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SEMIOTIC ANALYSIS OF POLITICAL TELEVISION COMMERCIALS: SIGNS OF INTENT, SIGNS OF MEANING

A Thesis

Submitted to the Graduate Faculty of the
University of South Alabama
in partial fulfillment of the
requirements for the Degree of

Master of Arts

in

The Department of Communications

by
Robert Rasch
B.A., University of Southern Mississippi, 1979.
June, 1998

THE UNIVERSITY OF SOUTH ALABAMA

COLLEGE OF ARTS AND SCIENCES

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ACKNOWLEDGEMENTS

This thesis was completed with help and encouragement of the following friends and teachers:

Dr. Gerald Wilson, Department of Communications Chairman, who urged me to re-enter the graduate program after illness delayed completion of this thesis.

Dr. Donald Wright, Thesis Committee Chairman, who guided the re-entry process and established a time line for completion of the project. His personal enthusiasm and constructive criticism was very helpful.

Dr. Richard Ward, Thesis Committee Member, gave me a valuable 'socratic' critique that led to important insights which improved this thesis.

Dr. John Strange, Thesis Committee Member and innovative teacher, reviewed the entire project.

Each of these men quietly demonstrate their commitment to excellence, and each has my sincere gratitude for their help in the graduate program.

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ABSTRACT

Rasch, Robert. M.A., University of South Alabama, June, 1998. Semiotic Analysis of Political Television Commercials: Signs of Intent, Signs of Meaning. Chair of Committee Donald K. Wright.

The study of mediated communication reveals a problematic relationship between the intent of the person sending a message and the meaning perceived by the person reading the message, particularly in the case of political television messages.

This paper compares the intended meaning with the perceived meaning of political campaign commercials from the Mobile, AL mayoral campaign. Results indicate that most voters objected to certain commercials and rejected their intended meaning. Extra textual signifiers that opposed intended meaning and conflicted with ideological beliefs of voters were the apparent cause of voter rejection of some commercials. Extra textual signs decoded in opposition to the intended message and emphasized by the perceived intimacy of television emerged as a powerful force in the political campaign commercials studied.

INTRODUCTION

The intent of this study is to apply semiotic theory to the problematic relationship between the intended meaning of a mediated message and the perceived meaning. This process involves a qualitative examination of the message maker, the message, the medium, the message receiver, the sociological, ideological, and circumstantial events bearing on the practice of communication. "The term *practice* emphasizes cultural processes rather than products. To study practice is to recognize that groups or societies habitually organize and institutionalize the meaning making practice" (Pauly, 1991, p. 4). Qualitative research and semiotics theory combine to present a valuable insight into how voters made meaning from selected political campaign commercials.

Communication is defined in qualitative terms as a "symbolic process by which humans constantly reorient themselves to the world" (Pauly, 1991, p. 3). Semiotics, the study of signs and sign systems (Kohl, 1992, p. 145), offers a substantial body of theory centered on how meaning is made and modified in the communication process. Selected semiotic theory is focused on professionally produced television commercials used in the 1993 Mobile Alabama mayoral election campaign to compare perceived meaning to

intended meaning. Political commercials are used because the intended meaning is clear, i.e., to move the viewer to vote or at least create a favorable feeling toward the candidate, and the actual meaning can be measured by the outcome at the polls and by interviews with voters. One candidate received over sixty percent of the total vote. His commercials obviously conveyed the intended meaning. Two other candidates each gathered less than ten percent of the vote, thus it can be assumed that their television messages failed to convey the intended meaning. The remaining 20 percent of the vote went to the candidate with only one television commercial.

Applying semiotics to these political commercials to learn how voters perceived meaning from them is an effort encouraged by Marshall Blonsky writes in The Agony of Semiotics:

> To make the semiotic instrument stronger, we must stop using only the linguistic sign as our glasses to see the world. We need to, and can do things other than watch signs make and *un*make their meanings.(p. XVIII) Semiotics is operable, analytically and creatively. It can be applied in the world. But one has to crack it out of its present uses and override refusals to abuse it. It is not a corruption of the semiotic enterprise to use it politically or commercially (Blonsky, 1985, p. L).

This effort will "crack it out of its present use" by applying semiotic theory and qualitative analysis to signifiers observed through television, and "abuse it" a little by combining semiotics, which is "in general the study of signs as signifiers (not content, not signifieds)"

(Blonsky, 1985, p. XXVII) with affects research, because "the media researcher is ultimately concerned with the question of effects" (Livingstone, 1990, p.35). To achieve this "ultimate concern," quantitative efforts, (Published pre-election polls and post election results.) in the Mobile mayoral campaign are used to corroborate or contrast with some of the ideas revealed by applied semiotics in a qualitative investigation.

A significant effort is made to outline a coherent semiotic approach through "a much tangled growth" of theory (Fiske & Hartley, 1978 p.37) in an attempt to apply semiotic ideas in a more pragmatic sense. Semiotics becomes operable when applied in a way that reveals insights useful to communicators involved in creating more effective mediated communication.

In this study semiotics is applied through qualitative research techniques as outlined by Pauly. "... Qualitative research is careful and coherent inquiry. Findings are continuously narativized, not neutrally 'reported,' and knowledge is always assumed to be partial and illuminative, rather than complete and cumulative" (Jensen cited in Pauly, 1991, p. ii). Thus this effort to learn more about how meaning is devised, conveyed, modified, and interpreted in political television commercials, is not intended to reveal some ultimate truth, but to gain insight into the practice of communication.

The procedures followed in this study are those

outlined by Pauly which are: gather the evidence, interpret the evidence, and tell the story revealed in process. Pauly's model of qualitative research provides the procedural frame-work for gathering evidence, then the evidence is interpreted and the story revealed through applied semiotics as outlined in the Fry & Fry, (1986) Semiotic Model For The Study of Mass Communication. The television commercials are viewed as texts constructed of signifiers read and interpreted by the viewer. All visual and verbal signs are considered part of the message text, all are signifiers that hold meaning (Kohl, 1992, p.145). Critical analysis of the video messages as texts reveals that "meanings are produced in the interaction between text and audience" (Fiske, 1982, p.143). This approach is often criticized because the broadest view of semiotic theory opens the text of the message to any interpretation, but this study adapts a more workable strategy that locates meaning in "a shared or consensual interpretation [that] exists within cultural or linguistic groups of similar circumstance" (Eco, 1979, p. 23). The shared and consensual interpretation is narrowed to the context of the campaign as viewed by interested voters.

Semiotic evaluation of these commercials as mediated texts draws on the ideas of: Fiske, (1991, 1987, 1982); Morley, (1980); Sigman & Fry, (1985); and Hall, (1985) who argue that ethnographic and ideological factors are the primary influence on signs and how they are read.

Foucault's (1971), (1972), ideas of knowledge ordering discourse within discursive fields compares closely with the ideas of Fish, (1986), who describes context as the key to ordering meaning and limiting unrealistic interpretations of texts. Eco's 1979, 1976, set of semiotic codes that show how sociological and situational factors cause overcoding and affect intended meaning apply directly to these campaign commercials. Fry & Fry emphasize that "textual meaning is constituted by the interaction between textual and extra textual factors" (Fry & Fry, 1986, p. 452) Blonsky (1985) suggests breaking semiotics out of the linguistic form into every facet of communication. And all agree, as does this writer, with Livingstone when she writes that the purpose of communication research is to learn, "What do actual, contemporary audiences 'do' with the text and how does it enter into and influence their culture" (Livingstone, 1991, p.35).

The "literature review maps the discourse of the field" (Pauly, 1991, p. 6), and in this instance draws a coherent line of reasoning through the maze of semiotic theory. Then qualitative measures from the semiotic view are related to quantitative data generated in this campaign by Fisher, 1987, and other effects research concerning political advertising. Shapiro & Rieger, 1992; Pfau & Kang, 1991; Garramone et al, 1990; Garramone & Smith, 1984; Latimer, 1984; Stewart, 1975; and others establish benchmarks for semiotic review of negative and positive political

commercials when associated with a candidate's image or with a political issue, the significance of relational messages in political television advertising, and the effect of television as a modifier of meaning.

Though these television commercials studied were probably not the determining factors in the campaign, the character of certain signifiers, some unintended, seem to reveal the character of the candidates and the overall character of the campaign. At best this decoding of how voters made meaning of these commercials can lead to creating more effective media messages. At least this effort will create some spirited discussion in certain communication classes.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Semiotics

Semiotics derives from the Greek word 'semeiotikos,' observant of signs. Herbert Kohl defines Semiotics as the study of signs, sign systems, and the way meaning is derived from them. Though semiotics began as a study of language, all forms of mediated discourse, speech, music, posture, and movement are now considered as signs that hold meaning.

> [In semiotics] systems of gesture and of visual imagery as used in film, video, and photography have begun to be analyzed. In addition, style, fashion, and other aspects of popular culture that involve communication in its broadest sense (including different ways of conveying status and social roles) are also studied (Kohl 1992, p.145).

Kohl's definition of semiotics agrees with earlier definitions written by Eco (1976), Hall (1985), Blonsky (1985), Fish (1986), Fry and Fry (1986), and Fiske (1987). Even Foucault's(1972) definition of discourse indicates that the study of signs includes every aspect of human activity involved in transferring ideas from one mind to another. Kohl writes, "Semiotics is an interdisciplinary field, that overlaps with sociology, anthropology, and other social sciences, as well as with literary, theater, and film criticism" (Kohl 1992, pp.145-146).

In his book, Archeology of Knowledge, Foucault's view of discourse is similar to Kohl's definition of Semiotics in

that both include all manner of signification, all fields of endeavor, and all group relationships:

> This interdiscursive group is itself, in its group form, related to other types of discourse (with the analysis of representation, the general theory of signs, and 'ideology' (Foucault, 1972, p. 158).

According to Foucault, knowledge and power, and thus meaning, flow together within and through specific groups that organize discourse. Each group occupies a discursive field of knowledge, that is, politics, education, religion, law, etc., and each field includes a web of constantly changing social prohibitions within groups and between groups. "The area where this web is most tightly woven today, where the danger spots are most numerous, are those dealing with politics and sexuality" (Foucault, 1972, p. 216). The accuracy of Foucault's statement is reflected in the national concern with "politically correct" language demanded in the discursive fields of journalism, politics, academics, and others. Foucault's "danger spots" occur where open expression is limited by the perception of power, though his view of a power structure ordering discourse does not imply a negative force: "[The power structure is] the power of constituting domains of objects, in relation to which one can affirm or deny true or false propositions" (Foucault, 1972, p. 216).

Focualt's vision of power ordering the distribution of knowledge and privileging one discourse over an other is a vision of an amorphous structure, defining certain

constantly changing boundaries and interactions between individuals and groups, "[But] one thing must be emphasized here: that the analysis of discourse thus understood, does not reveal the universality of a meaning. [And is] certainly not any monarchy of the signifier" (Foucault, 1972, p. 234). He makes this point to emphasize that simply defining a structure of discourse does not explain how meaning is made. This statement also separates his view of an underlying power structure controlling knowledge from the structuralists view that textual linguistic form constitutes the source of meaning. Focualt's position is that though power and knowledge organize information and influence the way meaning derives from discourse, discourse itself is a construct of signs and sign systems that only symbolize meaning. A review of the development of Semiotics research leads to a similar conclusion.

Ferdinand de Saussure, (1857-1913) a Swiss linguist, developed the early ideas for the study of signs, and Charles Sanders Pierce, (1839-1914) an American philosopher, elaborated on Saussere's ideas to establish the field of Semiotics. Umberto Eco (1976), Stanley Fish (1986), Fry and Fry (1986), Hall (1985), Marshall Blonsky (1985), John Fiske (1987), Sonia Livingstone (1990), and others have "developed their work with an increasing proliferation of terms; a much tangled growth" (Fiske & Hartley 1978 p.37). An overview of Semiotics shows a study of language structure expanding into a complex weave of sociology, psychology, anthropology,

communication, and discourse theories, each with a peculiar terminology that often obfuscates meaning and complicates the search for how meaning is made. This report draws from the broad fabric of semiotic research a single thread of relevant theory to form a coherent theoretical basis for this study of signs and meaning in political television commercials used in the 1993 mayoral election at Mobile, Alabama.

Continuity in Semiotic Research

Saussure, (1959) a linguist, relying on the structure of language to find meaning, divided the sign into two parts, the signifier and the signified. Signifiers are the actual signs, the verbal and/or visual elements that hold meaning while the items or ideas that the signifier represents are the objects signified. The object signified is established through convention. For example the word dog, a verbal signifier, contains the signified, the culturally agreed to object, i.e., an animal that usually barks and is found in many shapes and colors.

> What Saussurian semiotics made possible was this: the sign is not substance, it is the correlation of two sets of differences. It is a recognition marker, an expression, a signifier. It is correlated by a culture (the correlation is a code) to items of the culture's contents (Blonsky, 1985. p.XVI).

Saussere's idea of a signifier that represents a signified, or culturally coded object, gives opportunity to explain varied interpretations of signifiers that differ

from that intended by the original sign, a way to study how multiple meanings are created from a single sign. Thus what Saussere describes as "aberrant decoding" of a sign can be explained by cultural and/or ideological differences in the decoder or reader of the sign. Certainly the possibility of conveying the wrong message should be considered by any producer designing messages for mass media, particularly in designing political campaign commercials.

Charles S. Pierce, (1931-1934) a philosopher, also relied on an underlying linguistic organization, but added significantly to the ideas of Saussure and is generally credited with founding Semiotics (Kohl, 1992, p.145; Fiske, 1982, p.43). To explain how multiple meanings of a text are created, Pierce identifies the sign as a signifier of an object that is abstractly related to meaning by an *interpretant*. An interpretant makes meaning of the sign by connecting signifier and object. Pierce shifts the focus from the signifier to interpretation of the signifier. Meaning is made by an interpretative process in the mind of the decoder or reader rather than by the text. (In semiotics the term reader is used instead of decoder because reading is a learned activity and is based on cultural, social, and educational influences (Fiske, 1982 p.43).

Pierce reasons that since people learn by experience, signs must be interpreted:

> By describing the doctrine [of signs] as 'quasi-necessary', or formal, I mean that we observe the characters of such signs as we know, and from such an

> observation, by a process which I will not object to naming abstraction, we are led to statements, eminently fallible, and therefore in one sense by no means necessary, as to what must be the character of all signs used by a scientific intelligence, that is to say, by an intelligence capable of learning by experience" (Peirce, 1958, cited in Fiske, 1982, p.134).

In this explanation Pierce reveals a basic principle of semiotics: The reader, or interpreter, makes the meaning. This is a significant idea to communication researchers, because if the reader makes the meaning, then everything that affects the reader and the decoding process affects the interpretation of signs and thus the meaning derived from the interpretation. The search for the way meaning is made *must* focus on the situated individual and the social forces that shape individual perception of signs and sign systems as well as on the signs themselves. Communications research becomes interdisciplinary, overlapping into sociology, ethnography, and rhetoric, as Kohl has stated. And as we shall see, television has a very significant affect on the interpretant and thus on the meaning decoded by the reader.

Fish (1980) defines rhetoric as the study of all the ways in which humans, "may influence each other's thinking and behavior through the strategic use of symbols" (Fish, 1980, p.524). The study of rhetoric parallels and interweaves the study of Semiotics, thus principles of rhetorical criticism also include visual images and non-discursive phenomena in the effort to understand how ideas and actions are transferred. Boundaries between language,

pictures, and movement dissolve, and all aspects of signs are included in the analysis of how meaning is made. The difficulty arises when this fuzzy borderless interpretation of semiotics leads to equally fuzzy interpretations of meaning. Because the broadest view of semiotics finds no fixed meaning in any symbol or sign, interpretation often leads to bizarre readings of commonly accepted signifiers. Unbounded interpretation of signs by some researchers leads to the primary criticism of semiotics as a solid theoretical research position. Meyer Abrams assesses "The New Readers" whom he identifies as Bloom, Fish, and Derrida as:

> Apostles of indeterminacy and undecidability who ignore linguistic meaning and invite us to abandon our ordinary realm of experience in speaking, hearing, reading, and understanding for a world in which no text can mean anything in particular (Abrams, 1977, pp. 431-434).

The view that semiotics research is simply a method to deconstruct texts to discover multiple and often meaningless interpretations of signs has caused difficulty in applying semiotic principles effectively, and a general reluctance to accept semiotics as a communication research tool. In semiotic analysis, the tendency has often been to impose meaning that ignores literal or normative readings. An example of an extreme interpretation of semiotics is Julia Kristeva's use of the word semiotic to describe feminine language. According to Kristeva, "feminine language is metaphoric, associative, and intimate as opposed to rationalistic, logical, assertive masculine language" (Cited

in Kohl p.145) Kristeva's semiotic is not only the study of signs, but a signifier for gender specific language.

Stanley Fish, (1986) though identified as one of the "New Readers" by Abrams, is a researcher open to multiple interpretations of signifiers and a proponent of semiotics, but one who demands realistic interpretation. Fish posits that the meaning in texts is limited by the context in which the message is received. His theoretical position comes close to Foucault's view of an underlying power structure designed to control discourse, though Fish sees an "interpretive community" of social and institutional power that imposes meaning by context rather than raw authority:

> An infinite plurality of meanings would be a fear only if sentences existed in a state in which they were not already embedded in, and had come into view as a function of, some situation or other. But there is no such state; sentences emerge only in situations, and within those situations, the normative meaning of an utterance will always be obvious or at least accessible, although within another situation that same utterance, no longer the same, will have another normative meaning that will be no less obvious and accessible (Fish, 1986 p.526).

Fish limits multiple interpretations of signifiers to context specific interpretations, that is, within a given situation "the normative meaning will be obvious and accessible" (Fish, 1986, p.526). The critical view of this position is that context specific norms and standards merely authorize an infinite plurality of standards which is akin to no standards at all. Though Fish recognizes this criticism as generally true, he argues that it is of no consequence to any individual or to any specific instance,

> ...since everyone is situated somewhere, and to be in a situation is already to be in possession of (or possessed by) a structure of assumptions, of practices understood to be relevant in relation to purposes and goals that are already in place; and it is within these purposes and goals that any utterance is immediately heard (Fish, 1986, p. 531).

It is interesting to note that "a structure of assumptions, purposes, and goals," that is, a particular situation, also surrounds development of signs in the message, thus cultural influences affect the signifiers chosen for the message. The situated individual creates the signifier, and the situated individual reads or decodes it. The study of signs and what they mean must include the micro situations in which the signs are selected and received, and the covering macro situation affecting encoding-decoding, particularly in communication mediated by television.

Umberto Eco (1979) has established an elaborate system of codes to evaluate factors that influence the selection of signifiers, the formulation of the message, and the reader of the message. The codes apply to all forms of human communication and assign ideological, social, and situational references from which meaning is made. Eco's intent is to further limit 'aberrant decoding' of signifiers by establishing arenas within which decoding 'norms' are possible.

> Thus it seems that a well-organized text on the one hand presupposes a model of competence coming, so to speak, from outside the text, but on the other hand works to build up, by merely textual means, such a competence [within the text] (Eco, 1979, p.7).

Eco defines two general classifications of texts in the

coding theory. The first is a closed text, wherein the author directs the coding process to a specific reader or to a specific socio-psychological category of reader.

> [Some authors] have in mind an average addressee referred to a given social context. Nobody can say what happens when the reader is different from the average one. Those texts that obsessively aim at arousing a precise response on the part of more or less precise empirical readers are in fact open to any possible 'aberrant' decoding. A text so immoderately 'open' to every possible interpretation will be called a *closed* one (Eco, 1979, p.8).

A text designed with multiple interpretations in mind for readers of any persuasion cannot be interpreted in various ways, one independent from the other, because "each interpretation is reechoed by the others, and vice versa."

> An author can foresee an 'ideal reader affected by an ideal insomnia' (as happens with Finnegans Wake), able to master different codes and eager to deal with the text as with a maze of many issues. But in the last analysis what matters is not the various issues in themselves but the maze like structure of the text. You cannot use the text as you want, but only as the text wants you to use it. An open text, however open it can be, cannot afford what ever interpretations.
>
> An open text outlines a 'closed' project of its Model Reader as a component of its structural strategy (Eco, 1979, p.9).

Eco's theory of culturally connected coding within 'open' texts that include the reader in their design becomes a powerful measure of television political commercials. To analyze these texts from Eco's view research questions are directed to the creation of the commercials: Are the commercials coded to the political or cultural expectations of the reader? Or are the codes those of the writer-producers? Or has ignorance of culturally weighted codes

allowed inclusion of signs and signifiers that convey meaning opposite of that intended? Eco's theory focuses research on the social and ideological constraints affecting the writing, producing, and delivery of the messages as well as the effect of those constraints on the reader.

Eco (1976) also argues as does Pierce (1972), Wood (1982), and Pfau, (1990) that "Gesture is a sign that can *stand for* something else to somebody only because this 'standing-for' is mediated by an interpretant as a psychological event in the mind of a possible interpreter" (Eco, 1976, p.15). This aspect of Eco's research is especially important in relation to evaluating the communicative qualities of television commercials because "...a human being performs acts that are perceived by someone as signaling devices, revealing something else, even if the sender is unaware of the revelative property of his behavior" (Eco, 1979, p.18).

Julia Wood (1982) recognizes unintentional movement as sign and signifier, but cautions the interpretant to consider cultural factors influencing the motion. She writes in Human Communication:

> Because we have less control over nonverbal cues, they are often thought to reveal "true" feelings and emotions better than verbal symbols. 'Actions speak louder than words' may be an adage built on fact. [But] the significance of nonverbal cues is based on the meaning attributed to them by others--meanings do not inhere in the cues themselves. Further, our attributions of meaning should take into account the cultural and personal contexts in which nonverbal cues operate, as well as the verbal communication they often accompany (Wood, 1982, p.95).

Argyle (1982) views the human body as the main transmitter of presentational codes and lists ten categories with suggestions for the sort of meaning they can convey. The categories include: head nods, facial expression, gestures, posture and general appearance. Fiske (1982) points out that presentational codes can only "give messages about the here and now. My tone of voice can indicate my present attitude to my subject and listener: it cannot send a message about my feelings last week" (Fiske, 1982 p.71). Signs conveyed by 'body language' become exceedingly important in reading political television commercials that show the candidate in the commercial. Since presentational codes create relational messages that reveal feelings of the "here and now," any feeling generated in relation to the television environment may be delivered to the reader as part of the political message. In this way relational messages may significantly modify the intended meaning of television political commercials. Therefore, particularly in television, the communication researcher must study the environments in which signifiers are created and decoded.

Wood (1981), Livingstone (1990), Fish (1986), and Fiske (1982) emphasize that the culture in which signifiers are created and decoded must be considered in analyzing meaning. Fiske delineates three specific areas of study in Semiotic research:

> 1. The sign itself. [As] human constructs which can only be understood in terms of the people who use them.

2. The codes or systems into which signs are organized.

3. The culture in which these codes and signs operate. This in turn is dependent upon the use of these codes and signs for its own existence and form (Fiske, 1982, p. 43).

The semiotic approach to communication research is much more complex and uncertain than the commonly used Shannon and Weaver model but then so is actual human communication. The "receiver" is not an inactive, blank minded entity waiting for a "message" to be implanted. The reader is a person, aware of and influenced by surroundings and other people; steeped in learned behavior; concerned perceptions of past, present, and future events; enmeshed in the power structure of at least one discursive field; and motivated by needs for gratification. The reader functions in "a structure of assumptions, purposes, and goals" (Fish, 1986, p. 527). These and other factors affect the writing, reading, and context of the message. As Hall rightly points out "before a message can have an 'effect' (however defined), satisfy a 'need' or be put to a 'use', it must first be appropriated as a meaningful discourse and be meaningfully decoded" (Hall, 1989, p.130).

Including cultural and sociological influences in communication research changes the research process from the study of messages "sent and received" to the study of semiotics, the meaning of situated signs and sign systems. Television becomes a text filled with aural and visual signs delivered in various contexts where meaning is derived by

the reader. "To use the metaphor of text in relation to television is to emphasize that programs are structured, culturally located, symbolic products to be understood only in relation to readers and which, together with readers, generate meanings" (Livingstone, 1990, p.6). The shift from traditional media research methods to what may be called the critical approach draws on theories originally developed to analyze literature, but applying critical methods does not answer that fundamental question, because "the media researcher is ultimately concerned with the question of effects. What do actual, contemporary audiences 'do' with the text and how does it enter into and influence their culture" (Livingstone, 1990, p.35).

Fry and Fry (1986) help facilitate the application of semiotics or the critical approach to communication research with a semiotic model for the study of mass communication. Their effort offers a way to examine decoding and signification of media texts by the audience or reader

> by integrating Pierce's (1931-1934, 1958) concepts of sign and interpretant with Eco's (1972, 1975, 1976, 1984) extension of Pierce. [This effort] is an attempt to account for both the media text and the audience's interpretation without reducing the importance of either (Fry and Fry, 1986, p.444).

The Fry & Fry model is constituted in three fundamental postulates. The first postulate states that ***mass media messages are textual resources capable of engendering multiple levels of potential meanings*** (Fry and Fry, 1986, p.445). Eco (1976) posits signs less as things or objects

than as correlations between two planes, the expression plane and the content plane. The verbal and nonverbal signifiers form the expression of the text, while the meaning the text engenders in the reader is the content. Signs are produced when expression and content are linked (Eco, 1976, p.449). In this model content is "less an intrinsic property of a text than it is a meaning or signification" (Fry and Fry, 1986, p.445). It is clear that certain expressions can be linked to different meanings. Eco uses a music video as an example of an expression decoded differently by a teenager and a record company executive. Though the denotation (the primary content) may be the same, i.e., both agree they saw a music video, the connotation (the readers' interpretation of the primary content) may be quite different. This idea suggests and active audience, one that extends and adds meaning to textual signs (Eco, 1976, pp.449-450).

The second postulate states *that texts are made meaningful through a process of audience signification* (Fry and Fry, 1986, p.448). This postulate is based on Eco's extension of Pierce's interpretant theory. Pierce has identified three levels of interpretant: the immediate, the dynamic, and the final. The *immediate* interpretant refers to the matrix of possible meanings inherent in any text and allows for the possibility of aberrant decoding. The *dynamic* interpretant is the interpretant brought to mind by a sign, the actual impact of the sign. Pierce describes the

dynamic interpretant as a three part construct that allows the reader to encounter the sign on different levels of experience: The *emotional* level, which is the readers primary recognition of the sign; The *energetic* level, which describes the readers mental and/or physical reaction to the sign; And the *logical* level which exists in the intellect and includes such things as the rationalization of meaning. The *final* interpretant explains how a given sign evokes consistently specific interpretations from audience members, or as defined by Eco as "shared significations." "The final interpretant is the consensual interpretant of a social, linguistic, or cultural group" (Fry and Fry, 1986, p.449).

The third postulate states that *textual meaning is constituted by the interaction between textual and extra-textual factors* (Fry and Fry, 1986, p.452). In other words, if the text of the message is tailored to the culture of the reader, signification will be common across that culture. Eco (1979) contends that the reader of a text cannot actualize all the properties of a text; that is, the reader cannot follow all the possible lines of thought potentially inherent within a text. The well constructed text will encourage the reader to explore certain aspects of the text while deemphasizing others. Eco refers to this process of directing reader attention to the desired decoding as "semantic disclosures." Though a well planned text can predictably influence the reader's interpretations, "deviations from intended meaning arise from the influence

of 'extra semiotic' factors such as uncoded circumstances and extra coding." (Eco as cited in Fry & Fry, 1986, p.454) An example of uncoded circumstance is demonstrated by two readers of an automobile commercial. The commercial emphasizes quality workmanship. One reader owns the product advertised and is waiting for it to be repaired. The other is unfamiliar with the automobile advertised. The reader with car problems decodes the message differently than the reader with no product experience. Circumstance unforeseen by the message encoder causes aberrant decoding of the signifiers for quality. (Fry & Fry, 1986, p.454)

Circumstance may also create relational messages that affect encoding of the message. In television messages a political candidate's anxiety over an inability to read effectively or move naturally as directed may be recorded and later interpreted as anxiety over the candidate's stated political position. The relational message, that is the anxiety caused by the television environment, creates extra coding that may be interpreted by the reader as anxiety or uncertainty concerning the intended message.

Ideological Overcoding

Extra coding is not situational though circumstance may be a factor. Extra coding occurs when the reader's ideology affects signification "even when [the reader's] ideological bias is only a highly simplified system of axiological oppositions" (Eco, 1979, p.22). Audience members measure the

ideological stance of the text and juxtapose it with their own ideological position (Fry & Fry, 1986, p.455). Parkin (1972) offers three possible ideological positions in relation to a political system: the reader can agree with the dominant system, accommodate the dominant system, or oppose the dominant system. Hall (1985) and Fiske and Hartley (1978) apply Parkin's idea to a text-reader relationship. The reader's ideological orientation toward a dominant political system is seen as an ideological stance toward a text. Hall, (1985) and Fisk and Hartley (1978) also argue that the reader's ideological stance determines the level of interaction with media texts and influences what the reader looks at in the text. Thus the reading of the text and how deeply it is examined is determined by the ideology expressed in the text and the ideological position held by the reader.

Eco (1979) offers the idea that the more consistent the surface level ideological judgments of the reader and of the text, the more likely it is that the reader will not look for underlying ideological structures, thereby creating interpretants similar to those intended by the encoder. On the other hand, the more the text and reader disagree on value judgements the more likely the reader will search for connotations and further meaning by analyzing inflection, posture, and movement in the presentation (Eco, 1979, p. 21).

Stewart (1975) in a study of political mud slinging in

political campaigns describes voter perceptions of certain attack ads. His research applies to this study where there may be a clash of values, a kind of cognitive dissonance created by personal attack ads when the message is, "My opponent is a liar. I have the real truth. Trust me."

> A person guilty of spreading rumors, making insinuations, perpetrating deceptions, telling lies, and calling names would seem to be the opposite of a highly credible candidate who is trustworthy, competent, qualified, honest, self-confident, likeable, reasonable, sincere, open-minded, and mature (Stewart, 1975, p. 279).

"If the reader holds the cultural view that a 'snitch,' 'tattletale,' or 'name-caller' is a sneaky, untrustworthy person, the "trust me" appeal of the message is overcoded to mean, the opposite of what is signified" (Garromone & Roddy, 1988, pp. 416-417).

Conflict between the voters cultural ideology and the ideological stance of the political commercial, can force the voter to oppose the signifiers in the personal attack ad through ideological overcoding. "Overcoding directs the reader to connotative levels within the potentiality of the text, even though they may not have been part of the conscious intent of the author" (Fry and Fry, 1986, p.456). Therefore, regardless of the intent of the encoder or the signification of the reader, the interpretant engendered by ideological overcoding becomes the meaning of the text. The connotative meaning of the message makes the attacker the untrustworthy person, and the more forcefully the commercial insinuates or states wrong doing by the opponent

the more distasteful and untrustworthy the attack candidate becomes. "A strong attack on a candidate, if perceived by the audience as untruthful, undocumented, or in any way unjustified, may create more negative feelings toward the sponsor, rather than toward the target" (Garramone, 1984, p. 251).

Ideological overcoding of the candidate's message forces a connotation in direct opposition of the intended meaning. Eco argues that ideological overcoding is unavoidable.

> The reader approaches the text from a personal ideological perspective, even when he is not aware of this, even when his ideological bias is only a highly simplified system of axiological oppositions (Eco, 1979, p. 22).

Fry & Fry point out that Eco uses ideology in it's broadest sense, as a set of commonly accepted values and/or beliefs that directly determine what is accepted as meaning in any mediated message.

> [Further,] ideology is an audience centered factor that has been generally over looked in mass communications research in the United States. [But] articulating fully a semiotic approach requires addressing the issue of ideology (Fry & Fry, 1986, p. 455).

The power of ideology in affecting meaning is apparent in the simple axiological position stemming from certain biblical references such as "love thy neighbor, thou shalt not bear false witness, or judge not." People who live by these admonitions, that is those who do not confront nor lie to others, find the attack candidate in violation of their fundamental ideological position, especially when the attack

is personal and vehemently unforgiving. Therefore the attack candidate may be subject to severe ideological overcoding in a populace of readers who live by these ideals.

Hall (1989) writes that we are never unaffected by ideology because though ideas change, there is always an underlying 'framework of thinking.' "We are not ourselves aware of the rules and systems of classification of an ideology when we enunciate any ideological statement" (Hall, 1985, p.106). Since the reader imbedded in an ideology is not generally aware of how ideology affects her interpretations and actions or is even aware of an ideological position, it may be difficult for the researcher to define an ideological effect or to document ideological motive in signification. However using Eco's definition of ideology clarifies certain cultural effects by connecting commonly held axiological positions, or ideas of "right and wrong" to the process of signification.

Since ideology permeates all levels of society, it must be considered in how meaning is made by the reader, and will be included in the semiotic approach used in this paper. To make meaning from political campaign commercials one must include the personal attitudes, values, and circumstances of the reader and the writer, the circumstances and context in which the message is sent and received, and the character of the signifiers. Signifiers include, words, movement, color, light, and any other aspect of the campaign commercial. This view of semiotic theory suggests that the *intended meaning*

of the message is conveyed when signifier denotation is interpreted with corresponding connotation. Where connotation conflicts with denotation the action of the reader is influenced, but not in consonance with the intent of the signifier.

Semiotics and Political Communication Research.

Pauly suggests that an effective approach to test an idea or premise is to "search the work of others for useful ways of talking about the phenomenon" (Pauly, 1991, p.7). Most traditional communication research is quantitative and indifferent to critical techniques or semiotic theory, but applying the principles of semiotics might be used to reveal how campaign commercials convey meaning to voters. The purpose of applying semiotics is not to "search the materials for a clear message, moral, or value, but [to] interpret them as texts, as more or less integrated strategies of symbolic action." (Pauly, 1991, p.4) That may unveil arbitrary assumptions which obscure or distort meaning. Through this interpretative process one can gain insight as to how a study of signs and sign systems reveals meaning in political campaign commercials.

The effort focuses on research concerning "negative" campaigns since the Mobile Mayor's campaign is generally

characterized as a "negative" campaign.[1] Unpacking political research locates imbedded semiotic principles underlying and supporting the research, and suggests a methodology for understanding how voters interpreted underlying messages in campaign commercials in the Mobile Mayors's race. For example Smith and Garramone writing in Reactions to Political Advertising:

> Sponsor effects should not be considered independent of audience orientation. For political advertising in particular, the partisan predispositions of the audience probably play an important role. Partisanship may influence political advertising effect through selective perception (Smith and Garramone, 1984, p.772).

The first sentence in this quote affirms Pierce's theory that meaning is made by an interpretant, not by the message alone. It also implies that the reader interprets political advertising in a particular personal context as Fish (1986, p.527) contends. "Partisan predispositions" is a phrase used to describe personal beliefs or ideology that cause "Selective perception," which describes Eco's theory of ideological overcoding and selective interaction between the text and the reader: If message denotative meaning agrees with the reader's connotative meaning the interpretant follows the intent of the commercial and the message is accepted with superficial interaction. On the other hand if reader connotation is divergent from denotation the reader

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[1]See Exit Poll, Editorials 8/8/93, 8/20/93, and reports p.1B 8/19/93, p.1A 8/19/93 in The Mobile Press Register, as listed in the Mobile Public Library historical section in micro-film files August 16 to August 25, 1993.

tends to read more closely and there is a greater possibility of aberrant decoding (Eco, 1979, p. 23).

Though not explicitly recognized, semiotic principles may be discerned underlying the Smith-Garramone (1984) research effort. Their study investigating Reactions to Political Advertising found that viewer partisanship, or ideology, affects perceptions of trustworthiness. In semiotic terms, when the reader trusts the sponsor of the message, that is, when the readers ideas of right and wrong lead to a connotation that agrees with denotation, the intent of the message is realized in the interpretant.

In another study titled, Comparing Positive and Negative Political Advertising, Shapiro and Rieger (1992) reach a similar conclusion. They found that

> negative issue ads are more effective than negative image ads. [But] an effective negative ad is likely to do some damage to both the sponsor and the target. In fact, if the ad is really perceived as unfair, the resulting negative perception to the sponsor may overwhelm any damage to the target, and evaluations of the sponsor may actually be worse than evaluations of the target (Shapiro and Rieger, 1992, pp.136-137).

Negative ads concerning issues are more acceptable because a basic ideological stance in a civilized society allows for argument over issues, but personal attacks are considered rude, insulting, or just gossip, especially public personal attacks that ignore issues of concern to the community. Even negative ads deemed "effective" in this study cause damage to both parties. "The sponsor of a negative image ad, however, is evaluated no better and perhaps even worse

than the target and clearly loses votes" (Shapiro and Rieger, 1992, p.144).

Whether the ad is issue or image oriented or even negative or positive in tone the signs used must be perceived as truthful to convey the intended meaning.

> The perceived truthfulness of negative political advertising may determine its impact. Persuasion research indicates that the more credible a source, the more persuasive the message.[2] Similarly, an attack perceived as unjustified may generate more positive feelings toward the target (Garramone, 1984, p.251).

In semiotic terms, "perceived truthfulness" results when all of the signs appearing in the television message are seen to align with the basic axiological position of the reader. In this instance, according to Eco, et al., there is no ideological overcoding, the message is read without deep analysis, and the intended or denotative meaning aligns with the interpreted or connotative meaning. Even when the message is delivered by an independent sponsor the perception of truthfulness is the most important aspect in conveying intended meaning. In a study of voter reaction to political advertising "Perceived sponsor trustworthiness is the key to the process, [of reader acceptance of intended meaning] as both sponsor independence and viewer partisanship yield their effects only through a perception of trustworthiness" (Smith and Garramone, 1984, p.775).

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[2] For further discussion on this point see W. J. McGuire. (1968) The Nature of Attitudes and Attitude Change. in G. Lindsey & E. Aronson, Eds., *The Handbook of Social Psychology (vol III)* Cambridge: Addison-Wesley.

The Smith-Garramone study also points out that a measure of these effects must include evaluation of the commercial per se, "for all influences occurred through perceptions of the commercial itself" (Smith and Garramone, 1984, p.775). This observation tightens the theoretical loop from the broader view of communications to this study of specific political television commercials.

Semiotics and Political Television Commercials

"Despite the growing influence of television, most studies failed to seriously investigate the role of the media in electoral politics" (Kraus, 1988, p.15). Applying semiotic theory to the development, transmission, reception, and acceptance of specific political campaign commercials reveals television as an influential modifier of meaning.

> ...if television manifests a unique symbol system, as Chesebro (1984), Salomon (1987), and other scholars suggest, then it may fundamentally shape what is communicated to receivers, apart from content (Pfau and Kang 1991, p. 115).

Television communication is unique in that it conveys verbal information, visual information, and production information, that is, how the message is put together and presented. It is this third component, the way information is presented, that makes television communication unique. For example a close up of the person on television implies intimacy, as a friend might move closer to whisper a private message. The close up is intimate because it "affords immediate access to a communicator's facial cues. It's small

screen allows television to focus on the interpersonal" (Brummett, 1988, pp. 210-211.).

The illusion of intimacy is magnified by the fact that "the viewer can stare at the communicator's face at length, something that would be rude in most dyadic contexts" (Pfau & Kang, 1991, p. 115). Accenting the perceived intimacy is television's one way character. The viewer or reader may receive the message at home, in the bed room, wearing nothing but underwear, or in the living room relaxing with a beer, but always in an informal, relatively intimate atmosphere.

> Because television is perceived as a more intimate medium, it rewards a very different pattern of communication techniques from alternative modalities. On the one hand, television penalizes techniques traditionally prized in public speaking (i.e., well-crafted prose, well reasoned and supported arguments, or the ability to rouse large audiences). On the other hand television rewards techniques most prized in interpersonal communication (i.e., nonverbal techniques such as facial cues that communicate warmth, body positions that imply immediacy, or vocal cues that indicate trustworthiness) (Atkinson, 1984; Jamieson, 1988; Pfau, 1990, cited in Pfau & Kang, 1991 p. 116).

Television enhances non verbal or expressive features of the speaker and thus "elevates the impact of relational messages in political discourse." (Pfau & Kang, 1991 p.116) Relational messages are that part of communication that "[indicate how] people regard each other, regard their relationship, or regard themselves within the context of the relationship" (Burgoon & Hale, 1984, p.193). Relational messages may be spoken, as when one says to another, "I like you, or I like it here," but more often relational messages

are communicated nonverbally in connection with content or factual messages. (Burgoon, Buller, Hale, & deTurck, 1984; Newton, Burgoon, & Traynowicz, 1989)

Since relational messages are visually communicated as signs accompanying a factual or content message in interpersonal communication, and since television presents the appearance of a one to one or interpersonal context between the candidate and the viewer (Beniger, 1987; Perse & Rubin 1989) relational or non-verbal messages in political commercials must be at least as influential as the content part. Several studies support this contention.

> One investigation examined the relative influence of relational and content messages across five distinct communication modalities. Uniquely in television communication, relational messages contribute more to overall persuasiveness (Pfau, 1990, p. 18).

Applying semiotic theory to the study of political campaign commercials reveals certain non-verbal signifiers interpreted as ideas and feelings to be more important than the factual content and intended meaning of the message (Abelson cited in Leo, 1984, p. 37). Pfau & Kang report that the communication of 'warm feelings' is three to four times more powerful than traditional candidate preference criteria such as party identification or issues (Pfau & Kang, 1991, P.117). This is powerful information and suggests that the intended message of some television commercials used in the Mobile Mayor's race may have conveyed an unintended message contrary to the candidates intent.

Producers of political television commercials are aware that underlying messages exist, but though aware they seem to concentrate on content and emphatic delivery. While analysis shows that the relational, non-verbal cues may be more important than the carefully planned text (Pfau & Kang 1991, p. 116). The perceived intimacy of the television commercial "calls for a pleasant and friendly presence, a moderate tone of voice, small and natural gestures, and a general conversational manner." (Ranney, 1983, p.103) A comparison of Ranney's description of effective use of television with commercials used in the Mobile Mayor's race demonstrates the over looked power of relational messages.

> The findings indicate that messages that communicate more positive relational ratings--including more similarity/depth, equality, immediacy/affection, composure, and receptivity/trust and less dominance and formality--facilitate influence (Pfau & Kang 1991, p. 117).

In a study of relational messages in televised political debates Pfau and Kang emphasize the power of relational messages:

> "...candidates relational messages make an important contribution to influence in televised debates. ...results indicate that viewers' previous knowledge about candidates does influence their perceptions of debate performance, but to a lesser degree than relational messages. Further, the results specified individual dimensions that function as the strongest predictors of candidate influence" (Pfau and Kang, 1991, p.124).

Relational messages, the non-verbal signs, constantly conveyed, often involuntarily revealing, are more persuasive and influential than any other single aspect of political

television commercials. The character of television, the lights, cameras, makeup, and planned movement that must look natural often creates relational messages that significantly modify carefully planned ideas. Television political commercials are designed for visual and verbal effect, but their very design often engenders ideological overcoding that further modifies intended meaning when decoded in the perceived intimacy of television reception.

The theory of semiotics as outlined herein insists that situated individuals select and create signs used in a consensual system of signs that other situated individuals interpret to make meaning. Communicating through political television commercials adds the pervasive modifier of television per se to each situation. Semiotic theory, as outlined in this literature review, is an effective communication research tool and can be used to learn how situated meaning is derived. In this instance Semiotic principles reveal how the television commercials used in the 1993 Mobile Alabama mayor's campaign conveyed meaning to the voters of Mobile.

METHODOLOGY

Of the five candidates in the mayoral race, Mr Raley is excluded from this study since he had no television commercials and was not considered a serious candidate. "Leon Raley, 72, a candidate in his fifth local election this year" (Mobile Register, 8/17/93, p.1A). He received 159 votes, less than one percent of total votes in this election. Another of the five candidates, Mr. Thompson, a late entry, but a serious candidate for the post had only one commercial that ran a few days before the election. A copy of the Thompson commercial was unavailable for this study, but his relatively strong showing in the election is reviewed as part of this effort.

Included in this study are video tape copies of the other three candidates' campaign commercials.[3] These commercials were selected for this study because: (1) The intended message of each candidates commercial is clear. (2) Some of the commercials are rich in signifiers that seem to nullify or contradict the intended message. (3) This set of commercials demonstrate the value of understanding semiotics in the production of television campaign commercials. This

[3] To obtain a copy of the campaign commercials reviewed in this study contact the author.

study shows that had producers been aware of the principles of semiotics prior to this election, the effectiveness of their commercials could have been significantly improved.

Exit Poll

Exit poll data from about one hundred sixty voters were collected personally by the author of this thesis from three different polling places, but the underlying purpose of the poll was to contact voters who were interested in the political process and willing to discuss their views of the commercials and the candidates. While interviewing voters who chose to complete the exit poll, the non-directive-reflective technique was used to present a friendly, yet detached demeanor, while encouraging the voter to expand on answers to poll questions and voice opinions on the campaign in general. From the one hundred sixty contacts, four were incomplete and discarded, one hundred fifty six responses were tabulated, and fifty two of the voters polled agreed to a brief conversational interview.

The polls opened at 7 am, and the researcher arrived at the first polling place at 6:45 am and stayed until about 9 am, went to the second polling place around 11 am until about 2 pm, and to the third polling place from 4 pm until the polls closed at 7 pm. Data were collected and voters were interviewed at three different polling precincts. Some voters were reluctant to participate because of alleged time constraints, others refused as though the interview was an

invasion of privacy, while others seemed eager to stop and chat about the campaign or made significant comment while completing the exit poll.

The non-directive reflective technique allows opinions on any aspect of the campaign, however a subtle reference to the label "TV Poll" in large pink letters stuck on the front of the researcher's shirt could re-focus the conversation to the campaign commercials, or a reference to one of the interviewees answers on the poll. Example: "You indicate that some of the TV commercials were annoying..." often revealed overcoding or decoding of unintended messages in commercials which led to perceptions of certain character traits in the candidates. General outcome of the exit poll is referenced in this report.

Campaign Commercials

Creators of the commercials were interviewed during the campaign and after the election, though only one of the three responded in a very candid way. Each of the three advertising agencies provided copies of some of each candidates commercials for this study, though most agencies offered only tapes they considered to be their best effort.

It is from these interviews that the obvious intended purpose of the commercials was confirmed, i.e., to cause the reader/viewer to vote for a particular candidate, or at least think about the candidate favorably. To achieve this end, the readers perceived meaning must match the producers

intended meaning. Only one of the commercials' producers seemed to understand the difference in relational and issue oriented messages, and none of them were familiar with semiotics, though one producer was concerned with the effects of negative messages, citing polls taken by the University of South Alabama and The Mobile Press Register showing voter dissatisfaction with negative campaign advertising. Final election results seem to reflect many comments made in the interviews concerning the television campaign commercials.

Quantitative Data

Quantitative data (polls & election results) illustrate progress of the campaign and reflect the general effects of the commercials, while qualitative data is analyzed in an attempt to understand why readers perceived a meaning other than that intended by the producers. Sources of information:

1. One hundred fifty six exit poll responses.
2. Post election interviews with 52 voters.
3. Pre-election survey conducted by USA.
4. Published final election returns.
5. Interviews with producers of the commercials.
6. Video tape copies of political commercials.
7. Mobile Press Register editorials and reports.

These data create a multi-faceted, frequently conflicting description of the political campaign. Each point of view is examined in the light of semiotic theory

for insights into how these commercials conveyed meaning to voters. The research path develops a story based in evidence which supports the conclusion that meaning is made by the reader's interpretation of all the signs in the message.

Characteristics of the commercials observed and discussed in interviews with producers of the commercials are the synchronic signs that convey deep meaning to the reader, i.e., style, visual imagery, gesture, tone, and demeanor. This system of signs built into the television commercial production process [as interpreted by the reader] conveys a sense of the candidates friendliness, sincerity, empathy, or lack of empathy with the reader, and appears to be more important than the words delivered to convey the intent of the commercial (Hall, 1989; Livingstone, 1990); Pauly, 1991).

Characteristics of the commercials discussed with the voters centered on their personal interpretation, and their feeling toward the candidate as a result of the commercial.

Every effort is made to write this study as Umberto Eco's model of an open text. "[Where] in the last analysis what matters is not the various issues in themselves but the maze like structure of the text" (Eco, 1979, p.9). Though this study will explore many issues that some researchers may see as dead ends, the structure of this report leads to the end of the maze where the value of semiotic theory in analyzing political campaign television commercials is apparent.

RESULTS AND DISCUSSION

Signs of Intent, Signs of Meaning

"For better or for worse," writes Pauly, "modern people dwell in symbolic worlds mediated by mass communication" (Pauly, 1991, p. 23). Qualitative research enters this symbolic world in an attempt to reconstruct bits of meaning from specific instances of symbiosis. The individual researcher recognizes her personal decoding process involved with people explaining how they made meaning, "because we do consider that allowing us to listen or observe is a way of telling, that behavior in the presence of an observer is a form of speech" (Fiske, 1991, p. 470).

The symbolic meaning of these first few words is to convey the idea that the researcher has considered his own interpretive processes in collecting information and writing this report. The purpose is to show that control of this research effort is in the revelations of participants, the researcher's interpretive and writing processes, and in the readers effort to decode these signs. The trajectory of this research is guided by established semiotic theory and qualitative research techniques.

Fry & Fry (1986) developed a semiotic model of mass communication by integrating Pierce's (1972) idea of sign

and interpretant with Eco's (1972, 1975, 1976) concept of decoding in the signification process. The semiotic model is based on three fundamental postulates observed in this study. The first is that mass media messages are textual and capable of conveying multiple levels of meaning not readily understood through content analysis.

The second postulate states that texts are made meaningful through a process of audience signification. A sign [word, motion, scene, posture, etc..] addresses someone. It creates in the mind of that person an equivalent sign. The sign it creates is the interpretant. The concept of an interpretant developed from the message signifier explains how two individuals can decode different meaning from the same sign.

The third postulate states that textual meaning is constituted by the interaction between textual and extra-textual factors. Thus common significations of media texts can be produced across a diversity of audience members by expressions so commonly accented in a culture that meaning that deviates from the intended is highly unlikely (Fry & Fry, 1986, p.445).

Reasoning from these postulates shows that signs which are not common across a culture or unintended signs that are common (beads of sweat on one's lip, for example) may cause what Eco (1972) calls 'aberrant decoding' that contradicts or modifies the intended meaning of the communication. The Fry & Fry (1986) semiotic model is a useful guide when it is

applied to a narrow segment of mass media communication where the intended purpose of the message is clear and where it is directed to an audience having "a structure of assumptions, purposes, and goals" (Fish, 1986, p. 531).

In this instance the semiotic model is applied to specific political television commercials from the 1993 Mobile Alabama mayoral campaign where the intent of the message is clear, and voters offer a "semiotic ethnography that help us toward understanding concrete, contextualized moments of semiosis as specific instances of more general cultural processes" (Fish, 1980, p. 524). Interviews at the polls provide "concrete contextualized moments" where interested voters reveal how they decoded the commercials into an interpretant that led to meaning from the message. Voters interested in the campaign completed the exit poll, and those willing to comment on the campaign where interviewed. A few voters who did not complete the exit poll and would not be interviewed made significant comments regarding the campaign that are mentioned in this study.

Applying the semiotic model compels the broadest view of campaign communication to narrow into the fine point of meaning for the individual. Stanley Fish contends everyone is situated somewhere; therefore signs are always embedded in a context where they have meaning (Fish, 1986, p. 523). Thus political television commercials are described in the language of semiotics as a series of symbols encoded by a group of situated individuals (the producers) in behalf of a

second group of situated individuals (the candidates) which are onneeedthrough the 'mass media modifier'(television) to a third group of situated individuals (the voters) with the intent of causing the third group to act in a specific way, that is, to vote for or favor a particular candidate. The process is complicated in this instance by the intent of three different sets of producers each sending conflicting signs of different candidates to the same group of voters.

Campaign Context

The series of symbols, words, gestures, movement, etc., in the commercials are signs decoded by the voter within the context of a political campaign (Nesbit, 1988 as cited in Pfau & Kang, 1991, p.115). Campaign context includes social issues, each candidates persona, newspaper articles and editorials, town meetings, personal contact with candidates, symbols generated by the television process, the voter's learned behavior in connection with these events, and her ideological point of view. "In this complex web of [campaign] context voters decode the signs and symbols [of campaign commercials] and either accept or reject their intended meaning" (Fry & Fry, 1986, p. 444).

The importance of context in the communication process is illustrated by the phrase "the air is crisp." Accepted as a rough meteorological description of local atmospheric conditions it indicates an assumed context, but if heard in a discussion of music ("When the piece is played correctly,

the air is crisp.") the phrase is heard as a comment on the performance of a musical composition. Thus when no context is clearly identified the phrase is automatically read in the context most often encountered (Fish, 1986, p.527).[4]

Every sign in every message is always in context, but it must be stated or a familiar context is assumed. In this instance television commercials are analyzed in the context of a political campaign with the peculiar effects of television advertising, as decoded by a number of voters. Campaign context is not static. It changes as the result of developing issues, conversations with peers,[5] polls, rumors, television commercials, their producers, candidates supporters, or the candidates themselves. Though the changes may be slight, the dynamic character of the context in which the message is received and decoded must be considered in studying how meaning is made, because "...the contextualized utterance has greater significance than the speech system that makes it possible" (Fish, 1986, p.528).

Though each voter knows the general intended purpose of campaign commercials, extra-textual factors in the context and in the television system often cause what Eco (1979)

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[4] A more detailed discussion of meaning and context may be found in Validity in Interpretation, see E. D. Hirsch, (New Haven: Yale University Press, 1976), pp. 218-219, and E.D., Hirsch, The Aims of Interpretation(Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 1976.)

[5] For more information on the effect of communication between various social groups see Interpersonal Influence In election Campaigns: Two Step-Flow Hypotheses by J. P. Robinson (1976) POQ vol 40 pp. 304-319.

describes as 'over-coding.' An example of how fluid and powerful extra-textual factors can be was revealed in an interview with a voter who said he was considering one of two candidates, Mr. Chapman or Mr. Dow, but had not made up his mind until Mr. Chapman stopped by his home. "He was walking from house to house handing out campaign literature, I was working in the yard. He introduced himself and asked for my vote. We talked for less than a minute, and as he was leaving I said, 'good luck,' like you would for anybody. He sort of mumbled "I'm gonna need it..." and walked away sort of slumped, with his head down--I was surprised by his hang-dog image... and it stayed with me..."

After that encounter, the voter said Mr. Chapman's television commercials became more annoying and emphasized his impression of a candidate who lacked confidence, seemed insincere, and was "just going through the motions." One unguarded remark and a candidate's posture changed the context of the campaign and the way campaign commercials were decoded for at least one voter. A head down, mumbled response is a kind of gesture, and Gesture is a sign that can stand for something (Fiske, 1987, p. 73). The voter decoded the body language as a sign of hopelessness or lack of desire on the part of the candidate. After his encounter with the candidate in what Fry & Fry, (1986) call an 'uncoded circumstance,' and Eco (1979) describes as 'situational overcoding' the voter's image of that candidate changed and decided his vote, though the candidate was

apparently unaware of how his actions affected the intent of his message. A rumor reported in the Mobile Register (8/19/93 p. 1B) identifying Mr. Chapman as a puppet candidate for a former mayor became a serious possibility for this voter.

Television Context

Contextual considerations are especially important in making a television message because of television's perceived intimacy. Brummett writes, "television affords immediate access to a communicator's facial cues. The small screen allows television to focus on interpersonal facets, and the viewer is allowed with anonymity to stare at the communicator's face" (Brummett, 1988, cited in Pfau & Kang, p. 115).

> Effective political television messages must be made with an understanding of this new context. Television rewards a very different pattern of communication techniques. On one hand television penalizes traditional public speaking techniques, i.e., well crafted prose, well reasoned supported argument and the ability to rouse large audiences. On the other hand television rewards techniques most prized in interpersonal relations, i.e., nonverbal techniques such as facial cues that communicate warmth, body positions that imply immediacy, or vocal cues that convey a feeling of trustworthiness (Atkinson, 1986; Jamieson, 1988; Pfau, 1990; cited in Pfau & Kang, 1991, p. 116).

These aspects of campaign context prove to be very significant factors in the campaign commercials reviewed in this study. Exit poll interviews show signifiers included in the television commercials without regard to the context

in which the commercials were decoded, became a negative influence in direct contradiction to message intent.

Extra Textual Factors

Since 'the newspaper' was referenced as a source of information by many of the voters interviewed,[6] it seems to have had significant influence in forming the context of the campaign and therefore was a factor in the way campaign commercials were decoded, especially for interested voters who followed developments in the campaign. A brief review of articles appearing in the Mobile Register just prior to the election is included here to help establish an idea of extra textual factors that helped create campaign context as seen by voter-readers of the Mobile Register during the campaign.

An important characteristic of the mayoral campaign of 1993 was the lack of a dominant issue or conflict. Voter interest seemed low until the last two or three weeks of the campaign, and since there was no dominant issue, challenging candidates attempted to create one. This study shows that efforts to invent an issue damaged their credibility. This contention is validated by this study and by an article in the Mobile Register on August 8th just two weeks and two days before the election. Bill Sellers, a former editor and

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[6]In a statewide study by University of Alabama 68% reported using newspapers for information on politics.(Latimer, 1984) Also see Reagan & Ducev (1983) Effects of News Measure on Selection of News Sources, Journalism Quarterly, 60: 211-217 (Summer, 1983)

veteran campaign observer, wrote a column headlined: About The Mayors Race: What Race? Mr. Sellers points out that the problem for the challengers is "...that they have been unable to develop any voter enthusiasm for their argument that the rascal should be thrown out. No one can see Mike Dow, [the incumbent] as a rascal." Sellers claimed there was no credible candidate other than Dow, who he described as a self made millionaire living the American dream, then predicted Dow would win the election on the first ballot. After mentioning each of the candidates, Sellers concluded with this paragraph on Paul Thompson, the candidate who ran only one television commercial. "Paul Thompson, the 'Mr. Nice Guy' who says he's not mad at anyone but considers himself the only person knowledgeable enough to run the city, has made the mistake of ignoring Leo Durocher's admonition about nice guys finishing last" (Sellers, Mobile Register, 8/8/93, p. 3C).

An editorial column in that same paper described Mike Dow, the incumbent, in very favorable terms. The column reviewed his many achievements in office, his successful personal life, and all but endorsed him for a second term (Four More, Mobile Register, 8/8/93, p. 3C). Exit poll interviews indicate articles like these gave voters the impression that the newspaper favored the incumbent, Mr. Dow.

An article by editor Stan Tiner on the same page seemed to endorse a semiotic study of the campaign. He writes,

"Symbols are a succinct expression of who and what we are. Symbols are powerful because they speak silent words from the heart, and they are useful because they are simple and eloquent. Symbols are shorthand for things unspoken but understood" (Tiner, Mobile Register, 8/8/93, p. 3C). Mr. Tiner's view of symbols is essentially the semiotic view, and his column speaks to all students of semiotics. Though not written in relation to the campaign it emphasizes the power of a symbol, especially one chosen to represent a candidate in this campaign for mayor. Some campaign symbols, though not always included in the candidates commercials are extra textual and affect decoding of the television message. Candidate Rod Kennedy chose to use the jagged representation of a lightning bolt as his logo on all his campaign literature and became known as 'lightning Rod.' Comments in the exit poll interviews illustrate how his lightning bolt symbol was decoded: A voter who claimed to know him said, "...he sure picked the right logo, but who the hell wants to walk around with a lightning rod?"
"Lightning is very unpredictable and destructive, just like his speeches and TV ads."
"I think of Mr. Kennedy as lightning: a disturbing flash [of light] with a big noise."

These and other comments from exit-poll interviews show that some voters accepted the lightening bolt symbol as an accurate characterization of the candidate. The lightening bolt symbol is "an expression common across a diversity of

audience members. A sign so commonly accented in a culture that meaning is unmistakable" (Fry & Fry, 1986, p. 451). However in this instance the common meaning decoded by the voters was unintended by the candidate. The apparent intent of the candidate was to characterize himself as powerful, fast, and decisive, but the sign was generally decoded as unpredictable, unstable, and often destructive. This interpretation was supported by newspaper articles, the candidates campaign commercials, and by the candidates behavior which was often loud, combative, and unpredictable. "In the code of political communication the [lightning bolt] symbols referential function is to refer to an existing man and program, to make the reader think of what she already knows about the candidate" (Fiske, 1982, p.71). Mr. Tiner wrote, and the voters actions and comments confirm that in the case of Mr. Kennedy, "Symbols are a succinct expression of who and what we are" (Tiner, Mobile Register, 8/8/93, p. 3C).

During the last two weeks of the campaign, television commercials ran very frequently and the Mobile Register reported regularly on polls conducted for the paper by the University of South Alabama. The first published mayoral poll on 6/27/93 based on the question: "If the election were held today who would you vote for?" The incumbent Dow 50%, Chapman 9%, Kennedy 6%, and Thompson 6%. The second poll published 7/25/93 on the same question gave Dow 55%, Chapman 9%, Kennedy 6%, and Thompson 6%.

On August 16th the Mobile Register began a series titled Turning Point that ran a picture of each mayoral candidate with a brief biography on the front page. Each article appeared fair and balanced, but closer examination revealed the series clearly favored the incumbent, Dow.

The first article concerned Mr. Thompson, and it was headlined: Acquaintances Stress Thompson's Honesty. His is the longest biography printed for any of the candidates, and he is described as a successful real estate broker who was raised in a Catholic orphanage. "...he gets up everyday at 3:28 am, drives a priest to church, and attends mass." After identifying him as a devout Catholic, the article is largely favorable comments by friends and business associates. For example: "I wasn't going to vote for mayor until Paul got into the race..." Thompson entered the campaign very late, just before the qualifying deadline, and "...planned to run without taking contributions or spending more than $525, though he changed that idea when supporters pressured him into running a serious campaign." Thompson claims that none of the other candidates are addressing the real issues, and he is quoted as saying, "I won't lose a bit of sleep if I don't get the job, but I'll lose a lot of sleep if I do get it." The article ends with his comment about an earlier campaign for city council when he came in second, "I was never so glad to lose anything in my life" (Shermer, Mobile Register, 8/16/93, p. 1A). A copy of Mr Thompson's one television commercial was not available for

this study.

On 8/17/93 the Mobile Register ran a biography of Mr. Leon Raley who is described as a perennial candidate for various offices and one who disregards polls and last place finishes. Mr. Raley received 159 votes, or .33% of total votes cast, and since he had no television commercials, he is not mentioned again in this study (Mobile Register, 8/16/93, p.1A).

The headline for Mr. Dow: First term has been an eye-opener for Dow. The article described Dow as a war hero, a successful business man, a family man, and a successful mayor who had learned from his first term and earned the right for a second. Even those people quoted as critical of his ideology said they liked him. The worst said about him was, "He enjoyed the limelight... [and] ...he pushed people to do things" (Shermer, Mobile Register, 8/17/93, p.1A).

The brief biography of Mr. Kennedy was headlined: Kennedy Staying on The Attack. "When Rod Kennedy walks to the podium to address a crowd, he moves like a boxer getting ready for the bell to ring for the first round." Mr. Kennedy is described as a successful business man, but nearly one third of the biography is a verbatim account of Mr. Kennedy arguing with the city council. 'Lightning Rod' is identified as the "most fiery stump speaker" in the campaign, "...though moderators of candidate forums have asked candidates to focus on what they plan to do rather than criticize others. The requests have made Kennedy

visibly agitated" (Arbanas, Mobile Register, 8/17/93, p.1A).

The final profile concerned Mr. Chapman. Political Mentor Says Chapman 'Just Works' is the headline. The first sentence sets the tone of the article: "Charles Chapman is no flamboyant politician--he's more of a nuts-and-bolts man. That's exactly why former mayor Arthur Outlaw thinks Chapman would make a good mayor." The article explains that Mr. Outlaw and others are backing Mr. Chapman financially, and though Mr. Chapman is characterized as a successful business man, president of the city council for eight years, and a good worker. "Chapman admits he doesn't like campaigning and that the race has been tough, but he hoped to peak on election day" (Arbanas, Mobile Register, 8/17/93, p.1A).

Other articles mentioned in exit poll interviews added to the context in which campaign commercials were decoded. An editorial headlined, Dirty Tricks Arise From Desperation mentions a flier being circulated accusing Mr. Dow of being a puppet of the newspaper's publisher. The editorial denies the assertion, and defends Mr. Dow as a strong individual not likely to be anyone's puppet (Dirty Tricks, Mobile Register, 8/17/93, p.12A).

Another poll published 8/22/93 two days before the election: Dow 54%, Thompson 10%, Chapman 6%, and Kennedy 5%.

An editorial headlined, Quality Leaders Can Energize City endorses Mr. Dow for mayor describing him as a "mayor who has the energy, ability and desire to make Mobile the dynamic metropolitan center it can be" (Quality, Mobile

Register, 8/17/93, p.10A).

On 8/25/93, the day after the election, the newspaper published the election results as the final poll by all the voters: Dow 61%, Thompson 22%, Chapman 9%, Kennedy 7%. The surprise was Thompson's jump from a late start of 6% to a finish of 22%, while Chapman, rated in the first poll at 6% finished with 9%, and Kennedy started at 5% finished with only 7% of the total vote. This study suggests the reason for Thompson's relatively strong finish over the two other challengers is his generally positive campaign. He did not try to invent an issue, did not attack the incumbent, and did not run negative campaign commercials that eroded his credibility.

Exit poll interviews revealed a general perception that the newspaper was biased in favor of Mr. Dow throughout the campaign. Of course newspaper editors have a right to endorse anyone they choose, but in this campaign newspaper reports and polls seemed to encourage a campaign context biased toward the incumbent. While Mr. Dow is characterized as successful in every undertaking and eager to do a second term, in the last two weeks of the campaign all other candidates are reported as seriously flawed.

Mr. Thompson is characterized as a devout Catholic who was glad he didn't win public office in a previous campaign, and though described as a nice guy, it is pointed out that nice guys finish last.

Just five days before the election, Mr. Kennedy is

characterized as an 'on the attack' fighter, argumentive, fiery speaker, and a candidate visibly agitated by rational suggestions.

Mr. Chapman is portrayed as a candidate backed by a former mayor, who is an honest, successful person, and a hard worker who isn't really sure he wants to be mayor.

Whether the paper was simply reporting 'facts' as they saw them or deliberately favoring Mr. Dow while revealing negative characteristics of other candidates is problematic, but exit-poll interviews indicate a voter perception that the newspaper favored Mr. Dow.

This is an important finding because decoding of the television campaign commercials included newspaper articles as a significant part of the extra textual factors which determine meaning, (Pierce, 1972) (Eco, 1972, 1976, 1979) and the third postulate of the Fry & Fry (1986) model states that textual meaning is constituted by interaction between textual and extra-textual factors to create an interpretant that makes meaning to the reader (Fry & Fry, 1986, p.452).

Voter Perceptions of Campaign Commercials

In this instance, many extra textual factors, whether by design or circumstance, were perceived to be weighted in favor of the incumbent. However, the biased context created by the newspaper was often strengthened when verified by unintended signs displayed in the campaign commercials and in each candidates behavior. Exit poll interviews indicate

that the most powerful effect of the campaign commercials was perceived when extra textual factors and signifiers in the commercials paralleled what the voter believed to be true. One voter's comment summarized a general perception, ...he's (Kennedy) a big phony blow-hard..." This voter image of the candidate questioned his integrity and saw him as loud but meaningless. This opinion was often reinforced by his personal behavior and by signs in the newspaper and in his campaign commercials. The meaning gleaned from the challenging candidates commercials was most often unfavorable despite the intended message. Effects research indicates that if the negative message coincides with what the voter believes to be true the negative message is accepted[7] (Garramone, 1984, p.251; Shapiro & Rieger, 1992, p. 136).

An idea expressed repeatedly by voters in exit poll interviews followed a point made in the Sellers article: that Dow, the incumbent, was not perceived as a 'rascal' and things in the city were not as bad as the other candidates tried to make it appear. Typical comments from the voters,

"I just don't like all that negativity..."

"They exaggerate [problems] for their own purposes..."

"I don't believe any of them..."

"Some of them are ok, (the commercials) but some of them are

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[7] Effects research by Garramone 1984, Garramone & Smith 1984, Livingstone 1990, Shapiro & Rieger 1992, report on negative political advertising as it relates to individual beliefs.

out right lies..."

"Dow admits there are problems, but it isn't as bad as they (Chapman-Kennedy) want to make it..."

These and other comments indicate that when voters believe conditions are good, or at least acceptable, they do not respond to candidates who continually criticize and accuse the incumbent candidate of wrong doing without proof. Making undocumented charges against the incumbent in the commercials led voters to question the credibility of the candidate making the charges rather than shift their basic belief. "The more truthful negative political advertising is perceived, the greater its impact" (Smith & Garramone, 1984, p.772). Persuasion research also indicates that the more credible the source, the more persuasive the message.[8] "The uses and gratifications model of communication assumes the audience is at least as active as the sender and that a message is what the audience makes of it not what the sender intends" (Fiske, 1982, p.135).

The exit poll revealed contradictions in voter reaction to questions regarding campaign commercials: Eighty two percent of those polled said they had seen most or all of the commercials for each candidate, but seventy one percent said the commercials had *not* helped them decide their vote. On the surface this data indicates the campaign commercials

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[8] William J. Mcguire, The Nature of Attitudes and attitude change. in Gardner Lindzey and Eliot Aronson, eds.. The handbook of Social Psychology Vol III Cambridge; Addison-Wesley, 1968

were ineffective in conveying their intended message, yet sixty four percent of those polled said they found some or all of the commercials annoying.

The qualitative interviews revealed that an annoying commercial was usually decoded as untrue, unfair, or rude and inappropriate therefore the intended message would not be accepted (Garramone, 1984, p.251; Shapiro & Rieger, 1992, p. 136). Since the voter would not support a rude individual or one who lies to get votes, it is apparent that certain campaign commercials *did* influence the voters choice of candidate, though most of the voters polled did not admit to that influence.

In this instance voters believed conditions to be much better than the circumstances described by the Kennedy-Chapman campaign commercials, thus they decoded their intended message as untrue and questioned the credibility of the challengers. An elderly voter and long time resident summarized this general perception of the challengers when he said, "Kennedy and Chapman made a mistake by criticizing Dow's performance in office, because he's been a pretty good mayor. And they really shot themselves in the foot when they attacked his personal character..." Exit poll interviews repeatedly confirmed what Sellers wrote, "...no body believes Dow is a rascal" (Sellers, 1993, Mobile Register, p2C).

The Chapman-Kennedy Commercials

The campaign commercials of both Chapman and Kennedy attempted to make Dow's image a campaign issue by attacking his credibility, but based on the exit poll and the election outcome, few voters believed them. (Chapman received 9% and Kennedy 7% of the total vote.) The producers of these commercials clearly did not understand that perceived truthfulness results when all of the signs in the television message align with the basic axiological position of the voter (Eco, 1979; Hall, 1989, cited in Fry & Fry, 1986, p.448).

In this 'bible belt' city the underlying value system as revealed in the interviews is dominated by Christian beliefs such as "Do unto others as you would have them do unto you," "Love your neighbor," "Blessed are the peace makers," and "Forgive thy enemies..." In this culture signifiers perceived to be deliberate lies would create a very poor image for the candidate associated with them, because the culture in which signifiers are created and decoded must be considered in analyzing meaning. (Livingstone, 1990; and Fish, 1986; Wood, 1982.)

Exit poll interviews confirmed that the Kennedy/Chapman commercials were considered unfair and untrue. A young lady's emphatic comment was typical, "I don't think Mike Dow is a liar..." Interviews with producers and analysis of surface content of the Chapman and Kennedy commercials show they intended to convey the idea that Dow was a stooge of

the newspaper publisher, a liar, who had deceived the voters and planned to deceive them again. Though they presented no clear evidence to support their claims, the commercials asked voters to support their effort to correct an unsubstantiated wrong. Shapiro & Rieger (1992) and Garramone (1984) contend that a strong attack on a candidate if perceived by the audience as untruthful, undocumented, or in any way unjustified, may create more negative feeling toward the sponsor, rather than toward the target of the attack.

Election results show the majority of voters rejected the accusations made by Kennedy and Chapman, and exit poll interviews indicate ideological overcoding of the Kennedy campaign commercials conveyed the meaning as deliberately unfair and untruthful in contrast to the intended meaning. The Chapman commercials were equally ineffective in conveying the intended message, but they were not as intensely disliked as the Kennedy commercials. Apparently, Kennedy was perceived as a much more aggressive individual, and as Stewart (1975) reports, "The higher the perceived speaker dynamism, the lower the perceived trustworthiness and competency" (Stewart, 1975, p. 278). This observation may account for the difference in the way signifiers in the Kennedy and Chapman commercials were decoded by voters.

A typical Chapman commercial shows him standing behind his desk, a picture that implies distance and authority, as he points into the camera and says emphatically, "Mike Dow

is not telling you the truth..." He is too far away to read his facial expression clearly and his posture is slightly slumped, quite out of context with the aggressive move of finger pointing. He turns to his right just before the camera cuts to a different and slightly closer view. His words are even more emphatic, "I am opposed to gambling. Gambling causes drugs, prostitution..." He is striking one hand against the other to emphasize his words. The producers, indicated they used this action in an attempt to change his image from the vision of soft spoken plodder and reluctant candidate to a more forceful man of action, a leader, eager to take control of the city. Since he received only nine percent of the vote, it is apparent most voters refused to accept the intended meaning of the message.

Analyzing this commercial in the context in which it is decoded--the viewers home--shows why the intended message was rejected. Chapman says "Mike Dow is not telling the truth...", but no documentation is presented to prove the accusation. His body language is that of a politician speaking to a crowd. Emphatically striking his hand and speaking in a raised voice is behavior not welcome in the intimacy of ones home, nor in the perceived intimacy of television. Television requires a "new eloquence" which consists of warmer communication, common to the interpersonal context (Jamieson, 1988, p. 117).

In the words of one voter, "Mr. Chapman is a very bad actor...," a comment directly questioning the credibility of

the candidate, caused by his lack of naturalness in the interpersonal context of television. Any statement perceived to be untrue reflects on the credibility of the candidate, (Shapiro & Rieger, 1992) (Garramone, 1984) and, more importantly, as Hall (1989) and Fisk & Hartley (1978) contend, a reader's ideological stance determines the level of interaction with media texts and influences how deeply the text is examined. The ideological stance of voters seems to be based more on the Christian ethic than on the accusatory style of Kennedy or Chapman, thus the intended meaning of the message was not accepted, because:

> Meanings are produced in the interaction between text and audience. It is a dynamic act in which both elements contribute equally. When the text and audience are together in a tightly knit culture the interaction is smooth and effortless. In other cases, meanings are produced with a much greater sense of strain (Fish, 1982, p.529).

Strain is probably the word that describes the Chapman appearance on television, and the majority of voters interviewed clearly registered a sense of strain in decoding meaning from the Chapman commercials, the intended meaning is rejected because, "...no one believes Mike Dow is a rascal." Thus the accusation was perceived as untrue or unfair, and the intended message was read superficially if at all. Exit poll interviews and election results disclosed a simultaneous rejection of the candidate personally and the voter/candidate relationship.

Uniquely in television communication, relational messages contribute more to overall persuasiveness (Pfau,

1990, p.12). Relational messages convey how people regard each other, regard their relationship, or regard themselves within the context of the relationship. (Burgoon & Hale, 1984 as cited in Pfau & Kang, 1991.) Ranney (1983) writes, "The TV-room situation calls for a pleasant and friendly presence, a moderate tone of voice, small and natural gestures, and a general conversational manner" (Ranney, 1983, p. 103). Image is probably the most important single factor in political communication.[9] A person guilty [or perceived to be guilty] of spreading rumors, making insinuations, telling lies and calling names would seem to be the opposite of a highly credible candidate who is trustworthy, competent, qualified, honest, self-confident, likeable, reasonable, open-minded, and mature (Stewart, 1975, p.285).

A perceived untruth in the intended message directly impacts the candidates relationship with his intended reader, the voter (Pfau, 1990, p. 18). The effect is particularly powerful when the message is delivered via television. Meyrowitz (1985) argues that compared to other communication modalities, television is (1) because of its visual component is more expressive, featuring kinesic and vocalic nonverbal elements (receivers use expressive

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[9] For discussions of the role image or credibility plays in American Political campaigns, see Dan F. Hahn and Ruth M. Gonchar, "Political Myth: The Image and the Issue, Today's Speech, 20 (Summer, 1972), pp.57-65. Marvin Carlins and Herbert I Abelson, Persuasion: How opinions and Attitudes are Changed (New York: Springer 1970), pp. 108-132.

messages to form impressions about communicators); (2) More presentational, bearing a physical resemblance to the objects characterized (receivers use presentational messages to form mental images); and (3) more analogic, involving continuous messages (receivers use analogic messages to determine how the communicator feels about them and/or their relationship) (Meyrowitz, 1985, pp. 93-97).

Since the perceived intimacy of television makes the message context more interpersonal the "TV politician cannot make a speech; he must engage in intimate conversation" (McGinniss, 1969, cited in Pfau & Kang, 1991, p. 117). Certainly if any one of the candidates came to a voter's home in person, (as they did via television) he would not try to persuade by pointing his finger, thumping his hand, and speaking emphatically with the strained posture and movement displayed in the commercials. The voter would decode the first statement as untrue, the presentation as unacceptable, and (at the very least) ignore the rest of the message as most voters ignored or rejected the intended message of the Chapman Television Commercials.

Applying this same criteria to the Kennedy campaign commercials shows voter reaction to be much more negative. Voters indicated in exit poll interviews that the Kennedy commercials were perceived to be untrue, exaggerated, and deliberately unfair. A typical Kennedy commercial showed a series of newsprint clips and unreadable documents appearing on screen as an announcer's voice sarcastically quoted a

statement or action allegedly made by Dow, then said the word 'fact' as it appeared over the unreadable documents with a dramatic musical chord, as the announcer refuted the alleged statement or action implying and sometimes saying Dow is a liar. The intent was to show that Mike Dow repeatedly deceived the voters, but there was no clear documentation to prove the accusations. The supposed proof moved too quickly to be read or understood, so it was decoded as a kind of deception. In another attempt at documentation, recorded comments made by Dow and others were edited into some commercials, but the phrases were edited in without credible context and also decoded as deception. Voters questioned the original context of the comments or didn't even realize it was a recording of Dow. A phenomenon supported by Hall (1980), Fisk & Hartley, (1978) in the contention previously mentioned, that is, when untruth or unfairness is perceived, the rest of the message is read superficially, if read at all. Thus the manner in which a television message is delivered defines how the candidate is perceived and how carefully the message is decoded by interested voters.

This researcher was hired as the announcer to do the voice over for the Kennedy commercials. During the audio recording session the advertising agency representative insisted the copy be read as an angry expose' in the manner of Kennedy's personal style, which made the accusations sound aggressive and rude when decoded by voters. However

after the campaign, when copies of the commercials were requested for this study, the agency provided only the mildest versions.

Even so the Kennedy commercials included in this study reveal powerful signifiers, "expressions so commonly accented in a culture that meaning cannot be mistaken" (Fry & Fry, 1986, p. 459), though most voters decoded the common signs to contradict or nullify the intended message. Even Kennedy's campaign slogan 'Begin Mobile Again' implied to some voters that, "Everything done before is useless and will be erased..." In the Chapman commercials Chapman says, in the voters home through the perceived intimacy of television, "Dow is not telling the truth...," a statement seen as untrue by most voters, and at best decoded as an undocumented statement that weakened the perceived character of the candidate and his relationship with the voter (Pfau, 1990, p. 15).

In the Kennedy commercials, an announcer, also in the privacy of the voter's home through the perceived intimacy of television, says in a strong accusatory tone, "Dow is a liar..." A very rude statement, much stronger than "Dow isn't telling the truth..." and in this instance ideological overcoding may allow the voter to take the text of the message as a manifestation of the candidates philosophical position (Garamone, 1984, p. 258). In this instance the unintended message is much more destructive to the candidates image and to his relationship with the voter.

The construct of the Kennedy commercial with documents appearing, dramatic music, and a professional announcer dramatizing, each point made in the content is more dynamic than the Chapman commercials, and the Kennedy commercials are filled with unmistakable signs "common across a culture" and decoded by most voters as professional mud-slinging, accusations without proof, and an irritating dynamism "...not welcome at my house"[10] The higher the perceived speaker dynamism the lower the perceived trustworthiness and competency (Stewart, 1975, p. 278). Signs in the Kennedy commercials align with newspaper articles characterizing Kennedy as an on the attack, fiery speaker, and with voter perceptions of Kennedy as the more dynamic of the challengers. The alignment of voter beliefs and negative signs in the commercials further reduce the "warm feelings" between voter and candidate which Pfau & Kang (1991) report are three to four times more powerful than traditional candidate preference criteria such as party identification or issues (Pfau & Kang, 1991, p. 117). The intended message of the Kennedy commercials was to show Dow as a deceiver and Kennedy as the 'good guy' who exposes him and who will make things right, but with no proof of the accusation voters decoded the Kennedy effort as mud-slinging. "While mud-slinging and name calling are often used synonymously, this

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[10] A phrase taken from an interview with a voter who expressed a strong dislike for the angry accusatory commercials during meal time or in the midst of other programs. "I don't want anybody talkin like that at my house..."

common epithet seems to encompass unsupported insinuations, gossip, rumors, clever deceptions, half truths and lies" (Stewart, 1975, p. 279). The outrage expressed in the announcer's tone as he pointed out Dow's alleged deceit was decoded in the intimacy of the voters home as a deliberate lie and an irritating affront to his privacy.

The producers who developed Kennedy's commercials with the harsh accusatory tone did not consider the context in which the commercials would be decoded, and obviously did not understand that signs included in the commercial, the accusatory tone, the unreadable documentation, the slogan implying everything before Kennedy must go, would contradict and nullify the intent of the message.

The last commercial Kennedy ran showed him wearing a business suit, in a room with a mounted fish in the background and fishing poles leaning against a flat knotty pine wall. A wider shot shows him seated at a small table in front of the knotty pine wall with a woman. (Apparently his wife, but she is not identified.) There is a carving of a marsh bird amidst nondescript papers scattered on the table. It is a scene voters perceived as obviously staged. One voter saw the commercial as "...typical Kennedy dishonesty."

Another said, "I love to fish, but I sure don't leave my tackle leaning against the wall like that. It looked so fake, I didn't even hear what he said..."

"...there were two stuffed fish on that knotty pine wall,

one was wearing a business suit."

Again the producers ignored a basic consideration of Television communication: The culture in which signifiers are created and decoded must be considered in analyzing meaning. (Wood, 1982; Fish, 1986; and Livingstone, 1990.) In this commercial the intent is to portray the candidate as an outdoorsman, one familiar with fishing, but the visual layout was perceived as false, "another deception" by voters enmeshed in that cultural characteristic.

After running a series of very accusatory commercials, candidate Kennedy's attempt to ingratiate himself with sportsmen was decoded as a deception designed to get votes. Researchers agree that because of the perceived intimacy of television, image is probably the most important single factor in political communication, and relational messages contribute more to overall persuasiveness (Burgoon & Hale, 1984, p. 193). It is not surprising that voters decoded the rude unsupported accusations in the Kennedy commercials as annoying and untrue, and his attempt to show himself in a relational way as a home body/sportsman came too late. Because most voters questioned his credibility, his last commercial was generally decoded as another deception. Throughout the campaign his dynamic aggressive behavior paralleled his characterization in the newspaper and the tone of his commercials magnified his flawed image.

The Dow Commercials

In contrast to the Kennedy-Chapman commercials reviewed in this study, the producers of the Dow campaign commercials clearly understood the power of relational messages and made each commercial with "a pleasant and friendly presence, a moderate tone of voice, small and natural gestures, and a general conversational manner" (Ranney, 1983, p.103).

The campaign slogan chosen by Mike Dow, "I Like Mike" used in some of the commercials achieved a multi-voiced endorsement of Dow by a number of Mobile voters appearing one at a time in shots showing the shoulders and head, referred to as a 'bust shot' in television jargon. It is used to resemble the view of an individual in conversation with the viewer. Each individual begins by saying, "I like Mike because..." and follows with a brief statement about "Mike's" achievement or character. The close-up of the individual's face emphasized televisions illusion of intimacy and allows voters to study their expression closely (Pfau & Kang, 1991, p. 115). Voters use expressive messages to form impressions about communicators, and analyze audio and video signs to determine how the communicator feels about them and/or their relationship (Meyrowitz, 1985, p. 95). Each of the individuals chosen to speak for Dow were identified by name and business association written below their pictures, and each spoke in a cheerful conversational tone. A cheerful face, a pleasant tone of voice, clear identification of the speaker, giving her straight forward

opinion of why "I like Mike," is decoded as a very credible message whether one agrees with the opinion or not, and it fits the perceived intimacy of television.

The campaign slogan "I Like Mike" spoken before each endorsement was influential in causing voters to decode the messages favorable to Dow. [11] A familiar and/or rhythmic phrase appropriate as a campaign slogan becomes a sign of acceptance for the candidate as the analysis of "I like Ike" [or I Like Mike] illustrates.

> One function of a message is the poetic or the relationship to itself. we are inclined to say 'innocent bystander' rather than 'uninvolved onlooker' because its rhythmic pattern is more aesthetically pleasing. Jakobson (1958) uses the political slogan 'I like Ike' to illustrate the poetic function. It consists of three monosyllables, each with the diphthong 'ay'. Two of them rhyme. The phrase is poetically pleasing and therefore a memorable slogan. [As is the slogan 'I Like Mike' for the same reasons.]
>
> The metalingual function of the phrase is to identify the code being used. In this instance it is the code of political communication. Everyone who uses the phrase 'I like Ike' [or I like Mike] may not know General Eisenhower [or Mike Dow] or like him personally. 'Like' in this case means 'support politically'. So too 'Ike' [or Mike] means not just the man, but the political party and the policies he represents. In a different code, that of personal relationships, 'I like Ike' [or I like Mike] would have very different meanings.
>
> *Emotively* [the phrase 'I like Mike'] tells us about the addresser, his political position and how strongly he feels about it.

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[11]See Fiske's (1982) review of Jakobson's communication model p. 36 in Introduction to Communication Studies, New York, NY, Methuen & Co. Though developed to explain interpersonal message decoding, the model applies to television communication and particularly to the phrase, I like Mike.

> *Conatively,* its function will be to persuade the addressee to support the same political program, to agree with the addresser.
>
> It's *referential* function is to refer to and existing man and program, to make the addressee think of what he already knows about Eisenhower [or Dow] and his policies (Fiske, 1982, p. 36).

Exit-poll interviews frequently included the Phrase 'I like Mike.' Older voters said "It reminds me of I like Ike, so I like Mike," but younger voters referenced the phrase in an entirely different and much more current context ("...yeah, I like Mike, you know, Michael Jordan...") connecting a favorite basketball star to the slogan. Exit poll interviews confirmed that many of the Dow supporters interviewed liked and used the phrase, 'I like Mike' whether in written material or in the campaign commercials, though only 38% indicated in the exit poll that it stood out over other slogans. Broad acceptance of the phrase is indicated in the MOBILE LIKES MIKE headline on the front page of the Mobile Register the day after the election.

Political campaigns expose the public to both issue and personal images, but the latter dominate (Latimer, 1985, p. 776). Signs in the Dow commercials were decoded as positive by the voters interviewed, "...Mobile is as pretty good town, and I like Mike."
"Things are better than when he (Dow) started..."
"I think he's (Dow) doing everything he can..."
"Dow's ok..."

The signs that make the Dow commercials so widely

accepted are the signs that express relational issues. The signs that promote "warm feelings" between voter and candidate which Pfau & Kang (1991) report are three to four times more powerful than traditional candidate preference criteria (Pfau & Kang, 1991, p. 117) In each of the Dow commercials the 'bust shot' was used frequently. The viewer can study facial cues and see that expressions align with voice inflection, and the surface message is delivered in a conversational tone. These are signs that convey a sense of openness and honesty, and "perceptions of a communication are influenced by feelings of trustworthiness" (Smith & Garramone, 1984, p. 772). [12] Though there was no primary issue in this campaign, the Dow commercials focused on the perennial concerns of any community, that is, leadership, schools, police protection, growth, people, etc.. These concerns delivered in a normal conversational tone, in the face to face intimacy of television conveyed the image of an honest man, sincerely interested in improving the community. In every commercial Dow and his producers directed the message to the individual voter decoding it in the privacy of his own home, and gave the decoder the opportunity to study the candidate closely. The Dow commercials are image oriented in purpose and interpersonal in execution because the producers knew a

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[12] See Carl Hovland and Walter Weiss, The Influence of Source Credibility on Communication Effectiveness Public Opinion Quarterly, 15:635-650 (1951).

television politician cannot make a speech; he must engage in intimate conversation (McGinniss, 1969 as cited in Pfau & Kang, 1991, p. 117).

In an exit poll interview a voter referenced one of Dow's commercials because "it really fit." It began with a close up of a comic strip showing two cartoon characters playing a game. Dow says in a voice over, "I saw this cartoon with two guys hollering and yelling at each other, and a third guy walks up and says what are you playing? One of the characters says, you cheat and lie til you win... It's called politics." The camera cuts to a bust shot of Dow who says firmly, "Well I don't play the game..." Then in a disdainful tone says, "You know one guy has accused me of everything but the Mississippi floods, and the other guy is so confused he now says I've got the Mafia after him... give me a break. I don't play the game."

This commercial, delivered expressively in a way voters could study facial expressions, and voice inflections was decoded as a powerful force in the campaign. At least one voter saw Dow saying his opponents were not to be taken seriously. Though there are no direct accusations of lying and cheating, the cartoon reference to "two characters playing a game" makes the point indirectly, symbolicly, and depends on the reader to decode the signs rather than making the rude undocumented accusations in the Kennedy-Chapman commercials. This commercial shows that "television is more expressive, more presentational, bearing a resemblance to

the objects characterized. [Voters] use presentational messages to form mental images (Meyrowitz, 1985, pp. 93-97).

In the course of the exit poll interview several voters said, "That cartoon really fit those two..."(Kennedy-Chapman) These voters decoded the cartoon character symbols as a representation of Dow's opponents, Chapman and Kennedy. This television technique created a mental image of his opponents as cartoon characters who cheat and lie, 'game players' who are not to be taken seriously.

The last campaign commercial broadcast by Dow began with the 'bust shot' showing his calm, well groomed image. Dow says, "As this campaign comes to a close, I wanted to include my family, but they said, "No that's too corny..." Well I don't care..." and the scene cuts to a wide shot showing Dow resting on the arm of a couch that seats his wife and children. There is an American flag suggesting the picture was taken in the mayors office. They were posed as if in a family portrait, and Dow was proudly displaying his wife and children to voters as a picture of his family.

This staged shot of Dow's family was more effective in creating a "warm feeling" for the candidate than Kennedy's knotty pine wall, woman, and fishing tackle. Kennedy did not identify the woman in the picture, which voters read as "lack of respect for his wife," "typical rudeness," or "another deception." Neither did Kennedy explain why the fishing tackle was out of place, nor why the fish seemed to be so close to his head. He talked about the campaign, but

didn't relate anything in the picture to his candidacy for mayor. The Kennedy commercial was decoded as deception.

Dow displayed his family in a normal mayoral setting and identified them as "my wife and family." He related everything in the picture to what he was saying about the campaign: "...I'm proud of my family, and besides, it isn't government that holds the country together, its people..." The commercial shows he is a family man who considers people powerful and important and signifies his respect for the viewer. The flag is appropriate in a mayors office, especially a proud veterans office. He concludes with a phrase that connects him to the ideology of the majority when he says, "God bless you all," but the most powerful signifiers in the Dow commercials are those that consistently convey trust.

Each of Dow's commercials, though directed to some issue or another, conveyed clear signs of his personal image: He always appeared close enough to show his facial expressions, he spoke conversationally, was well groomed, and calm. There was no hand thumping, harsh sarcasm, or rudeness to offend the individual in the perceived intimacy of television. Each surface message was clearly presented and easily decoded in a friendly conversational way. Even when responding to mudslinging, Dow didn't return rude accusations, but displayed his opponents as irresponsible cartoon characters 'playing a game of Politics'. The majority of voters read these image signifiers to describe a

"a responsible leader" "a likeable guy" "[who is] telling the truth," and a man who "thinks like I do"[13] Fiske (1982) writes, "Meanings are produced in the interaction between text and audience. It is a dynamic act in which both elements contribute equally. When the text and audience are together in a tightly knit culture the interaction is smooth and effortless" (Fiske, 1982, p. 143).

This study shows that efforts to create an issue by condemning a popular incumbent without clear evidence undermined the credibility of candidates Chapman and Kennedy, and their commercials included signifiers that voters decoded as inappropriate: vocal tones of anger, loudness, sarcasm, and unreadable 'proof' that was seen as deception. These unintended signs eclipsed signs of the intended message in all but a few percent of the voters.

The Dow campaign commercials offered no clear answers to any of the issues addressed in the commercials, but their design and execution did convey "warm feelings" between voter and candidate which are more powerful than other aspect of the message (Pfau & Kang, 1991, pp. 115-117). All of the commercials in this study show that mass media messages are capable of conveying multiple levels of meaning not readily understood through content analysis, because meaning is made from the message in the context in which it is produced and decoded, and in conjunction with the

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[13] Comments gleaned from conversational with voters during exit poll interviews.

ideological position of the decoder (Fiske, 1991; Fry & Fry, 1986; Garamone & Smith, 1984; Eco, 1979).

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

Summary

Eco (1979) offers an ideological explanation of the broad acceptance of the intended message in the Dow commercials and the rejection of the Chapman-Kennedy intended message: "the more consistent the surface level ideological judgments of the reader and of the text, the more likely it is that the reader will not look for underlying ideological structures, thereby creating interpretants similar to those intended by the encoder" (Eco, 1979, p.21).

A sense of right and wrong is an ideological judgement (Eco, 1979, p. 22), and in the context of this simple view of ideology, it is alright to criticize ones opponents indirectly using a cartoon, but wrong to make angry unsupported accusations naming an individual. If Eco is right, the issue oriented content of the Dow message isn't considered important once the ideological judgement of acceptance is made by the reader.

Cultural ideology is an important consideration in structuring and decoding a television campaign commercial. Hall (1985) writes that we are never unaffected by ideology because though ideas change, there is always an underlying

'framework of thinking.'

> We are not ourselves aware of the rules and systems of classification of an ideology when we enunciate any ideological statement. Since the reader and the writer imbedded in an ideology are not generally aware of how ideology affects their interpretations and actions or are even aware of an ideological position, it may be difficult for the researcher to define an ideological effect or to document ideological motive in signification (Hall, 1989, p.138).

However using Eco's simplified definition of ideology clarifies certain cultural effects by connecting commonly held axiological positions, or ideas of "right and wrong" to the signification process, and helps explain the acceptance of the Dow commercials and the rejection of the intended message in the Chapman-Kennedy commercials.

Smith-Garramone (1984) found that viewer partisanship, (ideology) affects perceptions of trustworthiness (Smith-Garramone, 1984, p. 772). In semiotic terms, when the reader trusts the sponsor of the message the connotation agrees with the denotation and the intent of the message is realized in the interpretant. The denotation in the Dow commercials was essentially "I like Mike" and the pleasant, well groomed, soft spoken, likeable man in the close up, made "I like Mike" the connotation to the majority of voters as indicated in the exit poll interviews and as Sellers wrote, "...no body believes Mike Dow is a rascal."

In contrast the Chapman commercials were out of context in the intimacy of television and were decoded as insincere speech making. The harsh tone of the Kennedy commercials

the interviewer's ideology and opinions affecting the process. Though every effort was made by this writer to adhere to the discipline of qualitative research and semiotic theory, the study is never-the-less written from one situated individual's point of view. Despite this flaw, this study tells an interesting story about the signs and symbols in political television commercials used in the 1993 campaign for mayor of Mobile, AL.

Signs unwittingly included in campaign commercials often obscured the intended meaning or even conveyed a meaning opposite to that intended. Usually the unintended signs were in conflict with the cultural ideology of the reader, thus certain signs in the intended message were decoded as untrue and unfairly directed at an individual. Candidates often tried to use emphatic delivery to prove an issue few voters believed. Some of the commercials were produced without regard to the context in which they were decoded and voters found their efforts annoying and missed or dismissed the intended message.

Some producers of the commercials didn't understand that perceived context, particularly the perceived intimacy of television, affects the meaning of certain signs. For example, the angry accusatory tone or hand thumping speech making are signifiers rejected in the intimacy of ones home and reduce acceptance of the intended message. The intrusive character of the commercial is often read as representative of the candidate's personal character and the intended

message, though understood, is decoded as a construct of a rude and unreliable individual not to be considered.

Though this phenomenon distorts or negates the intended message, it also demonstrates that certain signs have the same meaning across a culture: A loud voice, an accusatory tone, and an uninvited speech are signifiers generally inappropriate in the intimacy of one's home, or through the perceived intimacy of television where the candidate appears to individual voters.

In contrast, a calm, well groomed appearance, a friendly conversational tone, in a picture close enough to allow the viewer to read facial expressions while listening to a rational message is a broadly accepted sign appropriate for decoding in an intimate environment. In this instance, whatever the surface message content, the intended message contains the signs of a good relationship with the viewer and receives common decoding across a culture.

Message intent appears to be accepted when the reader perceives coherence in the meaning of surface signs and deep signs and with what the reader believes to be true. The Chapman-Kennedy commercials were not coded to the political or cultural expectations of the reader. They did not convey signs of trust or fairness with rude unproven accusations. Those writer-producers displayed an ignorance of culturally weighted codes when they allowed inclusion of signifiers that conveyed meaning opposite to the intended.

All signs and symbols in the commercials are apparently

compared to the values, ideology, or beliefs of the viewer before they are accepted as true or false. Particular attention must be given these elements in producing political television commercials, because context, reader ideology, and extra textual factors affect decoding. Without this consideration the connotative message will probably not follow the denotative or intended message and the sign of intent will not be read as the sign of meaning.

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VITA

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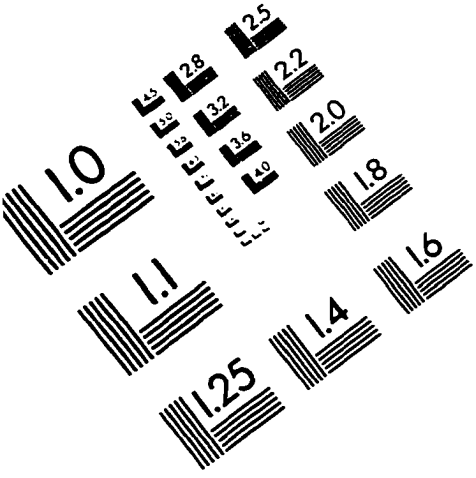
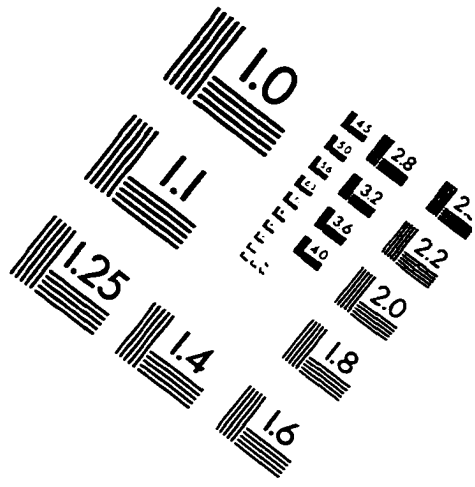
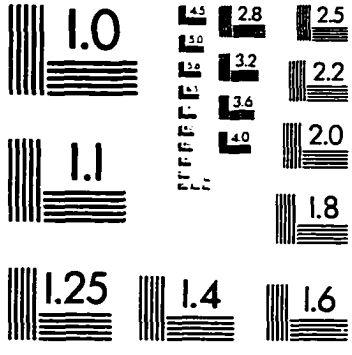
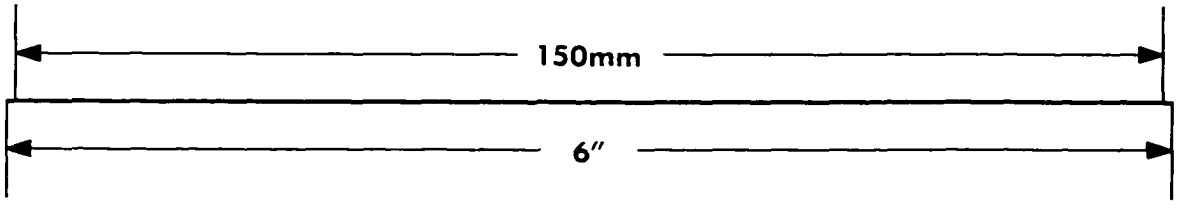
Robert Rasch was born in Somers Point, New Jersey, on August 15, 1931. He graduated from the University of South Mississippi, Hattiesburg, Mississippi, with a B.A. in television and film production in 1979. A graduate assistantship was awarded to Robert during his first and second year at the University of South Alabama. Robert is married to Karen Rasch of Syracuse, New York.

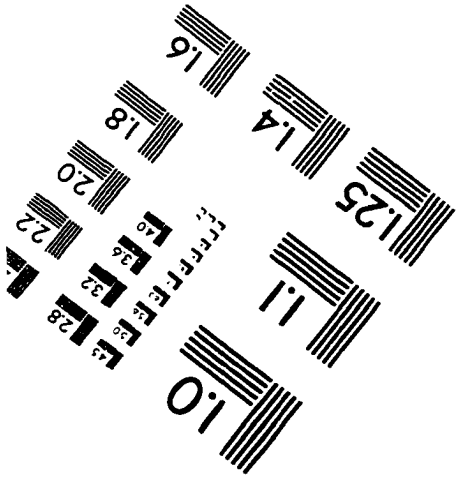
IMAGE EVALUATION TEST TARGET (QA-3)

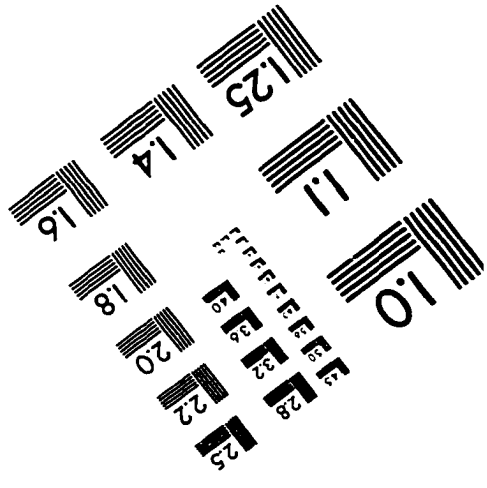












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