

A Qualitative Exploration into Voters' Ethical Perceptions of Political Advertising: Discourse, Disinformation, and Moral Boundaries

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ABSTRACT. Political campaign advertising continues to be a controversial policy topic in advertising and marketing research. It is also a prime subject for investigating the ethical evaluations of consumers (or voters). The following study draws from postmodern communication theory and employs a qualitative research methodology in order to explore voters' intimate and subjective views about politics, candidates, and political advertising. The findings include emergent themes relating to significant media rituals in voters' lives, the cynical perspective of politics as a 'game', and the widespread disapproval and suspicion with which voters regard negative political advertising. Additionally, the *a priori* theme of political information as 'disinformation' was proposed and expanded upon. Findings are discussed in light of a greater understanding of the appropriateness of the traditional versus the postmodern perspective of political communication, informants' construction of 'moral boundaries' which help them determine right from wrong, acceptable vs. unacceptable political behaviours in this particular context.

Introduction

Since President Eisenhower used television commercials in his 1952 presidential campaign in the United States, academics and critics have expressed their concern that politicians are marketing themselves 'like soap' or are somehow devaluing the democratic political system. Since this time, politicians have employed the media in many and varied contexts, ostensibly using it to create and develop their images, explain their platforms, and communicate various types of messages to the public.

Many academics have studied the effects of political advertising. In a recent comprehensive article, Faber (1992) summarized the relevant research, reaching the conclusion that various streams of research have evolved. The so-called 'limited effects' model (see Rothschild, 1978) of the 1950's and 1960's has given way to a contingency perspective. Political advertising is believed to work under certain conditions for certain types of voters and for certain types of purposes such as image development, agenda setting, or attacking opponents. The types of questions which have been asked (and indeed, are still being asked) include the following: can political advertising determine the electorate's issue agenda (Iyengar and Kinder, 1985)? Do negative spots have the potential to damage the opponent's credibility and image (James and Hensen, 1991; Johnson-Cartee and Copeland, 1991; Pfau and Kenski, 1990; Hill, 1989; Merritt, 1984)? Can political advertising enhance the sponsor candidate's image and chances of being elected (Meadows and Sigelman, 1982)?

Another stream of research, just as critical but not as extensive as the previous one, seeks to explore the ethical nature of political advertising, rather than its efficacy under various conditions (Banker, 1992; Kaid, 1991; Cooper, 1991; Cronbeck, 1991; Sabato, 1981). This kind of inquiry asks the following types of questions: does political advertising encourage or discourage voters from participating, thus promoting or harming the democratic process? Do politicians exaggerate claims or stretch the truth, creating a negative impression of the political system (Garramone, Atkin, Pinkleton, and Cole, 1990)?

Can negative advertising create a cynical environment in which voters are discouraged from voting? Can advertising from independent parties (commonly known as political action committees or PAC's) influence voters to favour special interests such as anti-abortion or free trade (Garramone and Smith, 1984; Garramone, 1985)?

These latter types of questions are undoubtedly critical in a democratic political system, as they allude to the perplexing issue of the societal effects of marketing and advertising. So controversial are these questions that various governments, including those of Canada, Great Britain and the United States, have attempted to place restrictions upon political communications during elections through their respective legislative bodies (Michalos, 1991; Lacznik and Caywood, 1987; Elebash, 1984; Szybillo and Heretenbaum (1976). Usually these bills are denounced as infringements upon the right to free expression in a democratic society and are challenged in the courts. Yet, the uneasy question still remains: do the marketing activities of political activities have potentially deleterious influence upon voter turnout and widespread attitudes toward politicians?

Previous academic studies, including Garramone et al.'s (1990) have argued that the threat is more imagined than real. Yet, the media have generally decried certain campaign activities such as the controversial 'Willie Horton' ad (The Economist, January 25, 1992) of the presidential campaign of 1988. Academic work has previously focused upon experimental studies of the psychological effects of particular ads (Garramone et al., 1990; Hill, 1989; Kaid and Boydston, 1987; Garramone, 1984; Garramone, 1985; Garramone and Smith, 1984; Merritt, 1984; Kaid, 1976). While these studies are enlightening up to a point, they do have serious limitations which leads one to question the dubious conclusion that political ads do not harm or prevent a healthy political debate from occurring during election time. First, often studies use students and thus, do not take into account the views of voters who are from different socio-economic groups, age groups, or other demographic categories. Further, and perhaps more seriously, an

experimental study is unable to capture the attitudes and thoughts of voters during an entire campaign. The holistic nature or entirety of the process is left out (Johnson-Cartee and Copeland, 1991). Longitudinal studies, or those investigating effects over an appropriate period of time, are virtually unknown. Certainly, one polisplot may or may not have the effect of alienating some voters. However, during a campaign which runs over the course of weeks or months, a voter may be left with an impression which is entirely independent of his or her sentiments toward one political commercial.

A campaign is a conglomerate of political ads, media coverage, other campaign activities (such as debates and leaflets), and a number of other potential influences. Furthermore, much of the environment's external stimuli is viewed from the perspective of candidates' prior knowledge and opinions concerning candidates or issues. Thus, in order to build upon and extend our current understanding of political advertising's impact in society, a phenomenological study was performed here, exploring a small sample of voters, to understand and expand upon their intimate, detailed knowledge and sentiments concerning campaign advertising and political communication.

The ethics of political communication

Ethics is, essentially, the discipline of determining what one ought and out not to do (Tsalikis and Fritzsche, 1989). Over the last decade, there has been considerable work in marketing research studying business ethics (for a comprehensive review, please see Tsalikis and Fritzsche, 1989) in various situations (Armstrong, 1992; Vitell and Muncy, 1992; Hunt and Chonko, 1987; Krohn and Milner, 1989), and in developing a valid scale of measuring evaluations of marketing activities (Reidenbach, Robin, and Dawson, 1991; Reidenbach and Robin, 1990, 1988). Political advertising has also been discussed from an ethical perspective, with Banker (1992) arguing that negative political advertising in particular is acceptable as another source of information in the general 'marketplace of ideas' and Kaid

(1991) reviewing various pertinent issues relating to the ethical nature of political ads: the truthfulness of the ads, their manipulative qualities, and their deceptive technical attributes.

What seems to unite the body of literature in this area is the positivistic, quantitative orientation and the implicit assumption that consumers (or voters) and actors in the private (or public) realms are able to evaluate information in a rational, meaningful manner. This 'traditional' approach which stresses open debate, choice, rationality, and democratic process may be contrasted with a postmodern one which would explicitly challenge the notion that voters are in any position to evaluate the veracity of claims, offer resistance to persuasion, or meaningfully participate in the political system (Cooper, 1991).

As an alternative to the traditional approach (Cooper, 1991), the postmodern perspective on ethics, as expressed by the French philosopher Michel Foucault (1980, 1985), views the voter to be entrapped in a number of previously created political 'discourses' – defined here as the structuring of reality or the web of historical, social, political, linguistic and cultural forces which shape the world (Pronger, 1990). Ethics, furthermore, is defined as the relationships one ought to have with oneself and with others (Foucault, 1980). In contrast to the traditional perspective which might ask "is 'truth' present in the various forms of political communications?", the postmodern perspective begins by questioning whether the assumptions of freedom and choice within the existing political discourse are valid, legitimate ones, for if they are not, then it is irrelevant whether or not 'truth' is contained within the advertisements or not. For example, if a voter is unable or unwilling to evaluate the rational claims in a polisplot (due to cynicism, antipathy toward government or politicians, laziness, or other reasons), then he or she cannot become persuaded of the truth. As a minimum, the political process must provide "truth, adequate information, and access to channels of communication" (Cooper, 1991, p. 25). It is with these very basic assumptions which the postmodernist perspective takes issue as expressed quite succinctly by Cooper (1991):

. . . unlike the traditional approaches that take individual freedom and choice as the ground for what constitutes ethical behaviour, postmodern approaches take such individual freedom and choice to be the end that ethical behaviour seeks. Consequently, political advocacy can be examined for its impact on individual freedom and choice.

In the postmodern view, the assumptions or givens become problematics, according to Foucault. If the political discourse is such that the voter is, in fact, unable or unwilling to rationally evaluate a campaign or participate in the democratic process – or is subjected to a plethora of ads which are sponsored and financed by special interests (which may include those of mainstream political parties) – then the 'marketplace of ideas' concept described previously becomes a problematic. Political problematics may include

. . . the categories of the rhetorical situation. It tells us neither why certain occasions, speakers, and topics are privileged, nor what unspoken interests are served, nor what audiences [are] excluded (Charland, 1990, p. 262).

In other words, the participation of the ordinary citizen is significantly constrained by the boundaries of the 'received view' of established discourse (Foucault, 1980). Within this theoretical framework, it is questionable whether one may conceptualize the voter as a rational being exercising reasonable and independent judgment within the context of, say, the central route of the Elaboration Likelihood Model, for example (Petty and Cacioppo, 1983; Cacioppo and Petty, 1985).

If one accepts that so-called rational persuasion is not always occurring in the minds of the electorate, just what is happening? While not explicitly eluded to in the literature on political communication, it is likely that the public is receiving and absorbing quantities of 'disinformation' during an election campaign. Disinformation, a term used extensively in the field of military intelligence, is defined as follows:

. . . The dissemination of deliberately false information especially when supplied by government or its agents to a foreign power or to the media, with

the intention of influencing the policies or opinions of those who receive it; false information so supplied (The Oxford English Dictionary; 2nd edition, 1989).

The disinformation point of view (which will constitute the single *a priori* theme of this research, the rest being emergent ones), while harmonious with the postmodern view of communication ethics (Foucault, 1984), is not entirely incongruous with more traditional perspectives which do explicitly recognize the false or misleading nature of some polispots (see Kaid, 1991 for a comprehensive summary of specifically how ads may be false or misleading). What appears to be the difference between the traditional view and the postmodernist one is that with the former, it is automatically assumed that voters will be able and willing to recognize the duplicity of misinformation in the vast 'marketplace of ideas' (Banker, 1992) and adjust their opinions and evaluations appropriately. The latter view, however, is more likely to postulate that disinformation becomes a critical element of accepted discourse, adding oppressive weight in maintaining the current balance of power. An analogy similar to this situation is described in George Orwell's classic *1984* in which the Ministry of Truth (which was in charge of lies) routinely disseminated false information which was subsequently processed as 'doublethink' – Orwell's term for the complex web of lies, deceit, and fabrications (i.e. disinformation) which constituted his fictional world's political reality or discourse.

The purpose of the present study is to investigate voters' personal experiences with political advertising and with disinformation. Some of the questions which this study attempted to explore, in the phenomenological tradition, are as follows: Are voters aware of or critical of the type of information they are receiving in political polispots? Do they trust it and do they seem to be 'taken in' by it? Most importantly, do they consciously construct 'moral boundaries' which dictate standards acceptable versus unacceptable, right versus wrong as applied to this political marketing context? What is the level of their apparent sophistication? The methodology of the

study, the findings, and a discussion of these findings with implications for future work will now follow.

Methodology

Qualitative methodology and phenomenological techniques have made considerable progress over the last ten years in fields such as marketing research or consumer research (Hirschman, 1991; O'Guinn and Feber, 1989; Calder and Tybout, 1987; Lincoln and Guba, 1987; Hirschman, 1986; Kvale, 1983; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The purpose of such work is to explore the consumer (or voter's) subjective, personal 'lived experience' in rich, thick descriptive terms. While a number of researchers have researched and written upon qualitative research methods such as McCracken (1986), Murray and Ozanne (1991), and Hirschman (1986), all of the qualitative perspective share in common an origin of phenomenology which endeavours to penetrate, understand, and illuminate the subjective world view of the participant. While these types of methods (such as personal interviews or focus groups) do not make general claims to external validity among large populations of consumers, they do have the advantage of being able to explore the whole or 'gestalt' of a phenomenon among smaller samples, arriving at enlightening and useful observations. Often, common patterns and categories arise among participants which provoke other questions for further research, often of a quantitative nature.

In this study, ten participants, five men and five women, all of whom are eligible voters in the Canadian system, were selected through personal contacts of the author. Care was taken to ensure that the participants came from diverse ranges of ages and occupations. A listing of the participants with some relevant information is given in the Figure. Once selected, long interviews (one per informant) of approximately one hour and a half to two hours as described by McCracken (1988) were conducted by the author during the spring of 1993 (after both the Canadian constitutional referendum and the American presidential election in 1992) in order to probe in depth the

Name	Sex	Age	Comments
Jack	M	43	Architect; voted in last federal general election and in last federal referendum
Ruby	F	51	Retired; voted in last federal election and in last federal referendum
George	M	48	Office manager; voted in last federal election and in last federal referendum
Suzanne	F	24	Secretary; voted in last federal referendum
Arthur	M	18	High school student; has never voted but is eligible to vote in upcoming federal election
Cari	F	22	Undergraduate arts student; voted in last federal election and in last federal referendum
Martin	M	35	Interior designer; voted in last federal election and in last federal referendum
Francine	F	29	Factor worker; voted in last federal election
Beatric	F	77	Retired; voted in last federal election and in last federal referendum
Murray	M	44	Electrician; voted in last federal election and in last federal referendum

Figure.

participants' memories, attitudes, opinions, political identity, ideologies 'moral codes,' and experience regarding political communications. Ten participants exceeds the number recommended by McCracken (which is eight) and is considered appropriate for research of this type. Interviewing was performed until redundancy of themes was discovered. At first, 'grand tour' questions were asked concerning participants media exposure and personal politics. As the interviews progressed, more penetrating questions were asked regarding political advertising, views on political leaders and past campaigns, and opinions, sentiments and subjective 'codes of conduct' about the commercials they have personally experienced.

In order to obtain informants, I networked among my acquaintances in order to find inter-

ested volunteers who are willing to devote the time. I attempted to interview a diversity of informants on the criteria of gender, age, and race in order to receive diverse perspectives which would both reinforce and challenge my interpretations. Thus, the age dispersion of the males and females was coincidental. As the author, I was also the interviewer and interpreter of the interviews. I do not claim that this small sample is representative of the general Canadian, American or North American population, and the qualitative, humanistic perspective in which I am working precludes extrapolation or generalizability. I also asked informants about their voting habits, attitudes toward politicians and political parties, attitudes toward and beliefs about positive and negative advertisements, media habits or regimens, political ideologies espoused,

interest in the issues, and particularly, I asked them to tell me what issues they believed were important and whether political parties and elections focused upon these issues.

During the interviews, rapport was generally established between the interviewer and the participant. While participants were somewhat uncertain of what was expected at first, they quickly 'warmed' to the topic, expressing with candour their opinions of political campaigns, advertising, political parties, and political leaders. 'Leading' questions were avoided. Rather, the interviewer attempted to capture the participants' independent views of the political world while imposing a minimum of structure and personal viewpoint upon them.

Once the interviews were audiotaped, transcribed and read over several times, the researcher attempted to 'sift' through the data which was generated. Comparative analysis was made between interviews to find differences and commonalities among participants. In keeping with a phenomenological approach, rather than attempting to impose a preconceived interpretive framework upon the data, I searched for emergent themes which are largely dictated by the participants' subject lived experience of political activity and exposure to media, and are empirically grounded in the data itself.

Obviously, the postmodernist perspective in itself dictates a certain bias and an existing predisposition toward the evaluation of the type of information under enquiry. The *a priori* labelling of even some political ads as 'disinformation' is a value judgment. In order to ensure the integrity of the research findings, I took extra caution to appear neutral during the field research so that the participants in the study would not be prejudiced. I accomplished this goal by reassuring the informants that I was not involved with any political party, that their views would be respected and faithfully conveyed, that their identities would be kept confidential, and my primary interest was to discover their own views on political advertising, media, and political parties.

As a final step in the process, the participants were presented with the themes which the researcher believed relevant to their own inter-

views. Such member checks are recommended to ensure the trustworthiness of the interpretations (Lincoln and Guba, 1987; Kvale, 1983; Glaser and Strauss, 1967). The emergent themes were further discussed with the participants in order to clear up any misunderstandings which may have occurred and to further elaborate upon the meanings of the themes. In almost of all the cases, the participants agreed that the interviewer had faithfully and clearly presented the information and perspectives which they had originally attempted to convey.

Findings: The ethical nature of political communication

After reading and interpreting the data and comparing the various interviews, a number of coherent themes suggested themselves. These themes or patterns constitute underlying ideas or central topics of interests which are shared by the majority of subjects. In much of the qualitative literature, themes are either *a priori* (that is, suggested by the review of relevant literature performed prior to the research and expected to be found in the data) or emergent, the latter being those which suggest themselves to the interpreter after the data is read several times and cross-compared. As stated previously, the one *a priori* theme is the recognition of political advertising as 'disinformation'. The emergent themes which arose from the data itself are as follows: the central place of media rituals – particularly those including television – in voters' lives (which is reviewed as instrumental in the search for objectivity), politics as a game to be fought and won, and the perceived unethical nature of the tactics employed in negative political ads.

Media rituals and the search for objectivity

The centrality and importance of media rituals – repeated, scripted, and serious actions which take on a major significance and formality in a person's day to day life (Rook, 1985) – became immediately apparent during the interviews.

When asked whether they read newspapers, magazines, or watched news on the television, participants automatically responded with long lists of their daily media viewing activities. Here, 'Jack', one of the participants, describes his daily media 'regimen':

I have a regime which I follow. In the morning, it's CBC morning news on the radio at six, NBC news on T.V. at six-thirty. I read the Globe [and Mail] newspaper in the morning if I have time. There's lots of news so I pick out bits and pieces. Then there's CBC T.V. in the evening . . . – Jack

Well developed media rituals had a place in every single participant's life:

I watch the news whenever I'm bored and there's nothing else to do, or while eating dinner. – Arthur

A critical feature of the media rituals is the selectivity of the participants in accepting or rejecting certain communication messages. The interviewees unanimously agreed that they use a great deal of the media (television and newspapers), and this overwhelming amount of information gives them the opportunity to decide for themselves what is true or not and evaluate accordingly:

You gotta be choosy about what you watch. What I mean is that there's lots of [news] shows, and you have to watch a few of them to get a good idea of what's really going on. – Francine

It's not very good [coverage of political events]. It's fairly distorted. You have to read many articles to find little bits of information. – George

The Conscious acceptance and rejection of both news and political advertising lends some empirical credence to Banker's (1992) conceptualization of a marketplace of ideas in which everyone is free to choose among various reports and for his or her own opinion. Indeed, each participant in the study was absorbed in discovering "what was 'really' going on" in the world, paradoxically pursuing a subjective search for objectivity and truth. One of the chief criticisms of both media coverage of politics and political ads was that they were not 'objective' enough:

It's necessary to watch a lot of programs to get a balanced point of view . . . [news programs] seem to be somewhat more objective and detailed and appeal to people's rationality rather than their emotions. – Ruby

On the other hand, campaign political ads in a recent Canadian referendum initiative:

. . . didn't allow people to sit back and have an objective view of the issues. – Ruby

Overall, objectivity emerged as a central feature and a necessary condition for communication ethics in political advertising. Participants agreed that for a communication to be "okay" or moral and its sponsors to be behaving in an ethical manner, the information contained therein must be perceived, to a significant degree, as being free from bias. Objectivity was described in various ways by participants including "logical argumentation free of emotions", "a balanced point of view", "what the hell is really going on in the world", and "accurate and complete information". What participants implicitly recognize is that while elements of the communication environment may contain lies or distortions, it is their responsibility to obtain enough information in order to discount falsehoods and forge their own version of the truth. In this manner, communication ethics may be ensured by the individual utilizing the media.

Most interestingly, it was agreed among participants that the news provided much more in depth and objective issue coverage and analysis than political ads do. This finding is in direct contradiction to Patterson and McClure's (1974) observation that political ads generally are more issue oriented than news coverage, the latter tending to cover campaign events without going into detail or depth on issue analysis. It could be speculated that in twenty years following the publication of their book, *The Unseeing Eye*, news coverage has gradually evolved into a more analytical and critical vehicle (particularly after the Watergate scandal), offering more analysis AND a wider variety of news programming to viewers. All speculation aside, nevertheless, political ads were viewed as peripheral and relatively unimportant in the context of various media rituals

and in the pursuit of objectivity, while news programming was, overall, considered indispensable:

Political ads, no matter if they're positive or negative will only tell you what the powerful political parties WANT you to know. If you don't watch the news, you won't get the facts, you won't get analysis, you won't get an idea of what's going on. I don't know how anyone votes if they don't watch any news . . . – Murray

And perhaps the most serious indictment of political advertising and of advertising in general in relation to the search for objectivity and truth is expressed in the following assertion:

Advertising by definition isn't complete and accurate. That's why it's called advertising. Otherwise, it would be called information. It's very biased information in the sense that it propagates a point of view. – Ruby

Politics as a game

Both the popular press and academics have noted widespread voter cynicism and disenchantment with the political process and government (Cooper, 1991; Kaid, 1991; Gagnon and Rath, 1991; Maclean's, January 7, 1991). Even the interviewer (who was expecting some degree of pessimism toward the subject matter after reviewing the literature and watching extensive media coverage of the 1992 presidential election) was unprepared by the participants' high level of cynicism, anger, and disgust directed toward politicians, government, and the electoral process. In this context, political advertising was viewed as a tactic in a 'game', a term used by many of those interviewed. Participants expressed the unambiguous opinion that politicians were often involved in playing a game in which political power was the stakes and would go to great lengths to 'win'. The terminal objective of this game (i.e. the election) was strictly victory. According to the subjects, achievements in office and serving the public was incidental or peripheral to the all-consuming goal of obtaining office. Participants referred often to the recent Canadian referendum (in which voters were expected

by the Progressive Conservative government to approve critical changes to the Canadian Constitution) in expressing their skepticism concerning the political process:

. . . I don't know. It depends on the intent [of the political ad]. I got the sense that the idea was to win a Yes vote notwithstanding anything, win the game by getting a Yes vote. – Jack

Do you think half of those ***** in power give a ***** what the average Canadian voter wants or needs? Mulroney was trying to win greater glory for Mulroney, not for the Canadian people. By scaring everyone into voting for the referendum, he would have pulled off a victory for his own government. It's just a game, and the government spent millions of OUR money to win . . . for itself. – Murray

In the context of viewing elections as a game to be won, the ethics of politicians, their ads, and the process itself becomes suspect. Tactics such as political advertising or other forms of campaigning are degraded to the level of 'play'. As a result, the messages are viewed with suspicion, and the motives of those sponsoring them are attributed to the goal of winning, not to any desire to serve the public:

What if we take the benefit of the doubt and say that Prime Minister Mulroney believed in his heart and soul and his mind that the economy would collapse [if voters voted No in the referendum]? But I don't believe that. So he may have been lying, or might have been playing a game. The extent of the negativity [referring to certain advertisements sponsored by the government during the referendum], how it's presented to instill panic, and it's strictly without a moral background to it. – Jack

According to the participants in this study, in the game which politicians routinely play during election time, truth, morality, and faith in the political process are the most serious casualties. Political advertising only serves to widely reinforce this pessimistic outlook.

The perceived unethical nature of negative political ads

Previous research has suggested that while voters generally disapprove of negative political advertising, they do learn considerable amounts of information from it (Johnson-Cartee and Copeland, 1991). This has often been attributed to the involving nature of negative information and the resulting depth of cognitive processing (Johnson-Cartee and Copeland, 1991; Kanouse, 1984; Fiske, 1980; Kanouse and Hanson, 1971). The data collected in this study, for the most part, do not contradict these previous findings. One must question, however, the type of information which voters recall. Overwhelmingly, the participants mentioned the alleged affair between Gennifer Flowers and then governor Bill Clinton and the draft issue, two themes which the Republicans publicized during the 1992 presidential election. Mentions of policy issues such as health care reform and the state of the economy were considerably more rare. This phenomenon may be explained by the Canadian voters' lack of interest in specifically American policy issues, but given the great amounts of American news to which Canadians are exposed, it does not reflect any lack of knowledge. It appears as if the voters interviewed here recalled the most irrelevant (according to their own evaluations) information to rational decision making.

Negative political advertising was often labelled as "extreme", "fear-mongering", and "scare tactics", aimed at damaging the relationship of trust between the voters and the candidate (Roberts, 1991). Consistent with prior research, negative advertising which attacks upon personal characteristics was judged by the participants as unacceptable, unethical and unfair 'play' (Johnson-Cartee and Copeland, 1991). Negative advertising which attacks upon the basis of issues, however, was considered more acceptable, but with significant qualification:

What I remember is that the Conservatives' ad for the referendum were saying something like 'vote for the deal or it'll destroy the country'. That's an issue, I suppose, and it was certainly very negative but it's still trying to prey upon people's fears and insecurities so that the government will get its way

. . . that's pretty unfair. They were wrong to try to get everyone so scared. And it didn't work. I'm glad about that. – Cari

I remember ads which were more locally oriented. There was a hostility there . . . it seemed really nasty, both ways. When it's negative, 'don't vote for someone', I think it's defeating the purpose. It's trying only to win something out of fear, it's trying to create a fear in the receiver of the message, 'don't vote for this candidate because he can ruin something.' It creates panic. That disturbs me. – Jack

Thus, issue attack ads which are deemed very negative and attempt to instill fear were judged "disturbing" and "unethical" by the participants. Many of them agreed that while it is generally acceptable to attack upon the basis of past failures or issues, it is the extent or extremity of the negative message which renders an ad unacceptable, as expressed succinctly by Beatrice: "okay, okay, so the guy messed up! But the ads are so extreme. They [referring to the ads] go too far, and they say nothing, NOTHING, about what they're [referring to the sponsoring candidate] going to do. That stinks!"

Some important and interesting ethical divisions or moral boundaries – explicit, subjective distinctions between acceptable and unacceptable electioneering behaviour – are constructed by the participants. Negative personal ads were, on the whole, judged to be both unethical and irrelevant. For example, while participants acknowledge that Bill Clinton's alleged extramarital activities and lack of military experience did not enhance their opinion of him, they generally agreed that the information was irrelevant to whether or not he would perform well in office. Moreover, they expressed unequivocal contempt for the Republican party who were perceived as having made political capital out of these 'issues'. These attitudes are generally congruent with the 'backlash' and 'double impairment' effects hypothesized to occur after exposure to a negative message (Johnson-Cartee and Copeland, 1991; Kaid and Boydston, 1987; Merritt, 1984).

The second category of interest was that including the ethical judgement placed upon issue-oriented negative ads. Participants agree that these ads give them relevant information for

their decision-making, and it would be wrong if such information were censored or suppressed:

I think it's okay if a candidate says that his opponent made mistakes or has policies which aren't good for the public. I don't see anything wrong with that, actually. It's when every ad you see on TV or in the news or whatever is negative. And then they get into this back and forth thing about saying how lousy and stupid the other one is and how they'll mess up in office, etcetera, etcetera. Then it gets ridiculous, and I ask myself, 'don't any of these jerks have any ideas of their own about how to solve problems or make things better?' – Suzanne

Knowledge about this type of moral boundary should serve as a practical caveat to candidates and political consultants. While a single negative ad may be judged ethically or morally acceptable due to its veracity and relevant information value, a predominantly negative campaign appears to have the effect of alienating voters and degrading the esteem of the democratic process. Again, it is the EXTENT, not necessarily the information content or nature, of a negative issue campaign which creates suspicion and contempt in the minds of voters:

I think if one candidate has information which he or she believes the public should know, even though it's part of the game or not, then the public should know. But in this case [referring to the 1992 American presidential election] it comes down to the extent again . . . it was over and over again. – Jack

The data gives a clear reading concerning negative issue ads: while a *single* ad may be deemed acceptable, informative, and ethical, a series of them depreciates their value in all relevant aspects. Repeatedly attacking an opponent with *multiple* ads pushes the envelope of acceptability too far and goes beyond the informant's boundary of acceptable, ethical conduct.

The meaning of political 'disinformation'

Are voters critical of the type of information they receive in political advertising? Do they scrutinize it for its veracity, representational faithfulness, or completeness? Or are voters taken in by its sophistication and reputed duplicity, allowing it to become part of accepted political discourse? The data gathered in this study suggests quite strongly that the voters interviewed are explicitly aware of the potentially manipulative quality of political communication and implicitly, of its potential to be disinformation. Perhaps the most (in)famous example of political disinformation in recent memory is the 1988 'Willie Horton' commercial which criticized democrat presidential candidate Michael Dukakis for being 'soft on crime'. All of the interviewees had heard of the ad. One participant explicitly labelled the 'Willie Horton' ad as disinformation:

Willie Horton was disinformation. It was one guy, one situation. But it was laid out as if it was across the board. They weren't letting out all the guys in prison. They let out one guy. – George

A deeper meaning may be inferred for the term 'political disinformation', gleaned from the participants' lived experience. The term is commonly defined as information which is *false* or a *lie*. However, after examining the interviews contained herein, disinformation may be described as true but somehow distorted, and *misleading*, as well. It may have been true that under the Dukakis governorship, certain convicts were released under a specific program. However, participants in the study rightly point out that some negative political advertising presents information in such a way as to lead viewers to a spurious inference or generalization. Thus, this flawed process ultimately leads to an emotionally charged, questionable understanding of reality by the public.

It is commonly believed that negative attacks such as those described above contributed to Dukakis' 1988 defeat. Yet, media coverage and analysis since then (The Economist, January 25, 1992) seems to have raised the awareness and political sophistication of voters such that they

recognize the misleading nature of this type of disinformation. One might attribute the Republican defeat of 1992 to a type of learning on a cultural scale. Once a political tactic such as negative advertising is used, the media facilitates widespread public criticism and debate of its efficacy and ethics, and the electorate gradually begins to question the good faith of political communication; the informants' moral boundaries become more discerning and sophisticated. It is significant that in the 1992 presidential election, George Bush's constant harping on Clinton's draft record, extramarital affairs, and trip to Russia (taking the form of 'do you trust this man?') were all considered ineffectual by the participants in defeating his opponent. As Gronbeck (1991) suggests, once used effectively, negative advertising becomes more commonplace and then recedes into the background, no longer effective.

There is another critical aspect to disinformation which relates directly to the ethical nature of established political discourse. In the interviews conducted here, it was seldom questioned why certain topics or issues were or were not included in the accepted agenda. To echo Charland's comment from above, why are certain topics, issues, speakers, and political groups 'privileged' to communicate or be communicated on a widespread scale while some are not? All interviewees implicitly accepted the state of the economy, health care reform, and even Bill Clinton's alleged affair as conventional and accepted (if not acceptable) political agenda. Yet, consistent with Cooper (1991), the concerns of marginalized groups such as the poor, blacks, women and gays were seldom positively addressed (by the participants AND the candidates in the presidential election). In this manner, the current status quo (or power structure) is maintained in the guise of serving the 'public' interest, consistent with Cooper's (1991) analysis.

Not one of the participants in the study mentioned or questioned how or why certain topics arise during an election and are accepted into the existing political discourse or how it is that access to media is dominated by certain groups and individuals (such as politicians or powerful lobby groups) and not others. While this interesting

omission is hardly evidence of voters' general reluctance to establish competing, rival discourses, it is suggestive of the media's and of the government's ability to set and dominate agenda items during a political contest. Perhaps the omission of these generalized concerns represents another, less tangible but more insidious, characteristic of disinformation: the incompleteness (and hence, misleading nature) of political rhetoric or lack of competing perspectives or discourses. The moral ethical boundaries could not condemn what they did not know or include.

Nevertheless, there were some indications that a few of the participants were somewhat aware of the problematic nature of the political agenda and of the process through which it is set. Two participants 'hinted' at the issue peripherally:

[My friend said that] there is so much we are not hearing about so that we can't make a proper assessment of the news. But I believe we can make a proper assessment by what's brought to us. I don't believe that we live in a dictatorship or that there is control over news coverage. That's my belief and I believe that we were getting a broad spectrum of the news . . . – Jack

I don't understand why they'd [referring to the government] want to limit what I can spend making a statement about a federal election. It's wrong of them to limit spending. They weren't elected to tell us we couldn't participate in an election. – George

Yet, despite some participants' hinting at the incomplete nature of information and lack of competing discourses, the majority were far more likely to criticize and challenge what *is* said during an election than to question what remains unsaid or kept silent.

Summary and conclusions

The findings of this study have important implications for both academics interested in post-modern theory as applied to political communications and to practitioners dedicated to producing effective, yet ethical, advertising. These will be detailed below.

How far can one go? What types of ethical activities violate boundaries or moral sense?

The information obtained from participants indicates that voters engage in critical media rituals in which they search for objectivity or truth. Interestingly, the findings here indicate the more traditional view, *not* the postmodern perspective, of political communication and discourse may be more appropriate and descriptive of certain participants' lived experience. Suspicion and cynicism appears to have prompted the development of a process of cultural learning. Each and every participant was intent upon establishing his or her own version of the truth through proactive media rituals and a universal skepticism toward sources of external communication. From their examinations of both news and ads, participants believe that politicians engage in a game or play for power, wherein getting elected is the terminal goal, altruistic and ethical concerns considered as secondary. Also, negative political ads are looked upon with extreme suspicion, criticized for their extreme nature and propensity to inspire fear and exaggerate.

On the other hand, consistent with Foucault (1980, 1985) and with Cooper (1991), there were indications that the postmodern view has some application as well. First, this perspective does not assume *a priori* that political choice and freedom exist (Cooper, 1991). Rather, they are goals which may be achieved. Consistent with this argument, informants engaged in aggressive activity in order to create and maintain their independence of political thought and thus, make appropriate decisions. Yet, it is interesting that the informants never once questioned the underlying 'right' of such an a political agenda or discourse to exist. In other words, it was unquestionably assumed by participants that the public interest was being served by debating those *specific* issues which the media popularizes. Access to media, the continued oppression of marginalized individuals, and questions as to how the present discourse serves certain interests and not others, to note some examples, were neither mentioned nor debated. For example, it was never brought up whether the entire structure and process of government or elected represen-

tation (i.e. an underlying premise, given, or sacrosanct assumption) might be flawed and need changing. Thus, the political agenda as espoused by the informants remains somewhat narrow, suggestive (although by no means conclusive) of a received political discourse. Future research could explore this phenomenon in more depth: how do certain issues and not others come to dominate voters' political consciousness? Are there deleterious effects of certain issues remaining unspoken?

Overall, from this study's data, one cannot confidently claim that a universal, hegemonic false consciousness – as asserted by more post-modern views of communication – dominates all voters' political thinking. It is more fair to argue that certain individuals (such as some of the ones interviewed) are aware that truth and valid points of view are problematic and make concerted efforts to be shrewd, discriminating citizens and voters.

In a more practical vein, the study brought to light some findings which may assist political consultants or advertisers in creating more effective, ethical ads. First, negative campaigns should be suspect. While certain specific negative polispots may be judged acceptable (assuming they contain information which is considered to be true), practitioners may be well advised to reconsider remitting 'bashing' of political opponents and focus on positive, constructive ads which contain substantive ideas for improvement. Furthermore, manipulative ads which are judged 'extreme' or which attempt to create panic or fear are clearly risky. Voters appear to be learning the 'tricks of the trade' and are more likely to question such questionable tactics. The lesson? Those politicians who wish to be viewed in favourable, credible manner should avoid negative extremes and attempt to persuade with ads which are perceived as rational, moderate, and truthful.

Further research which might follow includes an investigation into whether television news has improved in issue content, analysis and quality (as compared to political advertising) over the last twenty years. Political ads could be tested for critical aspects such as credibility, truth value, and perceived relevance to the voters' decision-making in controlled circumstances. Finally, the

meaning of disinformation and the testing of moral boundaries could be explored in the context of consumer products: what are the unquestioned beliefs and assumptions which form the established discourse(s) as relating to product advertising, and more conventional purchasing and use occasions? Future research in a postmodernist or critical (see Murray and Ozanne, 1991) tradition would certainly be a productive direction. For example, the media's agenda-setting capabilities should be explored in more depth, identifying the interests served and not served.

Clearly, the policy issue explored here is still of considerable interest and prominence in the public sphere. While there is discouraging evidence of widespread cynicism and anger toward the political system, a hopeful sign has been revealed in that voters appear as if they are becoming more discriminating consumers of information largely by filtering it through media rituals, a skeptical screen, and ever developing ethical boundaries. This study has uncovered, moreover, evidence of a continuing process of social learning which occurs at the subjective level. Perhaps this is one way in which the modern consumer can transform himself or herself into a citizen once again (Cooper, 1991). The alternative to heightened interest and participation in political affairs is, disturbingly, the belief that the most rational decision is not to vote at all.

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