

Angela Gubser

Negative Campaign Advertising. Which effect does New Media have?

Televised and online advertising during the 2016 U.S. presidential election

Master's Thesis

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1. Introduction

1.1 Overview

Dating back to 1952, when the Eisenhower *Answers America* ad ushered political advertising as a feature of presidential campaign communication, candidates have embraced political advertising in the United States (Dunn & Tedesco, 2017). Ever since, those ads are one of the main ways by which presidential candidates communicate with voters (McNair, 2011). Prior to candidate webpages, email and social media, televised political ads presented a rare form of communication, allowing for a candidate-controlled message by the campaign (Dunn & Tedesco, 2017). Some scholars even argue that these messages presented by the candidates leading up to the election can be seen as a cornerstone of functioning democracies. Campaigns are one of the few moments in large-scale democracies when competing candidates make mass appeals to wide segments of the population. While campaigning, politicians present themselves and their records to citizens. These messages undergird the legitimacy that comes with winning elections. Victorious candidate, for the most part, make governing decisions that resonate broadly with the messages and promises of their campaign and their success/failure is judged in accordance to them (Fridkin & Kenney, 2012).

Depending on the chosen strategy, these messages can both be presented positively, i.e. promoting a candidate or negatively, allowing them to attack the image and issue stances of opponents or respond to attacks made by the opponent (Dunn & Tedesco, 2017). In recent decades, most political ads have chosen the negative approach. Thereby, Lyndon Johnson's ad entitled *The Daisy Girl* of the 1964 presidential election remains one of the most memorable. It showed a young girl playing *he loves me, he loves me not* with a daisy and when the last petal was plucked, a voice counted down to a nuclear explosion. The tagline *because the stakes are too high for you to stay at home* created an even higher sense of urgency (Suggett, 2016). The implication was that a nuclear war was imminent if you voted for Barry Goldwater, Johnson's Republican opponent, yet Goldwater was never mentioned by name (Fowler et al, 2016). Despite criticism at the time, Johnson's subsequent electoral win can be seen as proof for the efficacy of negative campaigning and the reach of television (Suggett, 2016).

Traditionally, broadcast media has largely been the sole channel to broadcast campaign ads. More recently, advertising has taken place across a variety of platforms, from ads in cinema, radio, television and online (de Boer et al., 2012). While traditional communication networks rely on potentially expensive, frequently mediated forms of mass messaging, social media

platforms such as Twitter and YouTube offer inexpensive, and substantively different tools for candidates (Bode et al., 2016).

Overall, there is little discussion about the fact that the Internet has transformed the way politicians communicate with citizens. However, the speedy profusion of the Internet complicates a determination of the exact nature of ramifications for political advertising (Druckman et al. 2010). In an era of a transforming media culture across nations, political advertising has become more widely accessible, monitored, and crucial to understand (McNair, 2011). Additionally, most ads broadcast on television or radio are more hierarchically structured and marked by stricter gatekeepers and regulations. Online ads, however, are being spread more rapidly and through less centralized media flows (de Boer et al., 2012). Moreover, even though candidates are now able to use a broader set of options when addressing their voters, evidence of the importance of political advertising remains (Dunn & Tedesco, 2017).

1.2 Online Advertising in U.S. Presidential Elections

The rise of new media has unquestionably transformed campaign communications. Campaigns have proceeded from dabbling with websites in the 1990s, to sending emails and launching professionally managed sites, over to sharing content on social media (Druckman et al., 2014). The 2008 campaign was an important turning point for candidates in the process of applying new communications tools to reach a growing and increasingly engaged audience (Smith, 2009). Since Ryan Lizza of the New York Times, referred to the 2006 Midterm elections of the US Congress as *The YouTube Election*, YouTube has become a central election channel in the USA.

Particularly Barack Obama's 2008 campaign is often regarded as revolutionary with regards to the use of new media. The campaign was notably successful in giving supporters the feeling that they were part of the campaign (Kraski, 2012). Although he also used traditional media outlets and ran negative ads, his campaign was based on a positive message, *Hope and Change*. Internet blogs and message boards carried the message of Hope across the nation (Suggett, 2016). The Obama campaign also took advantage of the possibility to upload lengthier videos on YouTube (Fowler et al., 2016). For instance, his 37-minute YouTube video of his speech on racial discrimination in the pre-election campaign received over six million clicks (Salmond, 2012).

In his re-election campaign in 2012, the Obama campaign expanded their online strategy, due to the altering media landscape (Think with Google, 2013). For their first general election push, they did not turn to a 30-second ad but a 17-minute Hollywood-style online documentary, narrated by Tom Hanks. At the same time, viewers were able to post campaign content to their Facebook pages, volunteer and donate, all without having to leave Obama's YouTube page. As Darrell West, of the Center for Technology Innovation at the Brookings Institution put it, *It's hard to be persuasive through a direct ads. But if you can get people to share videos, it adds a degree of credibility because a friend is endorsing it* (Peters, 2012).

Over the course of the re-election campaign, Obama's team leveraged over 471,000+ subscribers and 289,000,000+ video views on their YouTube channel (Think with Google, 2013). According to Pew Research (2012), the Obama campaign also produced more than twice as many YouTube videos compared to his competitor Mitt Romney. As Nate Lubin, Director of Digital Marketing for Obama for America stated, *We knew that voters were increasingly hard to reach on TV, and that a large chunk of voters that we needed could not be reached at all through TV [...]. YouTube helped provide us the scale, reach, and targeting to speak to our audience in a way few other platforms could* (Think with Google, 2013).

1.3 Advertising in the 2016 Presidential Election

In terms of advertising, the 2016 presidential election stands out specifically through the fact that advertising spending for television did not exceed spending in 2012. The trend during the last few election cycles has consistently indicated spending to far outpace the prior cycle in terms of dollars spent by the major-party candidates (Dunn & Tedesco, 2017). Clinton's final total was far less than Obama's budget in the past two elections. Her spending was almost cut in half when compared to Obama's 404 million U.S. Dollar budget in 2012. When comparing the two campaigns, the Clinton campaign vastly outspent the Trump campaign in terms of TV ad buys. Although the Trump campaign made up ground in the final weeks of the campaign, it did not nearly reach the level of the Clinton budget in terms of overall spending. By the 2nd November 2016, Clinton had already spent 211.4 million US Dollar on TV ads, while Trump had spent only 74 million US Dollar, about of third of Clinton's budget (Parry-Giles, 2017).

But not only the spending was found to have decreased, also the volume of broadcasted advertising had lowered compared to 2012. An Analysis by the Wesleyan Media Project reports numbers of ads aired by candidates, parties and outside groups, shows that between the 16th of September, 2016, and the 13th of October, 2016, the number of ads aired has more

than halved compared to the same period during the 2012 presidential election (Dunn & Tedesco, 2017).

While those reports show that advertising spending and advertising volume decreased for Clinton when compared to Obama, the numbers are even more significant when Trump is compared to Romney. While most easily recognized that Trump ran an unconventional campaign, it seemed puzzling to observers that Trump espoused his lack of need for political advertising (Dunn & Tedesco, 2017).

One reason for the drop in spending and volume in TV ads could be that the 2016 candidates focused more energy on online advertising and social media compared to TV advertising (Parry-Giles, 2017). In January of 2016, three political ads ranked among YouTube's ten most-watched ads for the first time in its history and thereby, delivering millions more views to campaigns than ads in the best timeslots on any TV channel. Also, YouTube is particularly popular among younger viewers, with more 18-to-49-year-olds watching its videos than tuning into any cable network in the U.S. But, according to internal Google surveys, more than half of baby boomers and seniors are watching online videos as well (Harwell, 2016). Most importantly, overall digital spending reached an unprecedented high. According to Borrell Associates, a market research firm, digital spending for 2016 was estimated at 1.6 billion US Dollar, an 576 percent increase since 2012. Despite this increase in ad spending on social media, TV remained the most dominant platform for political ads with a 70 percent share of ad revenue (Parry-Giles, 2017).

With regards to the spread of their YouTube content, Hillary Clinton was far ahead of Donald Trump. Her political ads have drawn 26.2 million views as compared to his 19.9 million. In addition, Clinton's main channel *Hillary Clinton* reached about 135'000 subscribers, while Trump's campaign channel *Donald J. Trump for President* had 104'000 subscribers (Schill & Hendricks, 2017). This also could have resulted from the fact that the Clinton campaign was more active on their primary YouTube channel, releasing over 70 videos starting July 2016. Besides containing YouTube exclusive content, the channel also included every televised ad and her social media accounts re-circulated the ads for an even broader reach (Parry-Giles, 2017). However, it should also be noted that, YouTube is the only social media outlet where Clinton prevailed against her Republican opponent (Schill & Hendricks, 2017). Trump's effective use of social media has given him high media visibility. By August 2016, Trump had over 22.7 million likes and followers on Facebook, Twitter and Instagram while Hillary Clinton only reached 15 million combined (Parry-Giles, 2017).