitt Romney. After winning a historic victory in 2008, Obama’s party lost control of the House of Representatives in 2010 and faced a dismal economy in the run-up to the general election. Obama sought to frame the race as a choice between two radically different policy visions. Through advertisements, social media, and campaign appeals, he portrayed Republicans as “Social Darwinists” who wanted to dismantle programs protecting the middle class in favor of tax cuts for the wealthy.

Romney meanwhile claimed that Obama was not up to the job and failed to deliver on the changes he had promised. Government deficits were too high, and Obama’s policies on taxes, the budget, health care, and energy were stifling economic growth and innovation. The GOP nominee built on a very successful first debate against Obama to position himself as a calm, experienced, and reasonable alternative. But in the end, Obama won a second term.

BROADCASTING STRATEGIES

In the modern era, advertising has evolved through four types of strategies: broadcasting, narrowcasting, microcasting, and nanocasting. A broadcasting approach seeks to reach millions of voters through television networks. It was most common in the 1950s and 1960s, when television was the dominant medium and the three major networks reached 95 percent of the news audience.¹⁰ This was the heyday of the networks due to the control over content and the television airwaves.

Candidates interested in reaching voters needed to target broad audiences, and they did so by concentrating the vast bulk of their ad dollars on the three TV networks. They would buy time on leading network news shows and around entertainment segments featuring large audiences. Because commercials were designed to persuade broad swaths of the electorate, messages often focused on basic values and widely held beliefs. This helped candidates make compelling advertisements and win support.

An example of this approach took place in 1960 between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon. The race was very competitive, and each candidate focused his ad buys on the television networks. Between the first-ever televised presidential debates and the network advertisements, 1960 was considered the first television-oriented campaign. When Kennedy did well in the debates and won with ads highlighting his youthful energy and interest in “getting the country going again,” it reinforced reliance on a broad-based strategy.

NARROWCASTING

In the 1970s and 1980s, technological and operations changes led to a focus on narrowcasting. Rather than target broad parts of the electorate through network commercials, candidates made use of newly emerging cable television outlets to focus on hundreds of thousands as opposed to millions of viewers. With the expansion of news channels from three or four to several dozen in most communities, the news audience fragmented into smaller niches. It became possible for political aspirants to narrow their vote search and appeal to voters based on specific as opposed to general interests.

Ad placement emphasized network shows or cable channels that had known demographics. Candidates could target women, Christians, sports enthusiasts, or senior citizens, depending on the desired target group. Because particular entertainment shows such as the situation comedy *Maude* appealed particularly to liberal women, candidates interested in that voting bloc could run ads on cable stations running those episodes. Similarly, the show *The Golden Girls*, with leading characters who were elderly or widowed, attracted viewer audiences who were older. This enabled candidates to run ads around those shows and thereby target elderly voters.¹¹

The new technology and fragmented audiences enabled by cable television opened up new styles of campaigning. Candidates no longer were restricted to areas of widespread agreement. They could identify specific topics about which voters felt strongly and appeal to smaller groups that felt intensely about certain issues. Even if they were targeting particular groups, they could do well if their ads mobilized those who cared about abortion, guns, or international turmoil.

One individual who did well in this environment was Reagan. His grassroots support was concentrated among voters who felt strongly about downsizing government, overturning the *Roe v. Wade* abortion decision, protecting gun rights, and being tough on foreign policy. Cable television provided a means to reach out to those individuals and talk about those issues. When the economy suffered in the late 1970s and there was concern over foreign policy, Reagan had opportunities to target his appeals and win the presidency over Jimmy Carter.

MICROCASTING

The creation of the Internet in 1991 opened up new opportunities for advertising and voter outreach. Websites formed that were devoted to micro-niches composed of tens of thousands of adherents. News sites put together by various Internet browsers featured groups devoted to issues ranging from gardening and medical care to travel and entertainment. On these sites, viewers could learn the latest in their particular area of interest and stay up to date on those topics.

Taking advantage of this technology, candidates started to run ads on websites where they saw a commonality of interests. If health care represented

a major theme for their candidacy, they could focus on sites emphasizing medical issues. This allowed them to appeal to voters in more specific ways than was possible in the eras dominated by network or cable television. They could slice and dice the electorate with far greater precision.

Candidates such as Al Gore and George W. Bush shifted a portion of their advertising budgets from television to Internet-based spots. As they saw voters migrating from traditional to digital news sources, they followed them with advertisements, hoping to swap their political judgments. In close races, it was possible to “play to the political base” and turn out sufficient voters in order to win the election. Although these strategies increased the sharpness of the rhetoric and political polarization between the Left and Right, anything that moved a small number of voters in key states represented a winning formula.

Bush strategists, for example, targeted anti-gay marriage messages to conservative black voters in Ohio and raised his vote from 9 percent in 2000 to 16 percent in 2004. Because blacks comprised about 10 percent of the Buckeye electorate, this improved his support by more than 56,000 votes. Given that he carried the state by around 118,000 votes, Bush organizers argued they were able to double the size of his Ohio margin through microtargeting strategies.¹²

NANOCASTING

The rise in the twenty-first century of social media, mobile technology, and geolocation devices that can pinpoint people's specific location enabled the customization and personalization of campaign messaging. Using highly targeted ads on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Google, candidates can reach down to tiny niches based on dozens of people (or even single individuals) and seek to influence their voting and campaign behavior. For example, when people searched for information on Paul Ryan, the 2012 Republican vice presidential candidate, there were GOP links saying he was part of “America's Comeback Team” and a Democratic site asking voters to “get the facts about the architect of the extreme GOP budget plan.”¹³ The campaigns took advantage not just of television demographics but also recreational decisions, house size, and credit card purchases to target electoral messages.

Research has shown that social media sharing enhances political persuasion. A randomized analysis of campaign messages sent to 61 million Facebook users found that they “directly influenced political self-expression, information seeking and real-world voting behavior of millions of people. Furthermore, the messages not only influenced the users who received them but also the users' friends, and friends of friends. The effect of social transmission on real-world voting was greater than the direct effect of the messages themselves.”¹⁴

By 2015, 68 percent of American adults owned smartphones (up from 44 percent in 2012 and 14 percent in 2008), and people were using them to obtain a wide range of online information.¹⁵ Candidates posted ads and videos on Facebook, Twitter, Instagram, and Snapchat as well as their campaign websites.

Donald Trump attracted considerable attention with an Instagram video that accused former president Bill Clinton of sexually assaulting two women, Juanita Broaddrick and Kathleen Willey. The spot featured an image of him smoking a cigar and described the women's allegations. It closed by asking "Is Hillary Really Protecting Women?"¹⁶

With the growth of mobile phones and geolocation devices, political operatives have turned to online advertising, videos, and live streaming as ways to persuade voters. For example, people who attended the Minnesota State Fair and had a smartphone received targeted ads on their mobile devices from Michele Bachmann's congressional campaign informing them that her opponent supported food tax increases. "I know it's state fair time and you don't want to hear about politics," the ad announced. "But while you're at the fair, you should know that Tarryl Clark here voted to raise taxes on your corn dog and your deep-fried bacon and your beer."¹⁷ The campaign was able to target this ad only to those individuals who were within a two-mile radius of the state fair.

Geolocation features enable candidates to target ads geographically on specific events. For example, voters attending the Iowa caucuses got mobile ads targeted on caucus-goers. Candidates have the same capability for individuals who attend specific speeches or campaign rallies. "Campaigns want to reach voters where they are," indicated Rob Saliterman of Google Advertising. "And because of that, I think we'll see more [mobile advertising]."¹⁸

Voters have gotten "geo-targeted" mobile ads when they attended a Texas Rangers World Series game (sponsored by an Arlington, Texas, congressional candidate endorsed by Rangers owner Nolan Ryan), a NASA shuttle launch (sent by a Florida Senate candidate claiming incumbent senator Bill Nelson supported ending the space program), or the University of Virginia (originated by Rep. Tom Perriello, hoping to mobilize the youth vote).

Some campaigns even targeted individual voters using profiles compiled from multiple databases. For example, the Obama campaign sent messages "asking supporters on its email list to contact specific individuals in states with early voting to remind them to vote." The organization took information that voters made available from Facebook and matched them to personal contacts from their acquaintances. Because that social media site includes information on geographic location, this enabled targeted messaging based on key states with early voting provisions. Romney had a similar operation called "Commit to Mitt" that "connects supporters to voters in swing states via Facebook."¹⁹

In 2016, Republican Trump took to live streaming interviews through Facebook Live as a way to bypass the traditional media and reach his supporters. Produced by his own campaign, the shows had panel discussions, conversations with campaign strategists, and interviews with the candidate and his children. They featured cable crawls along the bottom of the screen and onscreen graphics to illustrate key messages. His campaign operative Boris Epshteyn bragged that "we're excited to be bypassing the left-wing media" through this means.²⁰

Candidates like social media, mobile advertising, and live streaming because of its highly targeted nature. According to experts,

the process for targeting a user with political messages takes three steps. The first two are common to any online marketing: a “cookie,” or digital marker, is dropped on a user’s computer after the user visits a Web site or makes a purchase, and that profile is matched with offline data like what charities a person supports, what type of credit card a person has and what type of car he or she drives. The political consultants then take a third step and match that data with voting records, including party registration and how often the person has voted in past election cycles.²¹

Campaigns also run ads based on certain Internet searches that people perform. Through Google or Microsoft’s Bing, organizers can target ads based on searches for immigration reform, abortion rights, the right to bear arms, national security, or other terms. In 2012, for example, the Obama campaign bought Google ads for people who searched for “Warren Buffett,” “Obama singing,” “Obama birthday,” or “Obama bracket.” Romney, meanwhile, purchased ads around people who searched for his father, George Romney, a former presidential candidate.²²

Analysis has found that voters skew in partisan ways through the Internet activities in which they engage and the restaurants they frequent.²³ For example, Democrats are more likely to visit dating sites, download video games or movies, search for jobs online, or use instant messaging, whereas Republicans use the Internet to check sports scores, access financial information, go to auction sites, make travel reservations, or examine real estate listings. Democrats also are more likely to dine at Church’s Chicken, Chuck E. Cheese, Popeye’s, and White Castle, whereas Republicans prefer Cracker Barrel, Macaroni Grill, Bob Evans, and Outback Steakhouse.²⁴ These variations in voter preferences allow candidates to target voters that have the greatest likelihood of supporting their particular campaigns.

Republicans sometimes get less impact for their ad dollars. A study undertaken by Gregory Martin and Zachary Peskowitz of Emory University demonstrated that GOP candidates in 2010, 2012, and 2014 garnered almost 40 percent fewer ad impressions than Democrats because “firms working for Republican candidates charge higher prices, exert less effort, and induce less responsiveness in their clients’ advertising expenditures to electoral circumstances.”²⁵ This shows that it is not enough to compare expenditures, but researchers need information on ad rates and purchase strategies.

CONCLUSION

Political communications have evolved considerably over the past few decades. As technology has shifted from network and cable television to the Internet,

mobile phones, and geolocation devices, candidates have altered their outreach strategies. They have moved from broadcasting strategies focused on television networks reaching large, mainstream audiences to web and data-driven social media outreach designed to appeal to nano-niches of specialized voters. The result has been a diverse range of ways in which political aspirants appeal to voters and difficulties in determining what really works.

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