

BLIND SPOTS:  
EXAMINING POLITICAL ADVERTISING MISINFORMATION  
AND HOW U.S. NEWS MEDIA HOLD POLITICAL ACTORS ACCOUNTABLE

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## ABSTRACT

While conventional wisdom suggests political ads are often misleading, this is the first known study to quantify the prevalence of inaccuracies in political advertising. This study also examines how and explains why the U.S. news media provide coverage of political advertising in the manner that they do. A multi-method research design includes a content analysis of the television ads from the 2008 presidential election, secondary data analysis of the National Annenberg Election Survey 2008, semantic network analysis of press coverage of political television ads from the 2008 election, as well as in-depth interviews with scholars, practitioners, journalists and lawyers having expertise in the issues surrounding political advertising.

Of all the English-language paid political ads that aired on television during the 2008 general election, just under 30% contained at least one inaccuracy based upon the ratings of FactCheck.org and PolitiFact.com. This figure, however, is likely a gross under representation of the prevalence of inaccuracies in political ads from 2008 because most of the ads (70%) were never evaluated by these purportedly elite fact-checkers. Among ads assessed, however, more than three out of four of the evaluated claims had some degree of inaccuracy. Furthermore, ads containing at least one inaccuracy aired twice as often on television as the ads that were never evaluated. To the degree inaccurate ads air on television more frequently, then, there is cause for concern particularly given the broadcasters' mandate to serve the public interest. Moreover, while political interest supporters were one of the groups most likely to have inaccuracies in their ads, nearly half of their spending was in the last weeks of the election contributing to most of their ads going without evaluation. Thus, in a post-*Citizens United* world, attempts by fact-checkers to review the onslaught of PAC ads during the final weeks of the 2012 election (and the final weeks of future elections) will be crucial in combating inaccuracies.

This study also extends the work of Geer (2006) who offered an organized review of negativity in political advertising. Rather than finding support for the hypothesis that negative attack ads are more accurate than advocacy ads, the evidence challenges Geer's defense of negativity. Among the ads evaluated by the fact-checkers, inaccuracies were significantly more likely to be present in attack rather than either advocacy or contrast ads. While Geer may have demonstrated that negative ads offer more substantive evidence, simply because evidence is presented does not mean the evidence is accurate. In the more provocative ads of 2008 designed to gain attention, inaccuracies were rife. Moreover, rather than the mainstream news media fixation on political ad negativity, the evidence in the forthcoming pages suggests attention is more warranted concerning the accuracy of the claims within the ads regardless of the ad's tone.

A first step toward a theory of strategic misinformation is also offered by demonstrating that it is possible to predict which political ads were more likely to draw an inaccurate rating from the fact-checkers. Holding all other variables constant, it was attack ads that had the highest odds of being evaluated as inaccurate with contrast ads also having a high likelihood. These predictions also confirmed that as the campaign progressed, the odds of an ad being rated inaccurate declined which was a function of ads not being evaluated. Furthermore, it was revealed that a loss of momentum or a decline in public perceptions of candidate characteristics increased the odds of candidates drawing inaccurate ratings in their attack ads.

In extending understanding of how news media cover candidate campaigns when political advertising is referenced, a plurality of media outlets from the over two dozen in the study were characterized foremost by their focus on campaign strategy rather than fact-checking. One cluster, however, emerged as AdWatchers - those committed to using political ads to scrutinize the accuracy of what candidates and their surrogates were claiming. Nonetheless, the

economic realities of adwatching are that there is a so called “chilling effect” because it is expensive, time-consuming, and divisive. Furthermore, the dearth of watchdog ad reporting enables broadcast stations to continue airing ads that may be false while preserving their ability to claim ignorance about the content when faced with regulatory compliance issues. Thus, the political ads most likely to air are the ones with inaccuracies. Chances are the ads will go unscrutinized by the mainstream news media while television stations profit from their proliferation.

DEDICATION

For C.M., T.R. and J.C.

Sunshine, Coyote and smooth sailing.

Anchors aweigh...

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## CHAPTER 1

## (MIS)INFORMING THE POLITY

“...[T]he casual approach of professionals is wholly out of joint with the view taken by those who have to cope with the consequences of deception. For them, to be given false information about important choices in their lives is to be rendered powerless.”

- Sissela Bok (1978, p. xvii)

Throughout the 2008 presidential election, U.S. residents were subjected to a litany of political ads heralding the plans of one candidate or cautioning about the perils of the other. We heard about the Bridge to Nowhere, Joe the Plumber, lipstick on a pig, and the U.S. of KKK. Senator Barack Obama, we were told by one ad, would raise our taxes on electricity. Another ad told us that Senator John McCain would implement the largest middle-class tax increase in history. The truth is both statements were false (Miller, 2008; Robertson, 2008), but they aired on the commercial airwaves thousands of times nevertheless. Even if we weren't directly exposed to these political ads, we probably read or heard about them in the news. Is it any surprise then that many studies of voter behavior have found the electorate to be woefully uninformed about political issues (Berelson, 1952; Campbell, Converse, Miller & Stokes, 1964; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1991; 1996)?

There are those who assert, however, that voters are not ignorant or uninformed. Critical of the uninformed electorate perspective was V.O. Key (1966) who famously wrote “voters are not fools” (p. 7). He argued that voters are about as well informed as can be expected given the clarity and substance of information provided to them. Indeed, studies of the last two presidential elections indicate that political ads were effective at *misinforming* voters (Jamieson & Jackson, 2008; West, 2010; Winneg, Kenski & Jamieson, 2005). Nonetheless, with certain exceptions to be noted in the forthcoming pages<sup>1</sup>, the calculus of much of the political science

literature on vote choice seems to presume the accuracy of political information (Neuman, Just & Crigler, 1992). This dissertation argues that while voters may not be fools, evidence suggests they certainly can be fooled. Like the danger inherent in the blind spot of a vehicle – what we can't see (or don't realize) can hurt us. While it is anecdotally accepted that political ads are often misleading, a systematic study of inaccuracies in political advertising has yet to be accomplished. This research strives to correct for the blind spot by bringing into plain sight the pervasiveness of political inaccuracies through an examination of the prevalence of political advertising inaccuracies. In addition, consideration will be given to how well the U.S. media serve the needs of the citizenry by holding political actors accountable for claims in their political ad spots.

In the middle of the 20th century, it was Dallas Smythe (1951, 1977) who initiated what has become known as the blind spot argument.<sup>2</sup> He argued that society is unable or unwilling to recognize that broadcasting comes at a cost to “consumers.” Rather than broadcast programming being the commodity, it is instead the audience that is the commodity, packaged and offered for the benefit of the advertisers. In other words, audiences are commodified by commercial media. This study extends Smythe's argument by questioning the ability of political advertising to truly serve the public's democratic ideals. It is not well understood in America that broadcasters receive free use of the scarce resource of the broadcast radio spectrum in exchange for serving the public interest. The cost to citizens (as distinguished from consumers) is that rather than being provided substantive, accurate information which can be helpful in making decisions about whom to elect to public office, citizens are instead provided with information that is often ambiguous and frequently misleading if not outright false. By providing financial donations to politicians (Center for Responsive Politics, 2009), broadcasters profit from these political ad

spots while at the same time lobbying against any sort of regulation. In 2010, it was estimated that up to 20% of broadcasters' revenues came from political ads – over \$2 billion (Nichols & McChesney, 2011). Thus, broadcasting comes at a cost to citizens when political ads that are misleading and inaccurate are presented to them by broadcasters claiming to serve their interests. Accordingly, the structural and regulatory environment of the media will be explored to better understand this paradox.

Issues in the literature of the political science and communication disciplines inform this dissertation. They will be addressed from theoretical, normative, and empirical points of view. The perspectives offered here conflict with the assumptions of the uninformed voter paradigm (Bartels, 1996; Berelson, 1952; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Dewey, 1927; Lippmann, 1922; McChesney, 2008; Mindich, 2005, Zaller, 1999) and the minimal media effects tradition (Campbell et al., 1964; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Klapper, 1966; Lazarsfeld, Berelson & Gaudet, 1948) and build upon the emerging misinformation framework (Alvarez, 1997; Bullock, 2006; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Key, 1966; Kuklinski, Quirk, Jerit, Schwieder & Rich, 2000; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010) and the social responsibility theory of the press (Carey, 1978a; Downie & Schudson, 2011; Jamieson & Hardy, 2008; Jamieson & Waldman, 2003; Siebert, Peterson & Schramm, 1956).

In drawing attention to these so-called blind spots of political inaccuracies, this chapter offers a literature review along with the theoretical principles forming the foundation of this study. In chapter 2, a conceptualization of inaccuracy is offered along with the study design that has been used to address the research questions and proposed hypotheses. Chapter 3 offers a first look at the nature and prevalence of political ad inaccuracies. After demonstrating that predicting the circumstances under which political ads will draw an inaccurate rating is possible,

chapter 4 explores the theory of strategic misinformation which reveals additional conditions under which candidates are more likely to resort to inaccuracies in their political ads. Focus shifts in chapter 5 toward how the news media hold political actors accountable for the claims they make in their ad campaigns and why it is done in this manner. Chapter 6 pulls back even further in exploring the macro environment of the mass media industry more generally. Chapter 7 examines the relevant legal and regulatory constraints on the media industry and how specifically they relate to political advertising. Finally, chapter 8 offers an interpretive synthesis of the results of this study along with thoughts about the future of political advertising.

### Political Knowledge and the Information Environment

#### *The (Un)Informed Voter*

At its fundamental level, politics is about managing conflict between choices in collective decision making (Kernell & Jacobson, 2003). For the purposes of this study, the focus will be on decisions related to electoral politics where the concern is with choosing individuals to hold public office. The United States political system is organized around the principles of a democratic republic. Government officials are elected by voters to represent their best interests. According to the various theories that serve as the foundational ideals of American democracy, an interested, informed and educated electorate is necessary for citizens to effectively promote their collective interests. In practice, however, it has been observed that many Americans lack the interest and knowledge purportedly necessary to participate in electoral politics (Bartels, 1996; Berelson, 1952; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Dewey, 1927; Lippmann, 1922; McChesney, 2008; Mindich, 2005, Zaller, 1999). Bartels (1996) has referred to voter ignorance as “one of the best documented features of contemporary politics” (p. 194). This is one of democracy’s seeming paradoxes. How can citizens effectively nominate and elect candidates for

office if they are not interested in or not knowledgeable about political issues that will affect their well being (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Dewey, 1927; Lippmann, 1922)?

Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) offered strong theoretical and empirical support for the claim that political knowledge is crucial to democracy. For them, the concept of political knowledge is “the range of factual information about politics that is stored in long-term memory” (p. 10). They emphasized that their definition requires the information to be accurate rather than based upon a belief or opinion. To demonstrate the importance of political knowledge, they compared it to the relationship between money and economics. “Political information is to democratic politics,” they claimed, “what money is to economics: it is the currency of citizenship” (p. 8). Their analogy also conveys that like other currencies, acquiring political knowledge depends upon more than one’s individual capabilities. If understood as a resource – like money - rather than an inherent trait, political knowledge can be perceived as resulting from a combination of an individual’s cognitive ability, motivation, and opportunity. Thus, rather than political knowledge – or lack of it – being construed as a personal accomplishment or failure, external factors need to be considered.

For those with adequate mental abilities of perception, memory, judgment, and reasoning, political learning is facilitated (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). Beyond cognitive abilities, however, structural factors in the social environment also play a role in the acquisition of knowledge. For instance, *Brown v. Board of Education* (1954) established that opportunities have not been equally distributed in educating children in the U.S. While a 2007 Supreme Court ruling struck down racial quotas in public education (*Parents Involved in Community Schools v. Seattle School District No. 1*), a Gallup poll during the same month indicated that blacks were significantly more likely than whites to perceive continued inequalities in educational

opportunities for their children (Saad, 2007). Regardless of whether the educational inequalities are perceived or structural, educational attainment levels vary by race (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996) suggesting that political learning is not facilitated equally.

Beyond formal education, occupation poses another structural factor to consider. Certain occupations are what Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) referred to as more “politically impinged” than others. Essentially, for some voters information is less costly to obtain because it is readily available during the routine course of their day. However for many others, much time and effort must be invested to acquire that same information because their occupations do not afford the opportunity to come in contact with political information. Thus, as information is harder to come by, it is less likely that any but the most motivated will access it (Downs, 1957). This has resulted in the unequal distribution of knowledge throughout the electorate (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996). This also suggests that more readily available information, such as political advertising, may be most useful to those with less political knowledge.

A principal finding of those surveyed in Delli Carpini and Keeter’s (1996) study was that while what they termed an “adequate” minority of the population was reasonably informed, many citizens were uninformed about politics. For informed citizens, democracy works as intended, serving their interests. Less politically informed citizens, however, have problematic implications for society. Ill informed citizens are less likely to be able to understand and connect their personal circumstances to the broader social and political environment. Therefore, they are less able to vote on issues in a manner consistent with their attitudes and ideology. Those with less political knowledge are also less likely to have stable political opinions and are therefore more susceptible to political propaganda – or political advertising. Delli Carpini and Keeter concluded that there is no paradox to U.S. democracy. When politically informed as



theoretically envisioned, democracy works as intended, serving the interests of those who participate. For those who are unable to participate at an informed level, however, their interests are not served. Accordingly, adequate political knowledge is necessary to serve the general public interest.

The uninformed voters, however, are not necessarily ignorant or uninterested in politics. Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) argued that “many citizens actively attempt to understand the political world and often give answers that, although wrong, are plausible or that reflect biases in the information environment” (p. 17). They even allude to the “misleading style of election campaigns” (p. 267) as a source of voter enfeeblement. Of particular importance from the political knowledge literature is that relevant, accurate information needs to be available to citizens (Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Key, 1966; Kuklinski et al., 2000). As observed by Key (1966), the echoes of public opinion are dependent upon what is put into the echo chamber. If false and misleading information is introduced into the election, unless some mechanism is offered to blunt or stop the inaccuracy, it will reverberate throughout the length of the campaign.

There are those, however, who argue that by relying on heuristics or simplifying cues, citizens can effectively select candidates even with minimal information (Berelson et al., 1954; Fiorina, 1978; Key, 1966; Popkin, 1991). Popkin (1991) contended that voters learn more than political scientists give them credit for and advanced a theory of low-information rationality. He drew upon the writings of Aristotle who positioned the decision-making process between consumers and voters as analogous. Popkin, however, discriminated between these two groups with his investor analogy. While consumers make choices to benefit their private interests, he argued that voters make choices to benefit the public welfare. Thus, he viewed a voter as “an investor and the vote as a reasoned investment in collective goods, made with costly and

imperfect information under conditions of uncertainty” (p. 10). The tension between individual versus group concerns and outcomes is fundamental to Popkin’s theory. Because the expected gains from personal consumption choices are higher than the gains from public voting choices, Popkin argued that citizens are not incented to become well informed about political issues. This aligns with the seminal work of Anthony Downs (1957) who argued that high costs of information acquisition make it rational for voters to abstain from voting.

Yet, Popkin (1991) contended that voters still are able to have an idea of where candidates stand on important issues. Voters learn this information as a by-product of living their everyday lives (also see Fiorina, 1978; Key, 1966). Whereas Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) distinguished those who had politically impinged jobs and thus exposure to more relevant political information (following Downs, 1957), for Popkin everyone can make relevant inferences. When citizens observe that food prices at the grocery store are on the rise and that it costs more money to fill the gas tank of their vehicle and hear about friends and neighbors who have lost their jobs, they know the economy is having problems.

Citizens can also take cues from the media to inform their voting decisions (Popkin, 1991). They take prompts from press endorsements and other elites about how politicians are addressing particular issues and then discuss these topics with family, friends and co-workers. Zaller (1992) developed a similar argument that the media and the political elite influence public opinion (although also see Zaller, 1998<sup>3</sup>). The coverage of elite discourse by the mass media enables citizens to form a set of considerations comprised of conflicting persuasive messages. According to Zaller, the most accessible considerations are the most influential. Like Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996), Zaller found the most politically knowledgeable citizens more likely to receive political messages, yet also more likely to resist messages that are inconsistent with

their value systems. Thus it is the less politically informed citizens who are most susceptible to political propaganda.

For Popkin (1991), the ability for campaigns to manipulate and mislead voters is “vastly overstated” (p. 232). Despite criticisms that voters are not as informed as they ought to be by conventional democratic norms, Popkin argued that voters are more able to accurately associate candidates with their positions on issues at the end of a campaign than at the beginning. Yet, Kuklinski and his colleagues (2000) challenged the efficacy of heuristics arguing that if the available information is wrong, using rules of thumb to draw inferences is useless. Given that millions of voters were demonstrated to have been misled on key policy platforms during the 2004 and 2008 presidential elections, the concern of Kuklinski et al. seems warranted.

#### *Misinformation*

Only recently has the vote choice literature in political science begun to acknowledge that voters do not always have perfect information (Alvarez, 1997). In his investigation of voter decision-making, Alvarez (1997) recognized that the clarity of information available to citizens can affect their interest and ability to vote (also see West, 2010) – a key condition noted by Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996). To better understand the real world effects of our “imperfect information,” (p. 2), Alvarez developed a model which accounts for voter uncertainty, “the imperfections which exist in a voter’s information about a candidate’s policy positions” (p. 3). His analysis of data from the 1976-1992 presidential elections demonstrated that uncertainty is driven by partisanship. So the more one relies on partisan cues the less certain one is about positions on policy issues. Thus, he inferred, partisanship may be an impediment to informing voters of actual candidate positions. This finding serves as another challenge to the effectiveness of the heuristic voting model. If partisans are unable to accurately place candidates on specific

issues, how can they accurately cast a vote? Candidate issue stances do not always align with expected ideological positions.

Alvarez (1997) also observed that greater issue certainty was attributed to candidates who voters supported which he hypothesized may indicate selective learning; voters only retain information about their preferred candidate. Of course, it could also mean that to avoid cognitive dissonance, voters become embedded in their convictions (Festinger, 1957). Scholars studying misinformation have found that voters tend to resist information that does not align with preexisting beliefs (Kuklinski et al., 2000; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010).

The “uninformed voter” perspective was also challenged by Lodge, Steenbergen and Brau (1995). They contended that voters are not uninformed, it is just that standard survey recall methods are not effective at measuring voters’ actual knowledge about candidates and how they make their voting decisions. “What is important,” they wrote, “is not so much whether citizens can recall a little or a lot of information but that their political judgments and choices reflect their evaluation of the information” (p. 322). Moreover, in rejecting the “uninformed voter” perspective, Lodge et al. also argued that the types of available campaign information need to be considered. The implication here, in part, relates back to the issue of the quality of information. If voters are so seemingly uninformed, perhaps their lack of knowledge corresponds to the messages given to them during the course of the campaign.

Like the “imperfect information” notion of Alvarez (1997), Carsey (2000) also recognized as unrealistic the ideal rational choice theory assumptions of complete and cost-free information. Candidates, observed Carsey, have a strategic incentive to inform voters with messages that position themselves most favorably. He outlined three basic strategies from which candidates will choose: “changing their location in the issue space of an election, converting

voters toward their ideal point on issues, or altering the nature of the issue space by changing the salience of dimensions along which the election is structured” (p. 23). Carsey assumed that campaigns strive to *reduce* voter uncertainty by strategic political communications. But what if they do not?

Might it be possible that rather than *reduce* uncertainty, under certain circumstances candidates are strategically inclined to *distort* campaign messages in their advertising and political communications? According to West (2010), this is what happens. He referred to it as “strategic manipulation” (p. 180). The theoretical implications of this phenomenon are that if there is enough disinformation, perhaps uncertainty will compel voters to fall back on partisan voting. And as Alvarez suggested, partisan voting is not necessarily an effective strategy for democracy. Strategic manipulation may actually perpetuate an unending cycle...the more campaign distortions offered, the more uncertainty caused; the more uncertainty, the less likely voters are to use the available accurate factual information, plus, the more likely voters are to fall back on partisan cues thus becoming ever more embedded in their convictions.

Research exists to lend credibility to these propositions. Nyhan and Reifler (2010) found that even in the presence of corrected information, people believe political misinformation. Thus, introducing disinformation can have lasting effects. Others contend that misinformation feeds into pre-existing political beliefs (Bullock, 2006; Fish, 2007). A long line of psychological research has demonstrated the presence of confirmation bias: we agree with information that supports our predisposed belief systems and disagree with, avoid, or ignore information that opposes our predispositions (Cialdini, 2009; Fish, 1989; Hart, Albarracin, Eagly, Brechan, Lindberg & Merrill, 2009; Jackson & Jamieson, 2007; Wason, 1960). Thus, a theory of “strategic misinformation” is worth consideration in predicting political ad inaccuracies.

Discriminating between voters who are uninformed and voters who are misinformed is a relatively recent development in the political science discipline (Kuklinski et al., 2000). Page (1976) perhaps began efforts toward this distinction by arguing that candidates must selectively emphasize policy stands and other campaign appeals. Because specific policy proposals likely appeal to only a segment of voters, candidates are rewarded with broader appeal if they are ambiguous in their policy stands. Zaller (1999) took Page's theory of ambiguity even farther. Zaller agreed that from a Downsian (1957) rationality perspective, candidate equivocation on important issues makes sense. According to Downs:

Ambiguity . . . increases the number of voters to whom a party may appeal. This fact encourages parties in a two-party system to be as equivocal as possible about their stands on each controversial issue. And since both parties find it rational to be ambiguous neither is forced by the other's clarity to take a more precise stand.

Thus political rationality leads parties in a two-party system to becloud their policies in a fog of ambiguity (Chapters 7 and 8; as cited by Zaller, p.13).

Zaller extended this line of thought, writing, "Some politicians may have an interest in bamboozling the public" (p. 28). That interest is the politician's own self-interest in getting elected (Page, 1976; Zaller, 1999). Thus, voters must contend with information that is not only ambiguous but intentionally inaccurate as well. But regardless of their clarity or accuracy, do these messages have any influence on voting behavior when conveyed to citizens through the mass media?

## Theories of Media Effects

### *Magic Bullet/Minimal Effects Models*

At the beginning of the twentieth century, many Americans feared the growing prevalence of mass-mediated communications as they evolved from print to film to broadcasting. While some elites believed the developments in mediated technology would lead to informed

public opinion (Dewey, 1927; Lippmann, 1922), others perceived the media as “menacing agents that threatened the destruction of democracy” (Lowrey & DeFleur, 1995, p. 190). Even common Americans feared the uprising of demagogues such as Adolf Hitler and the control he maintained with his use of mediated propaganda and media censorship. The “magic bullet” theory of media effects reflected these fears suggesting that viewers could be directly and immediately influenced by mediated content and, therefore, those who controlled the media would be able to control public opinion (Lowrey & DeFleur, 1995; but also see Chaffee & Hochheimer, 1985 who suggest a less widespread belief in a magic bullet model of effects).

Before the United States was officially established, news and information traveled throughout the colonies slowly by word of mouth after the newspapers arrived from overseas and as news sheets were launched. Changes in print and later broadcast technology made it possible to communicate within the country more and more quickly to what is today an instantaneous task. With the emergence of the wireless telegraph and use of the radio spectrum, it was recognized that some sort of regulation of this limited natural resource was necessary. In 1934, Congress enacted the Communications Act which established the Federal Communications Commission (FCC). Its mandate was and still is to oversee the regulation of the broadcast radio spectrum which today includes broadcast, cable and satellite television as well as telephony. According to the FCC, broadcasters are required “to air programming that is responsive to the needs and problems of its local community” (The Media Bureau, 2008, p. 6). This is the “public interest” requirement that broadcasters must serve in exchange for their license to operate a broadcast station using the publicly-owned airwaves.

Concern over the potential uses and abuses that could emerge because of the scarcity of broadcasting resources predated the formation of the FCC. As Rendall (2005) noted, fears about

the powers held by the radio spectrum licensees were evident in the debate that preceded the enactment of the Radio Act of 1927 – the predecessor of the Communications Act. He offered this quote from Representative Luther Johnson (D-Texas) as illustrative:

American thought and American politics will be largely at the mercy of those who operate these stations, for publicity is the most powerful weapon that can be wielded in a republic. And when such a weapon is placed in the hands of one person, or a single selfish group is permitted to either tacitly or otherwise acquire ownership or dominate these broadcasting stations throughout the country, then woe be to those who dare to differ with them. It will be impossible to compete with them in reaching the ears of the American people.

Given the power suggested by the magic bullet premise of media effects, the work of Lazarsfeld, Berelson and Gaudet (1948) was specifically commissioned to understand the implications from a political perspective: how do voters make up their minds when selecting political candidates? Rather than highly influential effects, their findings suggested a minimal effects model of political campaigns. According to this model, the predominant role of the mass media was limited to reinforcing the pre-existing beliefs of partisan voters. A small proportion of predisposed voters was motivated into action by mediated information. Even fewer were converted from the propensity to vote for one candidate to another. Lazarsfeld and his colleagues found that patterns of attention to media were selective, messages across media tended to reach the same people, and that people were often influenced by the views of others who came to be referred to as opinion leaders. Thus, the magic bullet hypothesis was seemingly refuted by this research in favor of a more limited effects theory.

For much of the mid-20th century, the political science literature was dominated by this “minimal effects” theory of political communication (Campbell et al., 1964; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Klapper, 1966; Lazarsfeld et al., 1948). The prevailing insight remained that political communication mattered, if at all, only around the margins. Subsequent research, however, has



indicated that the minimal effects findings were anomalous to the uneventful elections Lazarsfeld and his colleagues were studying and not broadly generalizable (Alvarez, 1997; Finkel, 1993). Bartels (1993) attributed the previous inability of scholars to find significant media effects from political campaigns to methodological limitations and carelessness (also see Zaller, 1992). Chaffee and Hochheimer (1985) argued that how one defined what constituted an effect mattered as well. For instance, rather than affecting vote choice, knowledge gain could certainly be construed as an effect as well. Moreover, it is worth noting that Lazarsfeld was part of the Columbia School of research which was affiliated with Columbia Broadcasting System (today known as CBS). As Carey (1978b) observed, the shift from a powerful effects model of media to a limited effects model was paralleled by the evolving relationships between scholars and media institutions. Broadcasters – and the academics working for them – had a vested interest in calming the fears of the public. Accordingly, the minimal effects paradigm was less a result of effective measurement methods and more than likely self-serving to the broadcast industry players.

More recently a growing list of scholars contend that political communications, including advertising, can effectively influence the outcome of an election (Bartels, 2008; Brader, 2006; Carsey, 2000; Huber & Arceneaux, 2007; Johnston, Hagen & Jamieson, 2004; Kenski, Hardy & Jamieson, 2010; Shaw, 1999a; Vavreck, 2009). In his experimental research on how the emotional content of political communications influences citizens, Brader (2006) concluded that “candidates can use television advertising to persuade voters. Fear appeals provide candidates with an effective instrument for convincing citizens to change their minds, and enthusiasm appeals provide them with a powerful tool for invigorating supporters” (p. 144). Field studies on the effects of political advertising have also proven fruitful. In their analyses of the 2000

presidential election, Johnston et al. (2004) noted that both factions of campaign effects theorists, those contending the independent significance of campaigns is minimal and those who take campaign effects as a significant force, offer elements that “prove to be true” (p. 21). They argued that one of the critical factors contributing to the outcome of the 2000 election was the imbalance in campaign resources, ad spending in particular. Similarly, Huber and Arceneaux (2007) were able to isolate the effects of advertising in the 2000 presidential election by examining areas in non-battleground states which received inadvertent advertising exposure due to their geographic proximity to media markets in battleground states. They also found evidence of the ability of campaign ads to “persuade voters to support one candidate over another” (p. 958). Most recently, Kenski and her colleagues (2010) provided survey-based evidence that campaign advertising during the 2008 presidential election had a causal impact on vote choice. An imbalance in campaign spending again contributed to these effects. Thus, both experimental and survey-based evidence of mediated campaign effects have been demonstrated.

#### *Agenda Setting, Priming, and Framing*

Theories exist to explain how individuals are influenced by the media. One perspective suggests that voters are influenced by cues they receive from the political information environment (Popkin, 1991; Zaller, 1992). Rather than manipulating individuals into what to think, the theory of agenda-setting suggests the mass media influence individuals by offering what to think *about* (Lippmann, 1922; McCombs & Shaw, 1972). From a psychological perspective, by covering particular news stories and not covering others, the news media make available only particular pieces of information for audience consumption. Priming is the impact that agenda-setting has on an individual by making particular evaluative criteria more prominent or cognitively accessible (Scheufele, 2000). As detailed by Iyengar and Kinder (1987), “By

calling attention to some matters while ignoring others, television news influences the standards by which governments, presidents, policies, and candidates for public office are judged” (p. 63; also see Iyengar, Peters & Kinder, 1982). If an issue is not salient or accessible in the mind of an individual, it is unlikely that that criterion will be used to judge something.

The theories of agenda setting and priming suggest that political ads receiving mainstream media attention have the opportunity to shape what voters are thinking about and influence which criteria citizens use when making voting decisions. In 2008, for example, during the general election an ad entitled “Celebrity” was produced by the McCain campaign and received an extraordinary amount of free media coverage because of its provocativeness in comparing Obama to the celebrities Paris Hilton and Britney Spears. In essence, the McCain campaign successfully used the “Celebrity” ad to prompt voters to think about Obama’s inexperience. The intent was to question his readiness to lead by juxtaposing him with frivolous celebrities (Kenski et al., 2010).

A sociological approach to media effects involves the theoretical concept of framing. To “frame” something is a metaphorical reference to the boundaries surrounding the context within which an issue is presented. According to Entman (1993), “to frame is to select some aspects of a perceived reality and make them more salient in a communicating text, in such a way as to promote a particular problem definition, causal interpretation, moral evaluation, and/or treatment recommendation for the item described” (p. 294). While this concept may seem similar to agenda setting, framing is primarily grounded in the theoretical framework of attribution rather than salience or accessibility. From this perspective, responsibility for actions or issues is attributed to individuals, groups or society based upon the framework journalists select to convey a news story (Scheufele, 2000). Thus, framing has important implications for news reporting –

and political advertising - because, as Entman contends, it highlights particular issues and obscures others. This leaves open the possibility for manipulation when preferred frames are emphasized at the exclusion of inconvenient frames (Jamieson & Waldman, 2003).

In the case of the “Celebrity” ad during the 2008 election, the media primarily framed the extensive discussion of this ad either around McCain’s intended message questioning whether Obama was ready to lead or criticizing the McCain campaign for comparing Obama to frivolous celebrities. Infrequently considered was the fact that a claim in the ad, that Obama would raise taxes on electricity, was deemed false by multiple factchecking organizations. It was also generally overlooked that Obama himself had once compared the amount of “over” exposure he had been receiving to that which Paris Hilton enjoyed (Kenski et al., 2010). Journalistic framing, then, can change the way voters understand the information that is presented to them by candidates – even information contained in political ads. Obama’s presidential qualification (or lack thereof) can be attributed to his prominence. Employing another frame, the criticism of McCain can be attributed to his attempt to focus on issues that some believed were lacking in substance.

Many of these political ads are produced as a means to influence not just voters, but to set the agenda in media coverage as well, an increasingly common practice by 2008 (Jamieson, 2009; West, 2010). This growing phenomenon is what Ridout and Smith (2008) referred to as ad amplification: the provision of unpaid media coverage of political ads which air minimally in a small media market or never actually air at all. According to Iyengar (2008), the more provocative ads can draw thousands of front-page news stories without the creators of the ads ever paying a dime in media costs. Even ads supported with media buys can receive incremental free media coverage that exponentially elevates the ads’ reach.

The reach of political advertising is also being extended in terms of share of voice. In January, 2010, the U.S. Supreme Court effectively ruled to allow corporations and unions unlimited spending on political advertising (*Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*). Like the campaign finance reform efforts of 1971 and 2002, which shifted political ad creation away from candidates toward political parties and then interest groups, respectively (Hull, 2007), *Citizens United* has again shifted the boundaries of who can participate in the political discourse of campaign advertising. Today ads are increasingly driving news coverage (Jamieson, 2009; West, 2010), and more ads than ever before are originating not from candidates or political parties, but from outside interest groups which are not necessarily required to disclose their sources of funding (Levinthal, 2010).<sup>4</sup> Thus, not only has the causal influence of advertising on voting behavior been demonstrated, but ads are playing an increasing role in political campaigning.

#### Theories of the Press

In reflecting upon the 2008 presidential election, campaign strategists described the use of the press for the purposes of politics as “masterful” (Jamieson, 2009, p. 130). Political consultants have contended that their efforts to influence the news cycle were necessitated by the press’ lack of focus on substantive campaign issues. For example, Nicole Wallace, senior advisor for the McCain campaign, stated, “In this campaign, people in the battleground states had a conversation for 15 months about how crappy the economy was. [By contrast] the national media only talked about it for the last six weeks” (Jamieson, 2009, p. 145). A similar sentiment was expressed by Anita Dunn, chief communications officer for the Obama campaign. She argued that the ads they were running for voters “weren’t covered because [the press didn’t consider them] interesting enough.” Instead, the campaign provided their “idiotic press ads” (p.

145) in order to drive news. “Print [interviews] does not drive news,” explained Dunn. “Internet drives cable; cable drives networks. If you want a story in the *Post* or the *Times* to drive news, you have to consciously make it a news driver. *You produce an ad*” (p. 141, emphasis added).

This phenomenon draws attention to the normative role of the news media in covering the advertising associated with electoral politics and holding politicians accountable for their claims.

The normative role of the press has been a subject of scholarly discussion for at least a century. Early on, Walter Lippmann (1922) argued that the press was ill-suited to fulfill the requirements necessitated by a representative democracy. He recognized that the world was too big, too complex and too dynamic for the vast majority of people to have direct familiarity with much of it. Politics was no different, he argued, writing about the “intolerable and unworkable fiction that each of us must acquire a competent opinion about all public affairs” (p. 31) as necessitated by a democratic republic (also see Berelson, Lazarsfeld, and McPhee, 1954). What happens instead is that many of us go through life reacting to our predispositions to see the world the way we think it is. Lippmann (1922/2009) referred to “the pictures in our heads” which are not necessarily accurate reflections of the world around us but rather stories created by others with ulterior motives. What was needed, he argued, was the ability to obtain information free from biases – both of our own making and from that of the source. This could be provided, contended Lippmann, from an “independent, expert organization for making the unseen facts intelligible to those who have to make the decisions” (pp. 23-24) or what he would refer to as intelligence bureaus. In essence, Lippmann had identified a disconnect between the practical reality of people’s dispositions and what was theoretically required of a representative democracy (Alterman, 2011). He, like many others, was also concerned with the increasing power of the media to influence citizens with propaganda.

Like Lippmann, John Dewey was also concerned with the evolving role of the media and its implications for democracy (Jansen, 2009). Rather than relying upon the elite knowledge of the intelligence bureaus, Dewey (1927) encouraged an increase in democratic discourse among the public as a whole. He lamented the sociological changes of industrialization, arguing the public was becoming eclipsed by its ability to be mobile and by the availability of and interest in leisure and entertainment activities which both ultimately resulted in a loss of attachment to local communities. Dewey's philosophy of democracy, however, relied more upon conversation than the inside information notion of Lippmann (Alterman, 2011). While Dewey's perspective on democratic enlightenment was different from Lippmann's, he offered no strategic details as to how it could be achieved (Jansen, 2009). Some observers have likened the emergence of the Internet as fulfillment of Dewey's conception of democratic discourse. With its ability to bypass mainstream media and offer conversational opportunities within on-line communities, anyone with an Internet connection can participate (Alterman, 2011).

Other scholars have offered more specific theories about the functioning of the press in the United States. According to Siebert et al., (1956), the libertarian theory of the press "stressed the superiority of the principle of individual freedom and judgment and the axiom that truth when allowed free rein will emerge victorious from any encounter" (p. 70). It presupposed the rationality of human decision-making based upon the Miltonian premise that "by exercising reason [one] can distinguish between right and wrong, good and bad, and that to exercise this talent [one] should have unlimited access to the ideas and thoughts of other[s]" (p. 44). But with the rise of objective news reporting, however, came the eclipse of libertarian doctrine. Opinions were to be separated (limited to the editorial page) and the focus was to be on reporting the facts of the day (Siebert et al., 1956). For Schudson (1990), this convention of press objectivity

demonstrated that journalism was ascribing to the morality of the market system in which ultimately “truth” would prevail.

The rise of objective reporting and demise of the 19th century party-aligned press could not have occurred without the new technology and commercialization that made the mass production and distribution of newspapers possible. From a business standpoint, partisan news reporting became undesirable for mass audiences. Publishers did not want to lose the business of readers who had political leanings different from those of the newspaper. Thus, the press evolved into neutral purveyors of supposedly objective facts (Bennett, 2006; Hamilton, 2006; Patterson, 1994). For a time, news reporting relied upon the candidates’ own words to drive political coverage. However, today it has become dominated by strategic (even synthetic) reporting (Patterson, 1994). As evidenced in the Wallace and Dunn anecdote, by 2008, political ads were commonly employed by campaigns to drive news coverage since candidate words no longer sufficed.

With the shift away from libertarianism in the mid-twentieth century and the rise of objective reporting came the adoption of the “social responsibility theory of the press” (Siebert et al., 1956, p. 73; also see The Commission on the Freedom of the Press, 1947; Jamieson & Waldman, 2003). From this perspective, the press has a responsibility to not just objectively report the facts, but also to place the facts within proper context. By fulfilling this obligation as the custodians of fact, citizens will be provided with enough information to discern truth from deception (Jamieson & Hardy, 2008; Jamieson & Waldman, 2003). But as Jamieson and Waldman attest, what is factual versus fictitious is not always straightforward. When dealing with interpretations of the world, “[t]he critical variable is usually not the facts themselves but



the manner in which they are arranged and interpreted in order to construct narratives describing the...world” (p. xiv). Thus, the press have an obligation to contextualize facts.

Similar to the social responsibility of the press is what Downie and Schudson (2011) referred to as “accountability journalism” (p. 57). This is essentially the watchdog function of the press – holding government and private interests accountable for their actions. This is accomplished by not only reporting what these groups appear to be doing, but also by explaining the context behind their actions. As communications scholar James Carey (1978a) eloquently explained, from the accountability journalism perspective the role of the press is “simply to make sure that in the short run we don’t get screwed” (p. 855). For example, given the current hegemony of the free market system and the focus on increasing short term profits, today’s watchdog press needs to keep the public informed about the repercussions of this philosophy, particularly among those who wish to corrupt it by running organizations in the manner of Enron or Bernard Madoff.<sup>5</sup>

Aside from the evolving normative roles of the press were the challenges surrounding some of the accepted journalistic conventions. Although the journalistic ideal of objective reporting continues to guide some in the profession, questions about the actual attainability of objectivity in practice have become a matter of controversy. The Society of Professional Journalists dropped “objectivity” from its code of ethics in 1996. It was replaced by the terms truth, *accuracy* and comprehensiveness. Despite the change in terminology, however, Bennett (2006) has argued that practices have stayed the same. Critics of news objectivity also contend that even attempts to operate on a middle ground (fair and balanced) may itself be a form of bias, which is as McQuail (1992) wrote, “a choice of one truth above others, which is often neither

explicated nor justified. This criticism is valid, at least, where objectivity is thought of as an approximation to absolute truth” (p. 192).

Other journalistic conventions are problematic as well. For Schudson (1990), the vision that “individuals uncovering facts in random fashion would reveal truth” has been replaced by the recognition that “powerful publishers and the needs of mass entertainment, not the pursuit of truth, governed the press” (p. 293). Moreover, while fairness sounds laudable, Bennett (2006) found it problematic because it generally limits issues to two sides (there may be more) and because equal time favors stereotypical explanations as new ideas take longer to explain. He argued that new perspectives should receive adequate time to be explained at the expense of equal time for status quo ideas. The balance of information over time should replace the ideal of balance within each story. Thus, the disagreements surrounding journalistic conventions demonstrate the complexity of normative press ideals.

Nowhere have the importance and challenges of journalism been more apparent than in the realm of politics. Today, the announcement of political ads to the media has become common practice in presidential campaigning, a notion referred to varyingly as “press ads” (Jamieson, 2009, p. 130), “phantom” ads, or “vapor ads” (West, 2010, p. 23). This strategy strives to achieve the free media coverage for political ads offered by ad amplification (Fowler & Ridout, 2009; Novak, 2008b; Ridout & Smith, 2008). It is the more controversial ads which are generally rewarded with free airtime from the news media (Fowler & Ridout, 2009; Iyengar, 2008; Ridout & Smith, 2008). Thus, rather than the watchdog concept of the press protecting citizens from corruption or providing information useful in electing candidates, instead it appears the press has become increasingly beholden to controversy and sensationalism necessitated by the commercially-driven structure of the media. As multiple sources will contend in the pages

that follow, without adequate ratings and circulation, the best watchdog in the business will not survive.

In considering the normative role of the press, this study attempts to reconcile the perspectives of Lippmann and Dewey within the paradigm of watchdog journalism. While it is conceded that journalistic objectivity is a misnomer, proper contextualization associated with accountability journalism can aid citizens in understanding political issues and candidates. For example, when confronted with a political ad claim that may initially seem persuasive, consideration of background information and different perspectives by the news media can make one certain enough that an argument is actually quite weak or even inaccurate. While Lippmann proposed specialized intelligence bureaus and Dewey envisioned more dialogic communication among the general public, today the emergence of the Internet-based FactCheck.org and PolitiFact.com can be seen as the convergence of their philosophies. It is from this premise that an investigation is made of how the press holds political actors accountable for their ad claims.

#### Political Advertising and the Rise of Adwatching

While televised news coverage of political advertising had been increasing since the early 1970s (Kaid, Gobetz, Garner, Leland & Scott, 1993), the actual scrutiny of political ads by the U.S. mainstream press gained prominence during the 1992 presidential election (Cappella & Jamieson, 1994; Just, Crigler, Alger, Cook, Kern & West, 1996; Pfau & Loudon, 1994). Prompted by the notoriously deceptive attack ads from the previous presidential election of 1988, political ad watches were implemented by both broadcast and print reporters to police the ads for “fairness and accuracy” (Cappella & Jamieson, 1994, p. 343). Primarily, adwatches were intended to “reduce the net influence of misleading ads” (Pfau & Loudon, 1994, p. 326), “encourage restraint by creators of political commercials” and enable corrective information to

be disseminated to voters (Cappella & Jamieson, 1994, p. 345; also see Jamieson & Waldman, 2000). More than just drawing attention to political advertising, adwatches entail critiques by the media to inform the voting public about the accuracy of claims made in political ads (Kaid et al., 1996). What adwatches do not do is systematically track the pervasiveness of political advertising inaccuracies.

Scholarly research into the content, prevalence and effects of political ad watches ensued primarily throughout the early 1990s (see Just et al., 1996 and Kaid, Tedesco, & McKinnon, 1996, for a review). Generally, political ad watches focus largely on attack ads, portray advertisements negatively, and confer prominence and legitimation on political advertising (Jamieson, 1992; Kaid et. al, 1996; Jamieson, Waldman & Sherr, 2000). Research by Kahn and Kenney (2004) found the competitiveness of a race was an influential factor in the prevalence of adwatching. Adwatches are more likely in competitive races rather than in races where there is a clear favorite. In terms of the effectiveness of adwatching, Cappella and Jamieson (1994) offered evidence suggesting that, at least in 1992, reporters and political consultants found adwatches effective in improving campaign conduct. For voters, the experimental research of Cappella and Jamieson indicated that adwatches are effective at influencing attitudes about the fairness and importance of political commercials. What they do not do is facilitate accurate interpretation of political realities, particularly among less-educated audiences. In other words, ad watches can affect voter attitudes toward the ads but do not effectively promote corrective learning or “political literacy” (Cappella & Jamieson, 1994, p. 359). Moreover, Pfau and Loudon (1994) offered evidence of a “boomerang” (p. 326) effect whereby, under certain format conditions, voters exposed to an adwatch were actually more influenced by the ad itself than by the critique of the ad (also see Just et al., 1996). In other words, the critique had no effect in

refuting inaccurate claims in an advertisement. Similarly, Simons, Stewart and Harvey (1989) offered evidence that rhetorical criticism by commentators – akin to adwatches - is conditionally ineffective. Each of these studies suggests that the format (and rhetoric) of the adwatch is important.

Theoretically, ad watches encourage resistance to persuasion by inoculating voters with accurate information (Simons et al., 1989). However, as noted, ad watches do not always have the intended effects. Simons et al. (1989) contemplated the different “modes of rationality” (p. 194) employed by adwatches in their critique of political advertising. They contended that “the genre of political campaign rhetoric, the modality of the largely nonverbal, and the contextual frame of television culture, all operating together, are potent forces in blunting the effects of rhetorical criticism's linear, calculative logic” (p. 194). Accordingly, consideration must be given to the possibility that the logic of rational argumentation is a mismatch for the effects of emotionally evocative narratives of the political ad genre. “To make its point,” argued Simons et al., “criticism...must necessarily be heady, serious, intellectual—qualities not widely esteemed by mass audiences” (p. 195; also see Just et al., 1996).

What Simons and his colleagues overlooked, however, are the efforts at satire that have been used to hold politicians and the media accountable. Political cartooning existed in colonial America since Benjamin Franklin’s “Join or Die” attempted to promote inter-colonial association in the 1850s (Hess & Kaplan, 1975). Protest music enabled slaves in the ante-bellum South to subtly communicate messages of social change and folk singers from Woodie Guthrie to Bob Dylan to criticize political power (Gibson, 2004). Painter and Hodges (2010) noted a long line of press parodies including Jonathan Swift’s *A Modest Proposal* (1729), David Frost’s television show *That Was the Week That Was* (1964-1965), *Saturday Night Live*’s “Weekend Update”

segment (1975-present), the parody news organization *The Onion* (1988-present), and television shows *Murphy Brown* (1988-1998), *The Daily Show* (1996-present) and *The Colbert Report* (2005-present). Using *The Daily Show with Jon Stewart* as a case study, Painter and Hodges argued that Stewart holds broadcast media accountable by pointing out falsehoods, inconsistencies, and absurdities as well as satirizing the essence of broadcast news. Satiric efforts at accountability continue to expand as the Annenberg Public Policy Center recently launched Flackcheck.org in January, 2012, which offers humor and parody in holding media accountable for their political coverage. Thus, political criticism need not be limited to “heady” or “serious” rhetoric.

After hitting a low point during coverage of the 2000 presidential election, newspaper and TV ad-watch stories have been reportedly on the rebound (Bank, 2007; Papper, 2007; West, 2010; although see Graves & Glaisyer, 2012). Yet despite the reported resurgence of media attention to political advertising, scholarly attention to adwatching has waned since the flurry of activity during the 1990s. With the exception of the work associated with Travis Ridout and Kathleen Hall Jamieson and their respective colleagues, there has been little continued research into the news media reporting of political advertising.<sup>6</sup> Whereas Ridout and colleagues have focused on both broadcast and newspaper coverage of advertising from U.S. Senate and gubernatorial races (see Fowler & Ridout, 2009; Ridout & Smith, 2008), this study focuses exclusively on the major-party candidates and their surrogates from the presidential race. While Jamieson and colleagues have examined a wider breadth of campaign information sources (including but not limited to political advertising), much of their research has focused on the effects on voter knowledge and perceptions (see Hardy & Jamieson, 2011; Kenski et al., 2010). The focus in the present research is the news reports of political advertising to offer insight as to

how particular news organizations covered the television advertising produced by the two major-party presidential candidates and their surrogates during the 2008 election.

The systematic review of televised inaccuracies in political advertising and attempts at establishing accountability are the central tasks of this study. Just as Geer (2006) offered an organized review of negativity in political advertising, so too can an organized review of accuracy in political advertising be conducted. Clear and defensible standards, however, will need to be offered to define and judge accuracy. Ultimately the concluding thesis of this research is that political advertising in the United States does not benefit citizens. While the industry gainfully employs a host of political consultants and media personnel, it is television stations that are benefitting at the expense of citizens. Moreover, the watchdogs entrusted to serve the public interest by guarding against corruption and demanding accountability are increasingly at the mercy of commercial interests. Thus, the public should be made aware of the (mis)information being presented to them and should have a better understanding of how the political advertising industry operates.

In the pages that follow, I offer what is – to my knowledge - the most extensive analysis of political advertising inaccuracies. Given the sea of political ads that are available for study and the wealth of information that can be considered, one could easily get lost in a quagmire. Navigating these challenges requires a clearly defined methodological framework. Chapter 2 addresses this issue.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>An exception is the emerging line of political science research on misinformation. Besides the work of Jamieson and colleagues, see Bullock, 2006; Kuklinski, Quirk, Jerit, Schwieder, and Rich, 2000; Nyhan and Reifler, 2010.

<sup>2</sup>It was Walter Lippmann, however, who wrote about the value of blind spots in his seminal work, *Public Opinion*: “That [blind] spot,” he wrote, “covers up some fact, which if it were taken into account, would check the vital movement that the stereotype provokes” (1922/2009, p. 70).

<sup>3</sup>Zaller (1998) conceded that his previous findings were incorrect. Instead of being susceptible to media effects, he contended that citizens do vote based upon political substance. As evidence, he offered the re-election of President Bill Clinton in spite of the Monica Lewinski affair. The public was more concerned with the reality of a good economy than the political scandal perpetuated by the media.

<sup>4</sup>Karl Rove, however, has contended during speaking engagements that outside interest groups such as the NAACP have been influencing the political process with anonymous funding sources since at least the 1960s (also see Marston & Yoo, 2011).

<sup>5</sup>Officials at Enron were found guilty of fraudulent accounting which made the company appear to be profitable when in actuality it was not, filing for bankruptcy in 2001. Rather than running a legitimate investment company, Bernard Madoff pleaded guilty in 2009 to running a Ponzi scheme.

<sup>6</sup>Bruce Hardy, a colleague of Jamieson, indicated that rather than a lack of interest, it is the high cost associated with the necessary tracking studies that impacts the number of scholars able to pursue this type of research. (personal communication, April 4, 2011)



## CHAPTER 2

## DESIGN ON INACCURACIES

“I am skeptical of efforts to measure ongoing practices of lying, given the proportion of lies that are never uncovered, the shady regions of half-truths, self-deception, and hypocrisy, and the motives for those most embroiled in lies to undercut all efforts to probe their attitudes.”

- Sissela Bok (1978/1999)

In his influential research on political advertising negativity, political scientist John Geer (2006) punted on the issue of accuracy. “...[I]t is difficult, and perhaps impossible,” he wrote, “to assess with any precision whether any ad is truly misleading” (p. 5). The point of all advertising, he argued, is to make one’s client appear better than the competition. As with product advertising, this is often achieved through exaggeration. According to Geer, determining when a claim crosses a line from exaggerated puffery to being misleading is a “murky task” (p. 5) and “a very slippery slope” (p. 49). Republicans, Democrats and others interpret facts according to their ideological predispositions. While he acknowledged that accuracy was an important criterion in advertising, he left it up to other scholars and pundits to address.

Distinguishing fact from opinion is admittedly one of the greatest challenges facing studies of accuracy. Others like Geer argue it is difficult if not impossible to have “objective” facts because everything is grounded in a particular viewpoint (also see Kuklinski, Quirk, Schwieder & Rich, 1998; West, 2010). Scholars such as Stanley Fish (1989) have challenged what is referred to as formalist doctrine which subscribes to the notion that knowledge is foundation based. According to Fish, foundations “simply are, anchoring the universe and thought from a point above history and culture” (p. 30). Hegemonic ideology and culture are legitimized by a community of perceived experts. Formalism is indicative of the belief that

“words have clear meanings” (p. 6). Fish offers a 16-point list of implications that follow from this premise, three of which include “1) minds see those clear meanings clearly, 2) clarity is a condition that persists through changes in context, [and] 3) that nothing in the self interferes with the perception of clarity...” (p. 6). For Fish, however, rather than foundation-based knowledge, it is beliefs which generate evidence. We create our own realities based upon our beliefs. Language produces reality. From this perspective, clarity is a rhetorical achievement. Thus, assessment of the facticity of something is dependent upon one’s position to a particular worldview.

Fish (1989) offers anti-foundationalism as a thesis about how foundations emerge. He takes the notion of interpretive theory and stands it on its head. Interpretive theorists presuppose the formation of meaning within an individual as opposed to objective meaning existing exogenously. Fish contends that meaning does not derive from the mechanics of words, but, rather, takes the anti-formalist stance of speaker-relative presupposition: “meaning is a matter of what a speaker situated in a particular situation has in mind” (p. 7). To Fish, the naturalized action of interpretive theory is unnatural in that it proceeds “independently of historical and social formations” (p. ix). While we may think we are acting rationally with guidance from laws or theories, in essence, we behave without reflection. This condition of being “embedded in conviction” (p. 3) means that one’s sense of rightness of one’s arguments can be just as strong as someone else’s and yet not be diminished by one’s recognition of the source of one’s convictions. In the end, while we may recognize that we see an issue from a perspective different than our neighbor, to Fish, partisanship is inescapable. The anti-foundationalist perspective suggests that how we understand the world has been established through rhetoric.

And yet, the founders of FactCheck.org caution voters against simply dismissing conflicting information as mere differences of interpretation (Jackson & Jamieson, 2007). Citizens, they warn, must generally be wary of political agents who deliberately work to deceive voters, the very essence of being “spun.” They sought to clarify this point when challenged by Fish (2007) that one’s worldview drives whether one believes a political claim is accurate. For Fish, it is beliefs that generate evidence upon which our reality is formed rather than the other way around. The elusiveness of absolute certainty notwithstanding, Jackson and Jamieson (2007) assert the Aristotelean notion that one “*can* be certain enough” (p. 157). This is so particularly when one is able to identify tactics and ploys when what appears to be the better argument is not.

Instances of distinguishing fact from opinion can be drawn from the 2008 presidential race. During the election, the condition of the economy received a great deal of media attention. One could not make a factual argument as to who was responsible for the declining economy. One could not state as fact how the economy could best be revived. One could not even state as a fact whether the fundamentals of the U.S. economy were strong. It could be factually stated, however, how the federal government defined a recessionary economy, what percentage of Americans were unemployed according to a given definition, and whether the number of home foreclosures was on the rise or in decline. As Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) contended, clearly defined arguments based upon commonly agreed-upon facts allows for a common basis of comparison. They prevent debates from becoming unhinged from the conditions based in reality (also see Jackson & Jamieson, 2007).

This, then, is arguably where the press comes in – accountability journalism should be providing contextualization behind political claims so that voters can understand competing

arguments beyond he said/she said – a point addressed by Geer (2006). However, rather than watchdog reporting, political reporting instead has been dominated by the “horserace” – who is ahead, who is behind and why (Bartels, 1988; Iyengar, Norpoth & Hahn, 2004; Patterson, 1994). This vacuum is seemingly being filled by the Web-based factchecking organizations. According to Brooks Jackson, former CNN reporter and Director of FactCheck.org, “[We] ought to be an embarrassment to every major news organization. Why should there be anything for us to do? Why aren’t they doing it?” (personal communication, November 11, 2009).

### Conceptualizing and Measuring Political Inaccuracies

While it is acknowledged that Geer (2006) contended at the time of his study that it was too difficult to discriminate between truth and falsehoods, the emergence of the fact-checking organizations since then has offered an opportunity to now address the criterion of accuracy. Therefore, for the purposes of this study, ad claim accuracy is based upon the evaluations of Factcheck.org and PolitiFact.com. It is acknowledged that adwatching has been conducted by other organizations such as Spinsanity and newspapers such as *The New York Times* and *The Washington Post*’s “The Fact Checker” column. However this analysis focuses specifically on FactCheck.org and PolitiFact.com because they are enduring fact-checking organizations on a national level that continue to operate beyond specific election cycles.<sup>1</sup> Their primary purpose is to verify the accuracy of candidate claims. It is important to clarify that what is being measured is how the accuracy of the claims were evaluated, not whether voters believed them.

Both FactCheck and PolitiFact were established within the first decade of the twenty-first century. FactCheck.org was founded in 2003. According to its website, its mission is described as being a:

[N]onpartisan, nonprofit “consumer advocate” for voters that aims to reduce the level of deception and confusion in U.S. politics. We monitor the factual accuracy of what is said

by major U.S. political players in the form of TV ads, debates, speeches, interviews and news releases. Our goal is to apply the best practices of both journalism and scholarship, and to increase public knowledge and understanding. (“About: Our Mission,” n.d.)

PolitiFact was launched in August 2007 as an undertaking of the *St. Petersburg Times* to help readers “find the truth in politics” (“About PolitiFact,” n.d.).<sup>2</sup> Its original purpose was to “fact-check” the 2008 presidential campaign. Its website explains that its mission evolved into checking the claims of members of Congress and the White House in January 2009 (Adair, 2009).

Both ad watch organizations differ in their disclosure of how they define and arrive at their judgments of accuracy. For FactCheck.org, the process of accuracy judgments is not disclosed. Its website provides no details on its monitoring process or any classification systems to categorize ad claims. However, it appears the following categories are adhered to: true, misleading, distortion, misrepresentative, false, and incomplete information. Explanation of the operational definitions of these terms is not provided. Therefore, the standard by which it generally discriminates between an ad characterized as misrepresentative versus misleading is not clear.

In contrast with FactCheck.org, PolitiFact.com is explicit about its process for evaluating the accuracy of ad claims. For PolitiFact.com, procedures for data gathering and claim evaluations during the 2008 campaign were conducted by *St. Petersburg Times* reporters and editors as well as by researchers and writers of *CQ (Congressional Quarterly)* – a sister organization of the *Times* (Adair, 2009). PolitiFact discloses the use of two mechanisms in its pursuit of “the truth:” the “Truth-O-Meter” and the “Flip-O-Meter.” For the purposes of this analysis, focus will be limited to the Truth-O-Meter as it is the acknowledged “heart” of PolitiFact (“About PolitiFact,” n.d.).

Those at PolitiFact admit to recognizing variable perspectives on what constitutes truth by delineating various designations of accuracy. They explain that, “[t]he Truth-O-Meter is based on the concept that – especially in politics - truth is not black and white. Depending upon how much information a candidate provides, a statement can be half true or barely true without being false” (“About PolitiFact,” n.d.). The following classification for designating levels of claim accuracy is offered:

TRUE – The statement is accurate and there’s nothing significant missing.

MOSTLY TRUE – The statement is accurate but needs clarification or additional information.

HALF TRUE – The statement is accurate but leaves out important details or takes things out of context.

BARELY TRUE – The statement contains some element of truth but ignores critical facts that would give a different impression.

FALSE – The statement is not accurate.

PANTS ON FIRE – The statement is not accurate and makes a ridiculous claim.

The procedure by which PolitiFact arrives at these designations is explicitly defined. PolitiFact purports to always attempt to contact original sources to verify claims, preferring, for example, an original government report over a mass-mediated news story. Original sources enable PolitiFact the ability to evaluate a statement in its full context rather than in an edited press version. PolitiFact interviews what it refers to as “impartial experts” but does not indicate how impartiality is determined. As an important distinguishing characteristic from its competitors, the PolitiFact website is generally organized by evaluations of the individual claims made within ads rather than the overall ad in its entirety (“About PolitiFact,” n.d.).

It should be noted that both factchecking organizations carefully word their evaluative criteria to avoid assigning intent. While the ads themselves often scold opponents for lying, the

fact-checkers tend not to use this terminology. As defined by philosopher and ethicist Sissela Bok (1978), a lie is an “intentionally deceptive message in the form of a statement” (p. 10). The challenge, as observed by FactCheck’s Jackson (2008a), is knowing the intention of the candidates: “[W]e have no way of reading minds or divining anyone’s intent,” he explained. Thus, the fact-checkers generally avoid this language altogether.

### Multi-Method Research Design

Complementary research methods have been selected to explore the issue of inaccuracies in the political information environment. The utility of multi-method designs is to draw upon the strengths of particular methods while compensating for the biases of others (Blaikie, 1991; Hovland, 1959; Neuman et al., 1992). In his study of political advertising negativity, Geer (2006) relied upon content analysis supplemented with depth interviews of practitioners. In their study of news and the construction of meaning, Neuman and colleagues (1992) successfully employed survey research, depth interviews and content analysis. For the present study, the methods of content analysis, secondary analysis of survey research, semantic network analysis and depth interviews have been employed.

### *Content Analysis*

With the emergence of FactCheck.org and PolitiFact.com within the first decade of the twenty-first century, it is now theoretically possible to hold candidates and other political actors accountable for the accuracy of their political ads. However, metrics assessing the overall accuracy of the candidates’ political ad arsenals still do not exist. Nor do they exist for political party ads or interest group ads. Thus, central research questions driving this dissertation are:

RQ1: How accurate are the claims in presidential political advertisements?

RQ2: Does accuracy differ between candidate ads, party-sponsored ads and interest-group ads?

RQ3: Does accuracy differ by ad tone? In other words, are the much maligned “negative” ads – or attack ads – any more or less accurate than contrast ads or advocacy ads?

An organized review of negativity in political advertising was offered by Geer (2006).

His research on negativity rested in part on the assumption that political ads which offered more evidence or documentation would be more accurate. He claimed the need for evidence was a general dynamic supporting negativity. Particularly when attacking an opponent, argued Geer, candidates had to base their attacks on tangible evidence rather than on groundless claims. His results demonstrated that attack ads were, indeed, supported with more evidence (in the form of documentation) than advocacy ads. Accordingly, Geer concluded that attack ads were more beneficial to the information environment than advocacy ads. Based on this finding, the following hypothesis is presented:

H1: Attack ads are more likely to be accurate than advocacy ads.

The present research also strives to offer a theory of strategic misinformation in order to anticipate the likely candidate claim inaccuracies so that adwatching organizations and journalists can be better prepared in the future to examine particular claims and keep citizens accurately informed. The corresponding research question is offered:

RQ4: Is it possible to predict which types of ads are more likely to contain inaccurate claims?

To begin to address the questions of accuracy and “strategic misinformation” extended in this study, a systematic examination of the type of information that was being presented to the electorate is in order. Following the method of Geer (2006) and using the non-partisan accuracy assessments of FactCheck and PolitiFact, a content analysis of televised political ads from the 2008 presidential election has been implemented. Indeed, content analysis has also been used by other scholars in analyzing political advertising (Brader, 2006; Geer, 2006; Kaid & Johnston,



2001; West, 2010). The presidential race as opposed to congressional or gubernatorial races was selected as the object of study for a couple reasons. First, a race for the highest-elected office in the country generates more publicity and entails more ad spending than any other.

Consequently, relative to other races there is a larger proportion of ads from a presidential race that will have had the opportunity to be tested by the fact-checkers. Second, press coverage of congressional and gubernatorial races is more localized, reducing the likelihood that a national fact-checking organization will have the resources to review ads from those races. It is also notable that during the presidential election of 2004, FactCheck.org was in its nascent year of operation and PolitiFact.com did not yet exist resulting in a very small pool of ads that were evaluated. Thus, for this study evaluation of the ads from presidential elections was limited to the 2008 campaign.

### *Sample*

English-language television ads that aired during the general election between June 7, 2008 (the date Hillary Clinton conceded the Democratic nomination to Obama) and November 4, 2008 (Election Day) were primarily obtained from the online databases of NationalJournal.com, Stanford University's Political Communication Lab, Eric Appleman's Democracy in Action database hosted by The George Washington University, and *The New York Times'* Election 2008 ad database which includes records of the actual airing data collected by Campaign Media Analysis Group (CMAG). The NationalJournal database has been the source for other political ad content analyses (see Brader, 2006). Ads discovered on an ad hoc basis were also incorporated into the dataset. Work by Jamieson and her colleagues on the 2008 election offered resources to cross-check television ads by name (see Jamieson, 2009 and Kenski et al., 2010). While every attempt was made to obtain all television ads that aired during the general election,

it is possible that even with all of the cross-referencing an ad may have been omitted. However, confidence in the comprehensiveness of this study's ad collection was greatly enhanced with assistance from Ken Goldstein of CMAG<sup>3</sup> who provided a file containing links to video captures of all the ads which aired during the 2008 campaign. As a result, collected ads could be cross-checked with this file to ensure that all ads which aired were used for this study. Any ads not in the CMAG file were deemed to not have actually been paid ads which aired and were subsequently omitted from this analysis. It is believed that this study includes the most complete collection of campaign ads that aired during the 2008 election.

### *Coding Scheme*

Using a coding scheme similar to Geer (2006), ads were coded for ad tone (advocacy, attack or contrast), number of specific claims, and whether claims were supported with evidence. The release date of the ads was captured along with the number of times each ad aired.<sup>4</sup> Like Geer, the unit of analysis was the individual ad claim rather than an ad in its entirety. Unlike Geer, this analysis extends beyond candidate-produced ads to also include party ads and those produced by outside interest groups.

Just as Geer demonstrated that the tone of political ad claims can be systematically defined and measured (also see Jamieson et al., 2000), so too can political ad inaccuracies. An initial objective was to define a consistent framework for types of inaccuracies. A comparison was made between the differing methodologies of the independent adwatch organizations to develop this typology. The methodological frameworks of FactCheck and PolitiFact were judged against each other to note discrepancies between evaluations of ad claim accuracy. Of interest was to determine whether any correspondence existed between the levels of accuracy of the two factchecking organizations. For instance, did the "half true" categorization of PolitiFact

align with the “misleading” categorization of FactCheck? It was recognized that it could be an all-or-nothing proposition between the two groups – either the ad claim was accurate or it contained some level of inaccuracy. What was first needed was to determine the number of overlapping claims between the two organizations. It was also recognized that the overlap between the two fact-checkers could be minimal if they were each checking different claims.

The ad claims were scrutinized in terms of the variables collected using SPSS, a data analysis software package. The proportion of political ads from each candidate, party, and interest group that contained varying levels of inaccuracies was ascertained. Analysis by ad tone was also conducted. This approach allowed extension of Geer’s work (2006) by answering questions such as which types of ads were most likely to contain inaccuracies. Were negative attack ads more accurate than advocacy ads as Geer postulated? Moreover, given the proliferation of outside interest group-sponsored ads following the *Citizens United* ruling, a constructive step in assessing the impact of this case was to determine whether interest group sponsored ads were any different in their level of accuracy compared with candidate- or party-sponsored ads.

Individual ads were deconstructed to the level of specific ad claim. The number of ad claims for each ad was calculated and recorded. A claim was defined as any statement made in the ad regardless of whether its facticity could be established. General rhetorical questions were not coded as ad claims unless the question conveyed a substantive point to the viewer. For example, “We can restore America’s leadership in the world” was considered a claim even though establishing its veracity is not possible. However, in following the established decision-rule, “Have you seen John McCain’s TV ad?” was not considered a claim. The exceptions to this rule were questions conveying a substantive point, such as “How can McCain fix the

economy if he doesn't think it's broken?" Each claim was coded using a coding scheme following the framework implemented by Geer (2006). While the coding scheme was similar to Geer's, the claim codes were less generalized and specific to the themes and issues of the 2008 presidential election. See Appendix A for a copy of the coding instrument.

It is important to disclose how the tone of ads were conceptualized as this has been a point of contention in other studies (see Jamieson, Waldman & Sherr, 2000). To determine the tone of the ads used in the 2008 general election campaign, this study adopted the ad tone categorizations offered by Jamieson and colleagues (2000) that have been utilized by Brader (2006) and Geer (2006): promotional/advocacy ads focus on the candidate's qualifications, attack ads focus on an opponent's failings, and contrast/compare ads contain comparisons between a candidate's qualities, record, or proposals and his/her opponent's.

#### *Coder Training and Intercoder Reliability*

An initial draft of the coding instrument was informally tested by the author and a research assistant. Following the method of Brader (2006), after a period of training the coders independently coded six political advertisements from the 2008 primary election. Coding problems and disagreements were discussed and the process was repeated until it was believed that the instrument achieved reliable coding. Of the total 285 ads, fifty were coded by both researchers. Because both nominal and interval level data were evaluated, intercoder reliability was measured using Krippendorff's alpha. This reliability estimate is adaptable to any level of measurement and number of judges and is regarded as a stringently conservative measure of agreement between coders that is not due to chance (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007; Lombard, Snyder-Duch & Bracken, 2002). Following Jamieson et al. (2000), a reliability standard of greater than .60 was targeted. All variables were above this inter-coder reliability standard.

Most variables achieved an alpha score in excess of .80. Thus, the reliability of coding efforts can be considered sound. A complete listing of the alpha scores for each variable is available in Appendix B.

After collection and coding of the ads, the FactCheck.org and PolitiFact.com databases were mined to determine which ads were evaluated by either adwatch organization. The veracity of each ad claim was recorded using the evaluations assigned by each adwatch organization. It should be noted that many ads were not specifically reviewed by either FactCheck or PolitiFact. However, a particular ad execution that did not draw any specific criticism from these organizations cannot be assumed to be accurate. If an ad merely repeated a claim that had previously been rebutted, a new article or a new mention on the FactCheck website was not always imminent. FactCheck's Jackson explained,

...Some ads that we found false or misleading did not rate a specific mention. We saw little point in repeating ourselves. For example, McCain engaged in what we called a "pattern of deception" regarding Obama's tax proposals. He made the same false claims over and over in ad after ad, but we didn't run a new story every time. (personal communication, August 3, 2009)

If a claim from a specific ad was not evaluated by the adwatch organizations, this was noted. However if a claim had been previously evaluated, the data were collected in such a way to allow that rating to be carried over to other ads in which the same claim was made. The manner in which this was done permits discrimination between ads that had claims which were explicitly evaluated versus those that were extrapolated from previous evaluations.

It is important to emphasize that this analysis was focused both on the content of the produced ads and on the amount of *paid* exposure any one ad received. Ad airings data were considered in order to determine the media weight given to any particular ad (see Goldstein & Freedman, 2002). This information indicates the extent to which an ad was paid to air on

television. Ultimately, however, not only is ad airings data necessary to gain a complete picture of the amount of exposure any individual ad execution received, but an exhaustive media coverage analysis is necessary as well. As previously mentioned, a recently-labeled phenomenon known as “ad amplification” offers free media coverage to political ads and has been demonstrated to be quite common. Amplification is more frequent with negative and comparative ads than positive ads (Novak, 2008; Ridout & Smith, 2008). An exhaustive media coverage analysis was beyond the scope of this study. This clarification is emphasized so as to not lose sight of the claims actually being made in this study going forward.

### *Secondary Data Analysis of Survey Research*

In his research on negativity in political advertising, Geer (2006) was interested in finding a way to objectively interpret the character traits of presidential candidates. His solution was to use measures of public opinion as a guide to candidate characteristics. This study follows suit by using public opinion data as a baseline guide in determining any correspondence between candidate ad accuracy and public perceptions of candidates. A theory of strategic misinformation suggests that candidates may be inclined to distort ad claims based upon how they or their opponent are perceived by potential voters. More specifically, if there is a salient dimension on which a candidate is not strong but his/her opponent is, it is to the candidate’s benefit to distort his/her opponent’s record or to distort the issue context. Accordingly, two related hypotheses are offered:

H2a: Candidates are more likely to use inaccurate claims in their attack ads for dimensions on which their opponent is perceived more favorably.

For example, in the 2008 presidential election, McCain stated that if he kept talking about the economy, he would lose the election. Instead, he strategically sought to portray Obama as an elitist celebrity while distorting Obama’s positions on taxes.

H2b: Candidates are more likely to use inaccurate claims in their advocacy ads for dimensions on which they are perceived less favorably than their opponent.

An example illustrative of this second hypothesis relates to the perceived favorability of McCain on the dimension of experience. Throughout the election, potential voters consistently evaluated McCain more favorably than Obama on this attribute (Kenski et al., 2010). According to the hypothesis, then, it is no surprise that Obama distorted his own work record in his biographical ad “Dignity” to make up for some of the imbalance. Claiming he worked his way through college, it was revealed that he instead had a few summer jobs and relied mostly on scholarships and family money to make his way through college (Novak, 2008a). While some consider the degree of inaccuracy trivial, it still adheres to the principle of the hypothesis. It should also be noted that the Obama campaign changed the wording of the ad after fact-checkers pointed out the inaccuracy.

To explore the hypotheses of strategic misinformation, the National Annenberg Election Survey (NAES) 2008 data were utilized. The purpose of the NAES was to track the dynamics of public opinion including political attitudes, perceptions and behavior. While there were several components to the 2008 NAES, this study employed the data from the national rolling cross-section telephone survey of nearly 58,000 randomly selected U.S. adults during the primary and general election cycle. As part of the NAES, 30-minute telephone interviews were conducted between December 2007 through the day before Election Day. As many as 300 interviews were completed on a daily basis during peak campaign periods (Annenberg, n.d.). Since surveys were administered on a daily basis, it was possible to assess respondent evaluations based upon the release date of the political advertisements. To ensure adequate base sizes, particularly at the start of the general election period when not as many daily interviews were conducted,

aggregated averages for each of the measures were calculated based upon the five days up to and including the release date of each ad.

The NAES data were examined to determine how candidates were evaluated by survey respondents on various dimensions at particular points in time during the election. These measures included overall candidate favorability, leadership, trustworthiness, experience and judgment (see Appendix C for actual question wording). Respondent assessments of the candidates on these measures were explored to see if there was a relationship between a favorable or unfavorable assessment and the release of a political ad containing inaccurate information. Logistic regression analysis was used with the presence or absence of an inaccuracy as the binary dependent variable and independent variables of various candidate assessments by NAES respondents, ad tone, ad sponsor, ad release date, and number of airings for each ad. Field (2009) advocates logistic regression as being useful in explaining the relationship between binary variables, such as accuracy versus inaccuracy, and in isolating specific predictor variables.

#### *Semantic Network Analysis*

Another component of this dissertation research addressed press coverage of the political television ads from the 2008 presidential election. As will be explained in the next section, broadcast, cable and print press coverage is contrasted with the analyses provided by FactCheck and PolitiFact to explore how the stories differed. Newscasts and articles from various newspapers were compared with the independent adwatch organizations to learn the degree to which politicians were held accountable for their advertising claims.

While it is known that political ads are increasingly deployed as agenda setting gambits (Jamieson, 2009; West, 2010), what is not known, and what this study sought to learn, is how the



mainstream press is covering the ads. Building upon and extending previous adwatching research efforts (c.f. Fowler & Ridout, 2009; Jamieson & Hardy, 2008; Just et al., 1996; Ridout & Smith, 2008), the following research questions are addressed:

RQ5: How is the press covering these political ads - are they just repeating the message of the ads, or are they investigating the veracity of the political claims?

RQ6: How does coverage of the political ad campaigns differ between the mainstream print press, broadcast and cable news organizations and the coverage offered by the two Web-based organizations, PolitiFact.com and FactCheck.org?

Network analysis is an approach to the study of structure, measuring the connections between things, called “nodes,” as derived from graph theory (Barabasi, 2002; Scott, 1991). Initially developed in the service of social structure analysis by anthropologist Radcliffe-Brown, it has been signified by the textile metaphors describing the social fabric of a society and the web of life (Scott, 1991). The theory behind network analysis can be extended to the service of semantic analysis, measuring the linkages between words – the nodes in this case - and their relative influence on the meaning of a sentence or text (see Maynard, 1997; Murphy, 2010). This semantic network analysis captures word and word-pair frequencies that most influence the meaning structure of news organization reports mentioning political advertising. Comparisons were made across news organizations to determine similarities in the meaning structure of these reports.

To analyze the content of broadcast news stories and print articles, a computer-assisted, network-based text analysis approach was implemented using the software package Crawdad, by Crawdad Technologies (Corman & Dooley, 2006). As explained by Dooley and Corman (2002), this textual approach relies upon Centering Resonance Analysis (CRA) which “quantifies the influence of words within texts based on their position in a network structure of other words making up the text” (p. 121). However, this quantification is not based upon the frequency of

word use as infrequently used words can still be contextually important. Instead, influence is determined by the frequency that words link to one another as indicated by various centrality measures. As Murphy (2010) explained, “if an important (i.e., central) word were to disappear, the meaning of a sentence would disintegrate because its other elements would no longer be associated” (p. 217). Thus, semantic network analysis offers a holistic approach to text analysis by considering all the words in a text.

The centering approach concentrates on the noun and noun phrases that bring coherence to a text. CRA identifies the structural influence of these words through three centrality measures: degree centrality measures the number of other nodes to which a word is connected, closeness centrality indicates the number of steps on average that are required to reach other nodes, and betweenness centrality measures the degree to which resources in a network must flow through a node (Corman, Kuhn, McPhee & Dooley, 2002). Thus, in this analysis, CRA is used as a representational technique to investigate which words are most prominent in creating a structural pattern of coherence in the various news reports. “Resonance” refers to the degree of “mutual relevance of two texts based on their CRA networks” (p. 189) – that is, the same words used in similar ways. Resonant texts suggest similar intended communicative thought patterns by their authors (Corman et al., 2002). On this basis, this study compares the standardized word resonance scores for each news organization against all the others to determine the structural similarities and differences between the reporting on political advertising of each. News organizations exhibiting resonance suggest similarities in covering concepts associated with political advertising.

There are several practical and theoretical advantages for using semantic network analysis over traditional content analysis. Because it is computer-assisted, large quantities of

text can be evaluated in short order and without analyst fatigue. Rather than a reductionist approach used in content analysis whereby the analyst pre-determines the words to be sought in a text, network analysis takes a holistic approach “rooted in relationships between all the words in a text” (Murphy, 2010, p. 219). Thus, words are not interpreted in isolation but rather systematically and contextually, “relative to their place in the overall network of relations among the most influential terms” (McPhee, Corman & Dooley, 2002, p. 278). Furthermore, rather than by pre-determined word categorizations, the evaluation of texts is driven by decision rules grounded in centering theory. As a result, analyst bias in the form of coding categories is avoided (Murphy, 2010). While human interpretation of the output is required as in any other quantitative approach, measures of validity and reliability using the network analysis approach have been affirmed as sound. Studies by Corman et al. (2002) and MCPhee et al. (2002) have demonstrated both face validity and representational validity indicating the semantic network approach produces concepts similar to what would be produced by human readers. Because the algorithms do not change, identical output is replicated when identical texts are input using this method (Corman et al., 2002; MCPhee et al., 2002).

A primary research question driving this part of the study was whether news organizations differ in how they report on political advertising. A cluster analysis of all the texts identified by news source was conducted to determine which news organizations reported on political advertising using similar semantic styles. The centrality score of each set of articles or transcripts from news organizations was examined to allow comparison of shared word resonance which is indicative of texts having similar semantic patterns in their reporting.

One object of study for this research effort was daily newspapers. Daily newspapers were chosen for this analysis because of their historical propensity to serve as partisan vehicles

and their potential for variety in reporting style based upon the communities they serve (Dalton et al., 1998; Just et al., 1996). Furthermore, nearly half of all adults (48%) report reading a daily newspaper (Newspaper Association of America, 2007), and nearly two-thirds report reading news at least several times a week (Gentzkow & Shapiro, 2010) making this form of media coverage logically salient. The political science literature indicates that political advertising is not national and is not randomly distributed but rather is specifically targeted to battleground states (Huang & Shaw, 2009; Shaw, 1999). Thus, examining newspapers from specific communities in the 2008 battleground states is justified. Articles from targeted newspapers were obtained during the spring of 2010 from Temple University databases including LexisNexis, Access World News, and ProQuest Newsstand. Details of the newspaper sample are presented below.

In addition to newspaper coverage, broadcast and cable television news coverage of political advertising was also considered. According to the Pew Research Center for the People and the Press, the three broadcast network national evening newscasts attracted twice as many prime-time viewers on average as did cable newscasts in 2008 (Pew Project, 2009). Broadcast television tends to reach a larger cross-section of the electorate than cable, particularly those who are less partisan and less interested in politics. Accordingly, broadcast viewers are more susceptible to the influence of political advertising (Kenski et al., 2010). For comparative purposes also included as objects of study were evening newscasts from both national broadcasters as well as cable television. Transcripts from selected newscasts were obtained in November, 2011 using Temple University's LexisNexis database. Details of the news program sample are presented below.

The time frame of analysis corresponded to that of this study's content analysis: during the general election period between the dates of June 7 (the date Hillary Clinton conceded the Democratic nomination to Obama) and November 4, 2008. Many previous adwatch studies examined a shorter time period – between Labor Day and Election Day (Bennett, 1997; McKinnon, Kaid, Murphy, & Acree, 1996; Richardson, 1998; Tedesco, McKinnon, & Kaid, 1996; West, 1994). However, the political science literature suggests that races become more competitive and generally more negative as Election Day approaches (Campbell, J., 2008; Geer, 2006; Goldstein & Freedman, 2002). Therefore, to avoid overlooking news coverage of political ads that might be less negative, this study incorporated a broader time span for analysis as suggested by Goldstein and Freedman (2002).

### *Sample*

Since 2008 ad spending was concentrated in select, hard-fought battleground states (Huang & Shaw, 2009), states that had the largest amount of ad spending (in terms of gross rating points or GRPs<sup>5</sup>) were considered for this analysis. Among the battlegrounds selected were Ohio (the state with the most relative ad spending), Virginia, Florida, Iowa (one of few battlegrounds where McCain outspent Obama but lost anyway), and Missouri (McCain won this battleground; Obama won the others).

A semantic network analysis of newspaper coverage was conducted during the fall of 2010. Newspapers were selected based upon designated market area (DMA) and circulation size. All newspapers posted readership circulations greater than 50,000 as reported by Standard Rate and Data Service (accessed through Temple University's library system). Newspapers from battleground states included *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, *The Plain Dealer* (Cleveland), *Richmond Times-Dispatch* (Virginia), *The Tampa Tribune* (Florida), *The Des Moines Register* (Iowa), *The*

*Gazette* (Cedar Rapids-Marion, Iowa), and the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* (Missouri). In addition, the “recognized elite press” (Dalton et al., 1998, p. 114) was included: *The New York Times*, *Washington Post*, and *Los Angeles Times*. One newspaper from each candidate’s home state was also incorporated including *The Chicago Tribune* and *The Arizona Republic*. To balance out the number of newspapers endorsing each candidate and for comparative purposes, *The Washington Times* and *The New York Post* were also added to the study sample. To add to the two adwatch news organizations in the sample which do not endorse candidates, FactCheck.org and PolitiFact.com, two nationally oriented newspapers that do not endorse candidates were included: *The Christian Science Monitor* and *USA Today*. In all, 18 news organizations were included in the sample; seven endorsed Obama, seven endorsed McCain, and four did not provide an endorsement.

For the televised newscast portion of this study, the national evening news programs were selected including *ABC World News Tonight with Charles Gibson*, *CBS Evening News with Katie Couric*, and *NBC Nightly News with Brian Williams* along with PBS’s *NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*, CNN’s *The Situation Room*, FOX’s *Special Report with Brit Hume*, and MSNBC’s *Race for the White House with David Gregory*. In addition, highly rated cable political programs were also selected including CNN’s *Anderson Cooper 360°* and FOX’s *The O’Reilly Factor*. Ratings data for the selection of shows were based upon figures from Nielsen Media Research as reported in the Pew Project for Excellence in Journalism 2009 State of the News Media annual report on journalism.

News stories from the 2008 presidential election were selected following criteria similar to Bennett (1997). A story was included if it mentioned a political English-language television ad that aired about either McCain or Obama. Additionally, the story must have met at least one

of the following criteria: 1) used an excerpt from an ad, 2) paraphrased an ad, or 3) summarized the content of an ad. For the newspaper portion of this study, discrimination was not made as to whether an article originated from the target newspaper versus a wire service since it is presumed that most readers do not make this distinction. However, editorials, commentaries, op-eds and letters to the editor were omitted since these are not intended to be objective.<sup>6</sup> Articles that referred readers to coverage of a political ad elsewhere in the newspaper were also omitted. Book reviews and stories from magazine or entertainment sections were omitted as well. When articles were in a “digest” format, containing short paragraphs of different aspects of a political campaign within sub-headed sections, only the paragraphs in the relevant section of the article were included. For the televised news portion of this study, only the program segment relevant to the advertisement was included for analysis. To test the reliability of story selection criteria, text from approximately 200 transcripts was reviewed by two coders. The intercoder reliability of story selection achieved a Krippendorff’s alpha of .81 (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007). Thus, the method used to select news stories for analysis can be reliably replicated.

The primary search engine utilized to locate newspaper articles was LexisNexis. If a target newspaper was unavailable in this database, the Access World News database was utilized. The third database consulted was ProQuest Newsstand. All databases were accessed through the Temple University Library system during the fall of 2010. Comparisons were made to ensure that when available in multiple databases, the same number of articles was generated. This was generally the case with some exceptions – LexisNexis included articles that ran on a newspaper’s website while Access World News did not. LexisNexis also picked up duplicate letters to the editor that Access World News did not. These differences are irrelevant for this study as only articles appearing in print were included, and letters to the editor were excluded as

well.<sup>7</sup> Keyword search terms included “advertising,” “advertisement(s),” “ad(s),” “commercial(s),” “spot(s),” “campaign,” “Obama,” and “McCain.” Grouped by source, a total of 858 articles was included in this analysis.

LexisNexis was also the primary search engine that was used to locate transcripts of newscasts. Keyword search terms again included “advertising,” “advertisement(s),” “ad(s),” “commercial(s),” “spot(s),” “campaign,” “Obama,” and “McCain.” Across all broadcast and cable news sources, 406 program segments were incorporated as a part of this analysis.

### *Pre-processing Measures*

For both the newspaper articles and transcripts of the televised newscasts, certain pre-processing measures were implemented before analyzing the data using Microsoft Word and Notepad. The text of news articles was stripped of the publication name because, for example, the reappearance of “*The New York Times*” at least once in each of its 133 articles would certainly influence the network structure results. The same procedure was followed for the news program transcripts. Similarly, the author byline and publication or air date was stripped as well. As suggested by Corman et al. (2002), both articles and transcripts were scanned for proper names. The most frequently appearing names were combined into a common format. For instance, Obama was the most frequently referenced individual in the newspaper dataset. However, he was varyingly referred to by any of the following terms: Senator Barack Obama, Sen. Barack Obama, Senator Obama, Sen. Obama, Mr. Obama, Barack Obama, Barack, Obama, the Illinois Senator and the Senator from Illinois. One representative form was established: Obama. Whenever any of the other formats appeared in a text, they were converted into “Obama” so that the analysis program recognized the words as referring to the same concept.



### *Depth-interviews*

To better understand the current structure and prevalent accuracy and accountability issues within the industry, research questions regarding the structural and legal/regulatory environment of the political advertising industry are explored. Specifically,

RQ7: How has political communication, advertising in particular, been shaped by the economic structure of U.S. media?

RQ8: What are the resulting relationships between the institutions of political advertising and the news media as a result of the economic structure of the U.S. media?

RQ9: Whose interests are served by the current structure of the political advertising industry?

RQ10: How have commercial interests and independent expenditure groups influenced political advertising?

RQ11: How will/has this change/d given the *Citizens United* ruling by the Supreme Court?

To address these research questions, a fourth component of this study involved personal interviews with experts in the field of political advertising. Expertise was determined by the quality of publications or active participation in the discipline. Informants included political science and communication scholars, journalists, political candidates and consultants as well as those involved in the economic, legal and regulatory efforts of the industry. The goal of these interviews was to explore the political advertising industry within a critical scholarship framework by discussing the current structure and issues affecting the creation, dissemination and regulation of political information. As demonstrated in other studies, interviews with political experts can bring to life the numbers by providing anecdotal evidence that offers depth to how one understands a finding (for examples see Carsey, 2000; Geer, 2006).

A critical approach is warranted because beyond being persuasive, political ads can also be providers of information to voters to help them understand and make sense of political

candidate personalities and qualifications (Jamieson, 1984; West, 2010). But there are costs, both literally, in financing the messages, and figuratively, in what is not being said and in who is not being included in the conversation. How does one assess the utility and effectiveness of the political advertising industry? In an increasingly commodified cultural system, it is important to explore how the dynamics of capitalism organize the making of public meaning in political advertising and form the conditions under which these meanings are encountered and influence behavior (Garnham, 1995; Golding & Murdock, 1991; Murdock, 1995; Murdock & Golding, 1977). Accordingly, a structural examination of the political advertising industry needs to consider who or what is benefitting from the current system. The purpose of this type of critical scholarship is to carry on, in Lent's (1995) words, "a long-standing critical tradition...in-depth analysis of the strengths and weaknesses of dominant communication institutions, processes, and artifacts, with the intention of arriving at solutions, guidelines, and policies that benefit the masses, not the power brokers" (pp. 2-3). In other words, it is important for the average citizen to be able to understand how or even whether they benefit from political advertising.

Using the analytical premise of critical political economy, one can define the connections and relationships within a society. Contemporary critical political economy analyzes the economic forces in the "production, circulation and consumption of ideas, knowledge and culture...[and] how they are circumscribed by systems of class power and control" (Strinati, 1996, p. 142). Critical political economy is distinguished from classical political economy by its attempts to go beyond merely describing actual economic facts to critically examining issues of power. Ultimately, the aim of critical political economy is to create changes to improve conditions of society as noted by one of the oft quoted Marxist Theses on Feuerbach: "The

philosophers have only interpreted the world, in various ways; the point, however, is to change it” (Marx, 1888/1978, p. 145).

Critical political economy differs from mainstream economics, explained Golding and Murdock (1991), in four specific ways. First, critical political economy considers the relationship between “economic organization and political, social and cultural life” (p. 18) rather than only considering economics in isolation. For the political advertising industry, this would mean examining how the economic dynamics of the industry impact the range, diversity and accuracy of messages that are produced and available to different groups. Are certain types of ad messages more accurate than others? This line of questioning is particularly compelling given the *Citizens United* ruling. With the shifting boundaries of who can participate in the political discourse of campaign advertising comes a responsibility to understand the ramifications of giving voice to deep-pocketed interests.

A second differentiation from mainstream economics is that critical political economy examines “sets of social relations and the play of power” (Golding & Murdock, 1991, p. 18) rather than autonomous individuals. In the case of political advertising, one would be interested in how the construction and reception of ad meanings is shaped by the imbalances in social relations created by the regulatory environment. Are candidate, party and interest-group ads constrained by the same set of rules?

Third, political economy is “centrally concerned with the balance between capitalist enterprise and public intervention” (Golding & Murdock, 1991, pp. 17-18). While classic political economists strive to minimize regulatory intervention, critical political economists “point to the distortions and inequalities of market systems and argue that these deficiencies can only be rectified by public intervention” (p. 21). Thus, with respect to political advertising, one

could examine the degree to which regulations serve or fail to serve to level the political playing field as intended.

A fourth distinguishing characteristic of critical political economy is that it “engage[s] with basic moral questions of justice, equity and the public good” (Golding & Murdock, 1991, p. 18). In other words, specific to the present study, to what degree does political advertising serve all groups within a society and accurately represent their political concerns? Political ads that seek to obscure are arguably less able to serve the public interest than are ads that seek to accurately clarify an issue.

As this study attempts to explore the political advertising industry within a critical framework, the perspectives of some of the researchers and practitioners who have expertise in the political arena were collected and mined for insights. Individuals were selected because of their specific expertise related to the field of political advertising – academic or practical – as well as their accessibility and willingness to participate. All interviews were audio recorded and transcribed. The discussions were loosely structured conversations based upon an interview guide tailored to each informant’s area of expertise (see Appendix D). When feasible, interviews were conducted in person at a location convenient to the informant. However due to geographic, timing and cost constraints, some interviews were conducted by telephone. Depending upon the loquaciousness and available time of the informant, the interviews generally lasted between 30 and 90 minutes. Most were approximately 60 minutes in length. A snowball sampling technique was used to determine other appropriate informants. All interviews ended with the question, “Who else should I be interviewing?”

Personal interviews were conducted between the fall of 2009 and January of 2012 (see Table 1). These interviews were granted approval by Temple University's Institutional Review Board (IRB). A brief description of each informant is contained in Appendix E.

Table 1. Study Informants

<b>Practitioners</b>	<b>Scholars</b>	<b>Journalists</b>	<b>Legal Experts</b>
Scott Fairchild	Kevin Arceneaux	Bill Adair	Meredith McGehee
Chris Mottola	Daniel Chomsky	Tom Feran	Andrew Jay Schwartzman
Jim Mulhall	Noam Chomsky	Brooks Jackson	Anonymous FCC Source 1
Patrick J. Murphy	Michael Hagen	Brendan Nyhan	Anonymous FCC Source 2
Timothy Persico	Robin Kolodny		
Jon Vogel	Brendan Nyhan		
Rosemary Wuenschel			

In addition, two interviews were conducted with regulators at the Federal Communications Commission who requested to remain anonymous. Dr. Robert McChesney (University of Illinois at Urbana-Champaign) was instrumental in securing these FCC interviews.

Other informants provided valuable information and insights which did not necessitate personal interviews. Communication in these cases generally took the form of email exchanges. Individuals such as J. Davis Hebert, Vice President at Wells Fargo Securities, provided information regarding analysis of media companies in the broadcast industry.

It should also be noted that not everyone who was contacted for these interviews was willing to participate. Most notably, Dr. Kathleen Hall Jamieson (University of Pennsylvania), arguably the leading scholar on political communications, declined to participate citing time constraints and other commitments. Former Pennsylvania Senator Arlen Specter also declined to

be interviewed. Michael Dobbs, who ran *The Washington Post's* "The Fact Checker" during the 2008 election, was unresponsive to requests for an interview as was Dr. Rachel Maddow, MSNBC's host of *The Rachel Maddow Show*, Susan Kailis, political sales specialist at Comcast, Bill Wheatley, former executive vice-president of NBC News, and Republican strategist Karl Rove. Requests to the National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) and TVB (the not-for-profit trade association of America's commercial broadcast television industry) also went unanswered.

In the end, the intent of this research is to impact the practice of both politics and journalism. Despite the skeptics of measuring inaccuracies (Bok, 1978; Fish, 1989; Geer, 2006), by drawing attention to the blind spots of political advertising it is hoped that citizens will become more aware of the prevalence of political inaccuracies that are allowed to circulate with little, if any, correction over the broadcast airwaves that are supposed to be serving the public interest. Chapter 3 quantifies the prevalence of inaccuracies in political ad campaigns while identifying the types of ads most likely to be inaccurate.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Furthermore, FactCheck and PolitiFact were considered two of the three “elite, national fact-checkers” by Graves and Glaisyer (2012, p. 15). While the *Washington Post*’s “Fact Checker” was considered the third of the three elite fact-checkers, it was omitted from this study because the original Fact Checker with Michael Dobbs suspended operations after the 2008 presidential election. A “new” Fact Checker was eventually revived by the *Post* in 2011 with Glenn Kessler (<http://voices.washingtonpost.com/fact-checker/2011/01/welcome-to-the-new-fact-checker.html>). However, toward the objective of relying upon the enduring fact-checking organizations, only evaluations from FactCheck and PolitiFact were used. It should also be noted that Spinsanity ceased operating in January, 2005 (<http://www.spinsanity.org/>). In addition, *The Plain Dealer* from Cleveland, Ohio was another source of regular adwatches. However the paper changed its evaluative method during the course of the 2008 campaign, making use of its assessments impossible for comparative purposes.

<sup>2</sup>On January 1, 2012, the *St. Petersburg Times* changed its name to the *Tampa Bay Times* (<http://www.tampabay.com/blogs/media/content/st-petersburg-times-will-become-tampa-bay-times-jan-1>)

<sup>3</sup>Campaign Media Analysis Group (CMAG) has been collecting advertising expenditure/targeting data and providing content analysis of paid political advertisements since the 1996 presidential election ([http://mycmag.kantarmediana.com/publications/KG\\_letter.pdf](http://mycmag.kantarmediana.com/publications/KG_letter.pdf)). CMAG was acquired by TNS Media Intelligence which later changed its name to Kantar Media in 2010 (<http://kantarmediana.com/cmag>). In 2008 it monitored the transmissions of national network and cable as well as local advertising in the country’s top 100 media markets (<http://wiscadproject.wisc.edu/project.php>). As noted by Hagen and Kolodny (2008), “...CMAG provides an extraordinarily accurate record of when and where campaign advertising airs” (p. 8).

<sup>4</sup>While the *New York Times*’ Election 2008 database did list the frequency of airings of each ad, representatives from CMAG did not respond to requests to verify the accuracy and comprehensiveness of these figures.

<sup>5</sup>GRPs represent gross rating points: the estimated percent of potential audience reach multiplied by the frequency of airing an advertisement. The utility of reported GRPs is to account for the imbalances in cost of air time by state. For instance, a dollar spent on TV advertising in Pennsylvania does not afford the same number of viewers as it does in Colorado. The Philadelphia media market is certainly more expensive than anywhere in Colorado. Utilizing GRP figures account for the imbalance since it considers audience reach.

<sup>6</sup>Unless a story was specifically categorized by Lexis-Nexis or other databases as an op-ed, editorial or commentary, it was sometimes difficult to discriminate between columnists offering news reporting versus opinion. This was particularly true with newspapers offering stories with an ideological slant or in local papers with which the author is unfamiliar. While every effort was made to make this discrimination, some columnist articles may inadvertently be included in the sample.

<sup>7</sup>These inconsistencies in database output are similar to the challenges faced by Gentzkow and Shapiro (2010).

<sup>8</sup>Newscasts often covered ads that were purported to have aired or were planned to air, but never did. Some newscasts even covered fabricated ads as did Brit Hume on the Fox Special Report newscast (e.g. Hume, 2008 – June 10; Hume, 2008 – July 1). Since viewers were led to believe these ads were airing, these newscasts were included in this analysis.

<sup>9</sup>While Spinsanity was in operation between 2001 and 2004, its method of establishing the accuracy of ads was not conducive to the objectives of this study.



## CHAPTER 3

## THE NATURE OF INACCURACIES

“‘Spin’ is a polite word for deception. Spinners mislead by means that range from subtle omissions to outright lies. Spin paints a false picture of reality by bending facts, mischaracterizing the words of others, ignoring or denying crucial evidence, or just ‘spinning a yarn’ – by making things up.”

- B. Jackson and K. H. Jamieson (2007, p. vii)

The recurring themes reported about the 2008 presidential ad campaign were the unprecedented levels of spending (Carr, 2008) and the increasingly negative tenor of the ads (Teinowitz, 2008). Little was mentioned about the accuracy of the ad campaigns. By the end of the election, it was calculated that Obama spent a whopping \$235.9 million on television ads (“2008 Race,” 2008) and that McCain had run a proportionately larger number of negative ads than had Obama (“Political Advertising,” 2010). Yet no overall calculations about the number of ad claim inaccuracies were to be found.

Despite the dearth of media attention to the accuracy of the ad campaigns, finding inaccuracies within the 2008 presidential election ads was not difficult. This chapter first compares and contrasts the evaluations each factchecking organization gave to the 285 English-language political ads that aired on television between June 7, 2008 and November 4, 2008.<sup>1</sup> Although the methods each fact-checker used in determining the accuracy of the political ads were outlined in chapter 2, it is worth reiterating here that neither of these organizations attempted to judge the degree of importance or triviality offered by each imprecision. Thus, the number of inaccuracies is not the entire story. Nonetheless, it is a starting point. Once again, the research questions addressed in this chapter are:

RQ1: How accurate are the claims in presidential political advertisements?

RQ2: Does accuracy differ between candidate ads, party-sponsored ads and interest-group ads?

RQ3: Does accuracy differ by ad tone? In other words, are the much maligned “negative” ads – or attack ads – any more or less accurate than contrast ads or advocacy ads?

Despite the notoriety of negative ads, the work of Geer (2006) found negative advertising to be beneficial to democracy in that it is more likely to be based upon verifiable evidence than other types of political advertising (also see West, 2010). Thus, the following hypothesis is offered:

H1: Attack ads are more likely to be accurate than advocacy ads.

Finally, knowing the characteristics of inaccurate ads from the 2008 election leads to the question of whether this information can be useful in determining inaccuracies in the future.

Thus,

RQ4: Is it possible to predict which types of ads are more likely to contain inaccurate claims?

Throughout these analyses, consideration is given to both the overall ads as well as breaking out the individual claims within the ads. Contained within these 285 ads were 2,948 claims in total. FactCheck reviewed 70 of these ads (roughly one in four) and 30 ads contained specific claims reviewed by PolitiFact (approximately 10% of ads). Twenty-one of these ads were reviewed by both organizations leaving a total universe of 79 ads that were reviewed by either FactCheck or PolitiFact.

Within the 70 ads reviewed by FactCheck, there were 750 claims, 248 of which drew an evaluation. While 20% of the reviewed claims were assessed as “true,” three out of four (76%) had some sort of inaccuracy (see Figure 1).

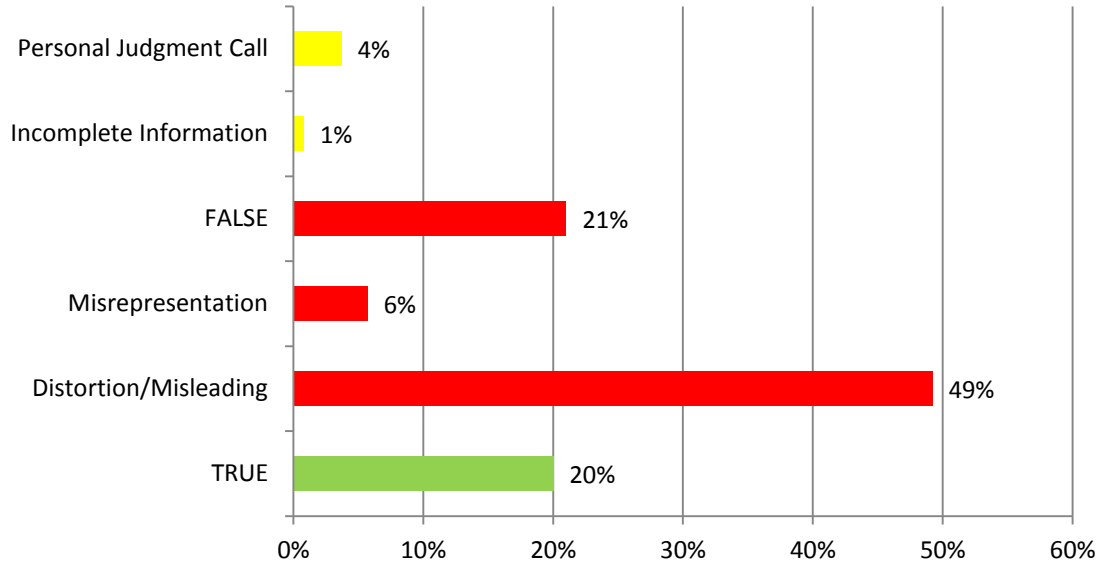


Figure 1. FactCheck Evaluations of 2008 Ad Claims. (N = 248)

Within the 30 ads reviewed by PolitiFact, 78 of the 307 claims drew an evaluation. Similar to its counterpart, PolitiFact found 18% of the claims it reviewed to be unequivocally “true.” This figure is statistically indistinguishable from the proportion of claims FactCheck evaluated as true. Four out of five claims (82%) were found by PolitiFact to be less than completely true, having some sort of inaccuracy (see Figure 2).

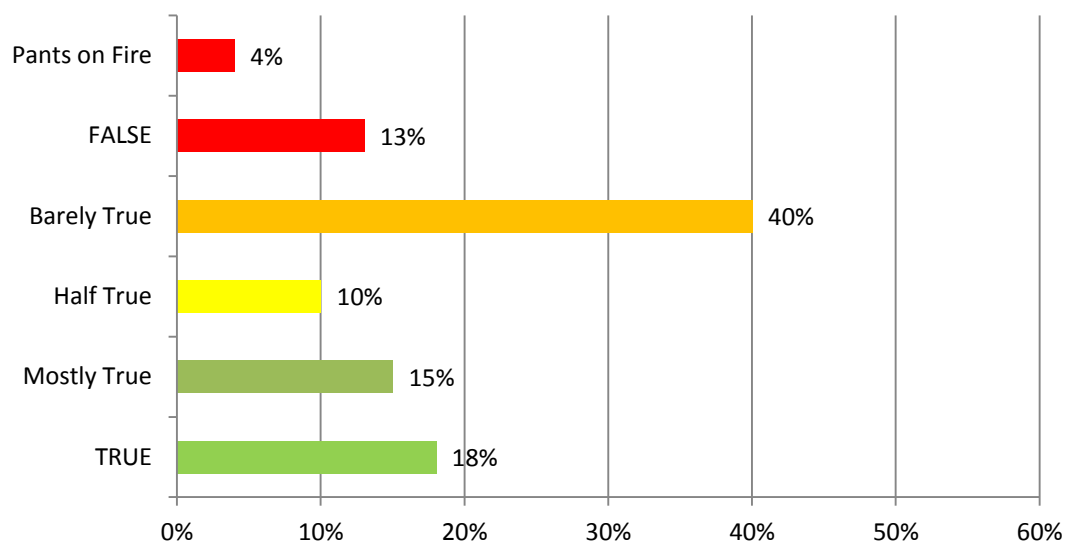


Figure 2. PolitiFact Evaluations of 2008 Ad Claims. (N = 78)

More often than not, then, when ads were reviewed by either of the fact-checkers, there were factual problems with the claims in the ads.

#### Comparisons Between Fact-checkers

Within the 21 ads reviewed by both organizations were 217 claims. FactCheck offered evaluations on 83 of the claims, whereas PolitiFact only evaluated 56 claims. There was overwhelming agreement (89%) between the 44 claims evaluated by both organizations. In 39 out of 44 cases, both FactCheck and PolitiFact either rated a claim as unequivocally true (one case) or established that a claim had some degree of inaccuracy (38 cases). Of the remaining five cases, there was essentially only one claim on which FactCheck and PolitiFact had a potentially problematic difference of accuracy rating. This discrepancy was within the ad “Alaska Maverick.”

An examination of the disagreement between FactCheck and PolitiFact puts the issue in perspective. While contrasting Senator Obama to Governor Palin, an announcer in the “Alaska

Maverick” ad claimed that Palin “took on oil producers.” FactCheck suggested this claim was misleading because it disregarded the attempts Obama also had made in taking on oil producers (Robertson & Gore, 2008). PolitiFact evaluated this claim as being true. However, PolitiFact’s verdict was not on their landing (web) page for this ad, but rather on a separately linked page devoted specifically to “Palin’s efforts to oppose oil companies” (Adair, 2008; Lane, 2008). On this linked page, PolitiFact offered evidence supportive of the claim about Palin taking on oil producers - a claim which originated from Palin’s first speech as McCain’s running mate (Lane, 2008). Thus, PolitiFact’s “true” designation was removed from the context of the ad. This may explain how the two factchecking organizations could come to opposing conclusions. It also illustrates the challenges inherent in evaluating a statement removed from its context.

Another ad causing disagreement was the Obama campaign’s “Backyard” spot. PolitiFact found two claims to be “barely true” while FactCheck considered the interpretation of these claims to be unclear and left it up to their readers to decide whether the statements were misleading (Novak, 2008c). Thus, in this case the disagreement was whether or not a claim was clear enough to be factually verifiable.

The last pair of disagreements relate to the “Heartless” ad released by the interest group Planned Parenthood Action Fund. The claims in question involved whether Governor Palin made rape victims in Wasilla, Alaska pay for the forensic testing kits after they reported being raped. FactCheck found Palin’s role in this practice to be unclear (Henig, 2008a), while PolitiFact rated the claim as half true. While there was no record of Palin supporting the charges, PolitiFact considered her lack of opposition to the practice as well as approval of city budgets that relied on the revenue from the charges as implicit endorsements of the practice

(Adair, 2008a). Again the disagreement between the two organizations stemmed from a lack of enough clear evidence available to verify the claims.

Loosening the standards of agreement between the two fact-checkers by comparing PolitiFact claims evaluated as at least mostly true (i.e. “true” or “mostly true”) with the “true” designation of FactCheck, the two organizations were still in agreement 77% of the time. In three ads, Obama’s “Pocket” and “Country I Love” and McCain’s “Troop Funding,” PolitiFact considered several claims to be “mostly true” while FactCheck found them to be “misleading” or a “distortion.” It is here at this junction where the differing approaches between PolitiFact and FactCheck come into focus. Whereas PolitiFact assigns degrees of truthfulness to claims, FactCheck does not. FactCheck’s Jackson explains their reluctance to do so:

The problem as I see it is that there is no objective way to weight the seriousness of any particular falsehood. A simple count of ads that we criticized won't do, because some might be a little misleading and others wholly false. Some might misinform the public about a trivial matter (such as Obama's claiming that he "worked his way through college" when in fact he had a few summer jobs and got through mainly on scholarships and family money) while others might be very substantial policy distortions (such as Obama's ads late in the campaign accusing McCain of planning to cut Medicare benefits, when McCain's spokesman had made quite clear that no such thing was contemplated.) Who's to say how each should be weighted? Is one "cuts Medicare" worth five "worked my way through college" falsehoods, or ten, or three? It would just be my opinion, and yours might differ. (personal communication, July 20, 2009)

Despite these differing philosophies about how factchecking should be approached, it is noteworthy that the discrepancies between the two organizations were minimal.

#### *Combining Measures of Accuracy*

Having established that the two factchecking organizations maintained a high level of agreement with respect to the accuracy of ad claims, their evaluations can be combined to expand the set of claims available for analysis. For example, within the 79 ads reviewed by either organization, a total of 328 claims drew an evaluation (although this number is inflated

because it double counts claims evaluated by both organizations). An overall assessment indicates that 20% of these ad claims were evaluated as “true.” More than three out of four (77%), however, were deemed to have some degree of inaccuracy.

Controlling for multiple responses when claims were evaluated by both organizations and dropping out claims deemed unratable (referred to as personal judgment calls or insufficient evidence by FactCheck) or when the two organizations disagreed on a rating, just under one in four claims (23%) was found to be accurate while 77% of the claims contained some degree of inaccuracy (see Figure 3). These differences in accuracy figures are meaningful. A binomial test reveals that evaluated claims were significantly more likely than not to be evaluated as inaccurate ( $t = 9.052$ ,  $p < 0.01$ ). In other words, if either of the two fact-checkers took the effort to scrutinize a political ad claim, an inaccuracy was discovered most of the time.

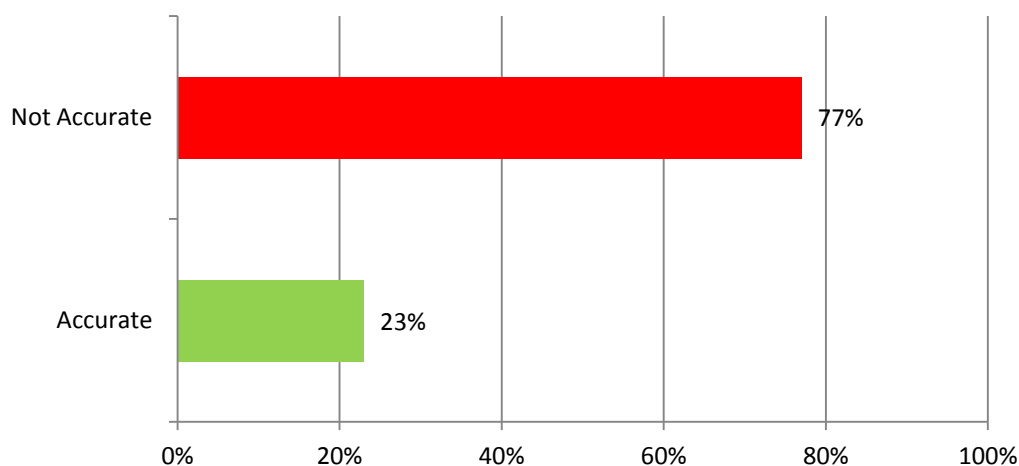


Figure 3. Overall Combined Accuracy Evaluations of 2008 Ad Claims. (N = 283)

### *Extrapolation*

It was previously noted that some ads repeated claims that had already been rebutted by factchecking organizations, yet another evaluation did not always materialize. To address this

issue, the evaluations of the factchecking organizations have been extrapolated. If a claim had been previously evaluated, that rating was carried over to other ads in which the same claim was made even if the ensuing ad was not specifically evaluated by either of the fact-checkers. This strategy did not yield a great deal more data to analyze. Only 16 additional claims were added to the analysis using the extrapolation method. The level of accuracy remained roughly the same with 24% of the claims evaluated as entirely accurate and 76% as having some sort of inaccuracy.

The minimal incremental data is likely due to the specificity utilized in the claim coding. For example, “McCain wants \$4 billion in new tax breaks for oil companies” was a claim rated as misleading by FactCheck and barely true by PolitiFact – inaccurate by both organizations. Applying the extrapolation method, if this specific claim was used in another ad, the evaluation was carried over (extrapolated) even if the additional ad was not reviewed by either factchecking organization. However, there were other ads which claimed, “McCain supports tax breaks for oil companies.” While the claim is similar in nature to the one that was evaluated as inaccurate, it is not exactly the same due to the specificity of the dollar amount in tax breaks purportedly supported by McCain. Erring on the side of caution, the more general claim was not considered inaccurate using the extrapolation method. No rating was assigned to the general claim unless specifically evaluated by a factchecking organization. Thus, even though the extrapolation method fails to yield substantially more data for analysis, it does suggest that the results of this study are conservative in nature.



## Campaign Accuracy

### *Overall Accuracy*

In answering RQ1, then, these results indicate that among the ads evaluated from the 2008 presidential campaign, the overall quantity of accurate claims was significantly less than the quantity of inaccuracies ( $t = 9.052, p < 0.01$ ). While it is conceded that just less than forty percent (39%) of all claims contained in the ads reviewed by the fact-checkers drew an evaluation, not all were verifiable statements – many were just statements of opinion. Moreover, like most advertising, political ads employ persuasive techniques such as puffery and generalizations. These exaggerated or vague statements are legally permissible by the Federal Trade Commission (FTC) in product advertising because their truth or falsity cannot be ascertained (Fueroghne, 2007). Furthermore, factchecking is time consuming and expensive. With limited resources, factchecking organizations cannot check every possible claim (Fritz, Keefer & Nyhan, 2004; personal communications, Bill Adair, May 31, 2010; Brooks Jackson, November 11, 2009). Thus, among the claims reviewed, the majority (77%) were inaccurate.

In determining which ads or claims to check, both factchecking organizations follow a screening process. PolitiFact selects claims to review based upon their perceived newsworthiness and significance. In particular, they gravitate toward statements that may leave a misleading impression and those likely to be passed along and repeated (Adair, 2011). FactCheck investigators attempt to screen all ads giving preference to presidential ads. They look for factual claims not previously covered and write up the ones found to have inaccuracies. Occasionally they will write up inaccurate claims that are repeated so that they can point out patterns of deception. They also look for outrageous claims that will be of interest to the public regardless of who made the claim (personal communication, Brooks Jackson, January 16, 2012).

For the present data, rolling up the claims within each ad allows examination of the ads in aggregate. As shown in Figure 4, among the 285 ads that ran during the general election, 84 (or 29%) contained at least one claim judged to be inaccurate by either fact-checking organization. Only two ads aired containing claims that were evaluated but did not draw any criticism. The remaining 199 ads (or 70%) were not evaluated.

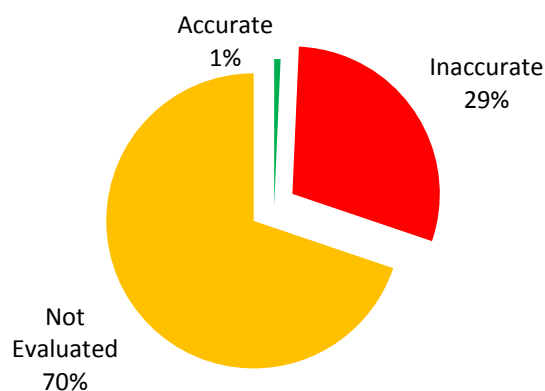


Figure 4. Accuracy of 2008 Television Ads. (N=285)

Research supports the review strategies employed by the fact-checkers; it was found that the more controversial ads are generally rewarded with free airtime from the news media (Iyengar, 2008; Ridout & Smith, 2008). The data in this study align with these findings as well. The ads containing at least one inaccurate claim aired on television significantly more often than ads never evaluated. In general, ads with at least one inaccuracy aired an average of 4,367 times compared to an average of 2,022 airings for ads that were never evaluated (see Figure 5). A t-test indicates this difference is significant ( $t = 3.73, p < 0.001$ , two-tailed). This finding suggests that even if the ads critically analyzed by the fact-checking organizations tended to be more provocative, they were the ads getting more air time and therefore were more likely to be seen by

voters. Since they were unable to check every ad that airs, their strategy of evaluating the provocative ads seems to serve the public interest in that these ads contain verifiable facts that were not all accurate.

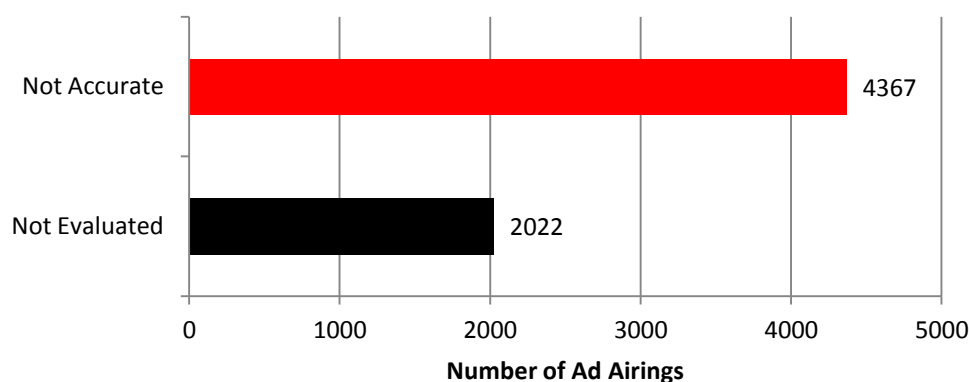


Figure 5. Average Frequency of Ad Airings based upon Evaluation Status. (N = 283)

Briefly considering the ad airing data more generally, one can see how many times each ad execution aired on network or cable television (see Figure 6). Among the 285 ads that ran during the general election, airings ranged from a minimum of one to a maximum of 23,930 times. While the average was 2,706 airings, the positively skewed distribution of data offers a misleading picture of the frequency with which these ads aired. The median, or mid-point value, was 268 airings. In other words, half the ads aired more frequently and half aired less frequently. Just over a third of the ads (35%) aired fewer than 50 times while a full quarter aired 21 times or less. This finding speaks to the prevalence of "press ads" which are paid to air minimally during programming in hopes of being given free air time on newscasts. To this point, one of the objectives of The Annenberg Public Policy Center's Flackcheck.org (launched in January, 2012) is to track the amount of free airtime various broadcast programs give to political ads.

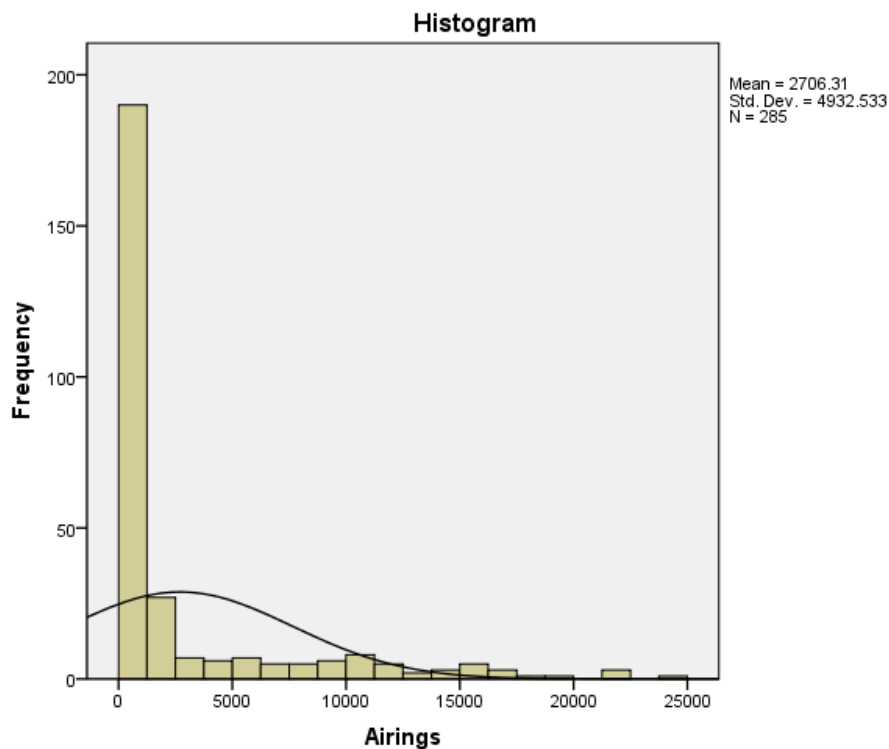


Figure 6. Frequency of Airings by Ad. (N = 285)

While only a portion of ad claims from this study were verifiable, those that were verified by the fact-checkers were over three times more likely to be inaccurate than unequivocally truthful. The fact-checkers were admittedly drawn to the provocative claims. Here it should be emphasized that these (inaccurate provocative) claims in the 2008 presidential election were used for the purpose of gaining voter attention. A look at the relationship between accuracy and ad sponsor reveals who was behind these attention-getting ads.

#### *Sponsors of Inaccuracy*

Consistent with the notion that money drives politics (Ferguson, 1995), the two groups least constrained by federal campaign finance fundraising limits dominated the share of political ad voice in 2008: Obama and independent interest groups (see Figure 7). Thus, Obama's

decision to decline public financing put the number of ads in his arsenal on par with those aired by interest groups. The McCain campaign was in third place with a 21% share of voice followed in last place by the party-produced ads. Among the 6% of party-produced ads, the Democratic National Committee (DNC) aired two ads and the Republican National Committee (RNC) aired 15.

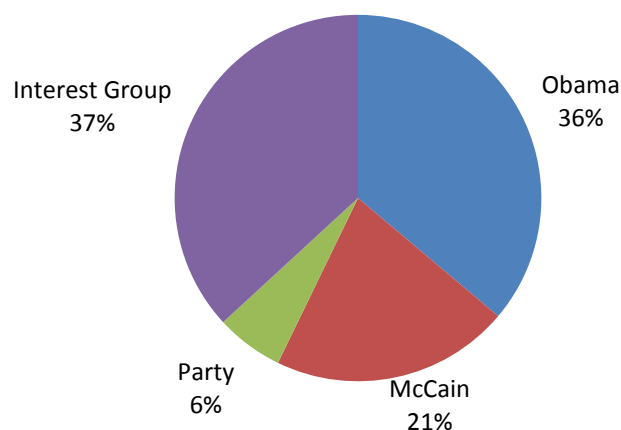


Figure 7. Proportion of Ads Produced by Sponsor. (N=285)

Among the ads evaluated, differences in claim accuracy varied by ad sponsor (see Figure 8). The Obama campaign was more likely to have aired accurate ad claims (32%) than the McCain campaign (16%). A z-test revealed the difference between these proportions is significant ( $z = 2.78, p < 0.01$ , two-tailed). The Obama campaign was also more likely to have aired accurate ad claims (32%) than were interest group advertisers (16%). A z-test revealed this difference is significant ( $z = 1.96, p < 0.05$ , two-tailed) as well. Because only 12 claims within the party ad category were evaluated, none of the observed differences reached levels of statistical significance. The inaccuracy of claims from the McCain campaign was at parity levels with the claims from interest groups – both were higher than the other categories. Thus, while

the Obama campaign had the greatest number of ads from a singular group (there were 40 different organizations represented in the interest group category), it also had the greatest quantity of accurate claims. Least likely to be accurate among the evaluated claim were the interest groups and the McCain campaign.

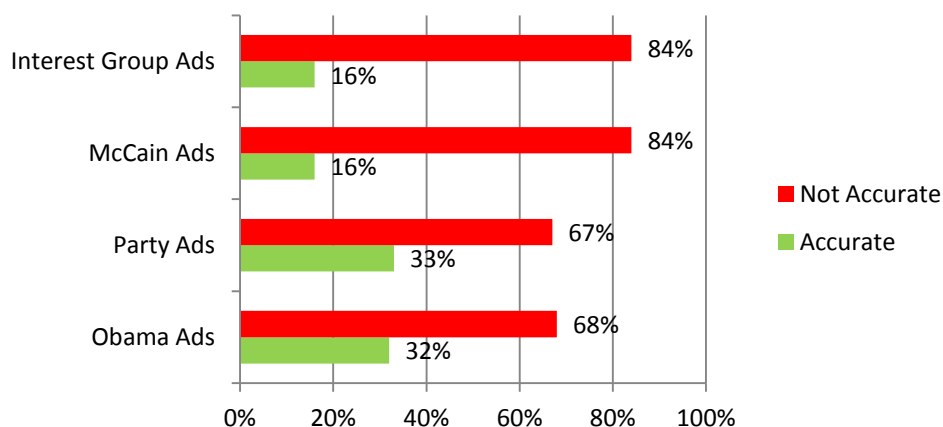


Figure 8. Claim Accuracy Evaluations by Sponsor. Note: Bars represent the evaluations of ad claims by FactCheck and/or PolitiFact. 43 claims were evaluated for interest group ads, 116 for McCain ads, 12 for party ads, and 126 for Obama ads.

Figure 9 illustrates that significant differences in evaluations existed at the ad level as well ( $\chi^2(6) = 19.29, p < .01$ ). McCain had a proportionately greater number of ads that were evaluated as inaccurate compared to Obama ( $z = 1.60, p \leq .05$ , one-tailed). While interest groups appear to have the smallest proportion of ads with inaccuracies, this was driven by so few of their ads having been evaluated. As previously shown in Figure 8, the evaluated interest group ad claims tended (along with McCain's) to be inaccurate. Thus, in answering RQ2, accuracy in 2008 did differ by sponsor. McCain led on inaccuracies in terms of proportion of ads and tied the lead on inaccuracies with interest groups in proportion of claims that had been evaluated.

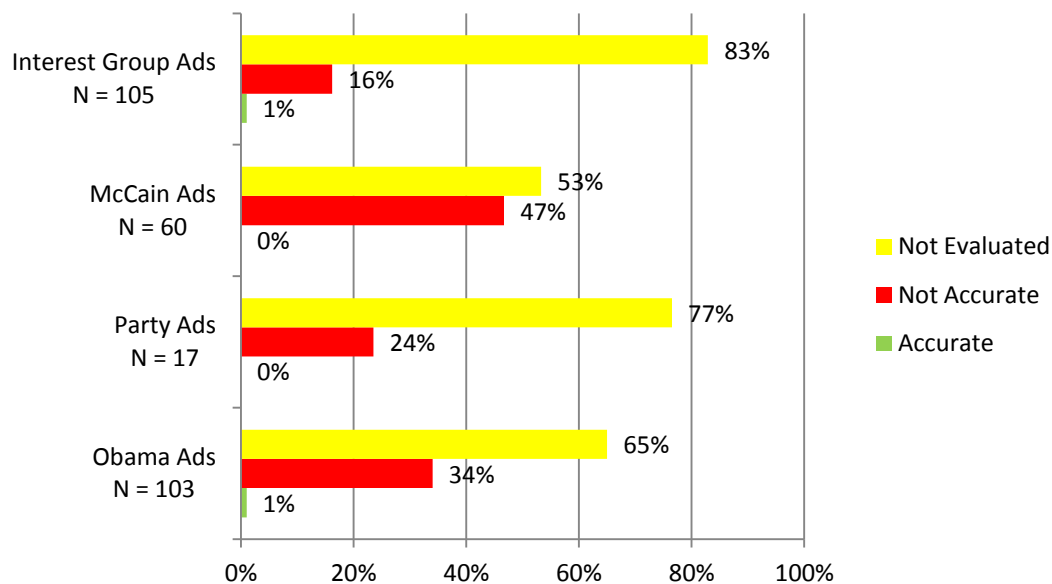


Figure 9. Ad Accuracy Evaluations by Sponsor. Note: Bars represent the evaluations of ads by FactCheck and/or PolitiFact. (N = 285)

In interpreting these results, the question arises as to why one candidate would be more likely to have a significantly greater number of inaccuracies in his/her ads relative to the other groups. Geer (2006) found political ads to be more negative from the out-party than the incumbent as the party out of power has to be more critical of the controlling party in order to make its case to the public. While McCain was not the incumbent in 2008, he was the candidate from the in-party. Yet a greater proportion of his evaluated ad claims were found to be inaccurate compared to Obama's. To disentangle the relationship between negativity and accuracy, consideration of ad tone is in order.

#### *Challenging the Defense of Negativity*

As widely reported in the news media during the campaign, negativity was rampant ("2008 Race," 2008; Teinowitz, 2008). Consistent with these reports, the majority of ads in this

study were of the “attack” variety (58%). One in four ads (25%) was categorized as “advocacy,” and 16% were “contrast” ads (see Figure 10).

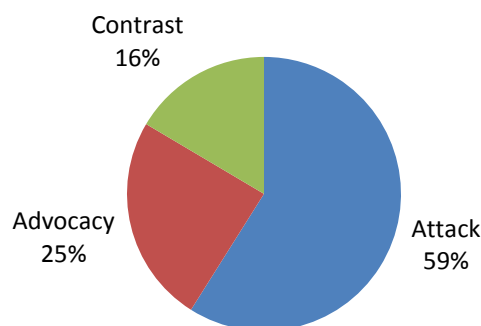


Figure 10. Proportion of Ads by Tone. (N = 285)

There was a significant association between the evaluation of an ad and its tone,  $\chi^2(4) = 25.85, p < .001$ . While advocacy ads were least likely to draw an evaluation, they were also least likely to have inaccuracies among ads that were rated. Examining data down at the ad claim level (see Figure 11), evaluated claims in attack ads were marginally more likely to be inaccurate (77%) than claims in advocacy ads (63%),  $z = -1.56, p < .06$ , one-tailed. A similar but stronger association existed with contrast ads. Evaluated claims in contrast ads were more likely to be inaccurate (79%) than those in advocacy ads ( $z = -1.65, p < .05$ , one-tailed). As observed by FactCheck’s Jackson, “We find often little to criticize in the puffy, airy-fairy, biographical ads that show the candidate with his or her spouse and an Irish Setter and lovely children and a coat slung over their shoulder saying what a great resume they’ve got...” (personal communication, November 11, 2009). Biographical advocacy ads, he explained, tend to be straightforward and are thus relatively easy to fact-check. These data seem to support Jackson’s remarks. They also



suggest that H1 cannot be supported. Evaluated attack ad claims are more likely to be *inaccurate* than are those in advocacy ads. So too are contrast ad claims.

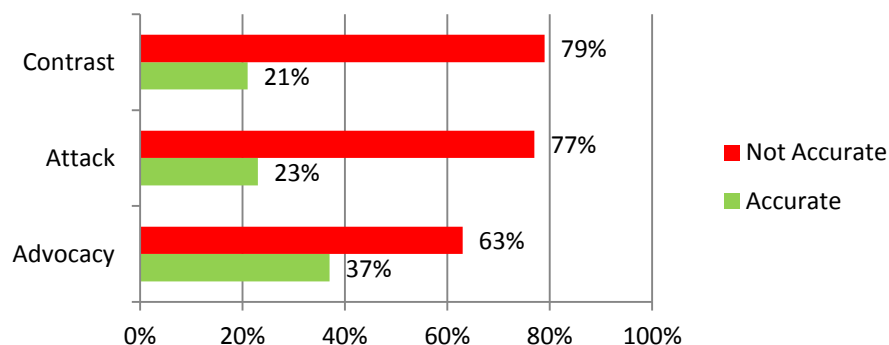


Figure 11. Claim Accuracy Evaluations by Ad Tone. Note: Bars represent the evaluations of ad claims by FactCheck and/or PolitiFact. 72 claims were evaluated for contrast ads, 198 for attack ads, and 27 for advocacy ads.

It is important to distinguish Jackson's observations about advocacy ads from Geer's (2006) work. Geer offered evidence that positive, or advocacy, ads were less substantive in the amount of issue-oriented information provided compared to attack or contrast ads. Jackson's observation that advocacy ads are generally easier to fact-check does not contradict Geer's findings. Since the advocacy ads offer less substance, they indeed may be easier to verify. Where Geer's assertions warrant a challenge is on the contention that because negative ads offer more substance with verifiable evidence, they are better at informing a democratic debate (also see West, 2010). The findings presented here suggest otherwise. Of all the ads which drew an inaccurate rating, 69% were of the attack variety. Thus, the connection between evidence and accuracy is not a foregone conclusion. Simply because evidence is presented does not mean the evidence is accurate. And as previously revealed, in the more provocative ads of 2008 designed to gain the most attention, inaccuracies were rife.

*Sponsors of Negativity (and Inaccuracy)*

In light of data indicating that negative ads are not more accurate than other ads, another look at the interplay between incumbency, ad tone and accuracy is warranted. As noted earlier, Geer (2006) found the out-party on the attack more often than the in-party. In 2008, it was actually the McCain campaign – the in-party – that produced a greater number of negative ads. A full 70% of McCain’s ads attacked his opponent either in full or in part, whereas only 62% of Obama’s ads did likewise (see Figure 12). However, when taking into consideration how often each type of ad aired, Obama outperformed McCain in terms of negativity. Obama’s combined contrast and attack ads aired 479,848 times, whereas McCain’s combined contrast and attack ads only aired 456,272 times. Then again, looking at the worst of the negative ads – those that were inaccurate – McCain once again was in the lead with inaccurate negative ads running a total of 456,135 times compared to a total of 450,203 for Obama. Thus, the dubious distinction of a greater proportion of not only negative ads, but negative ads containing at least one inaccuracy went to the in-party. Furthermore, McCain aired these inaccurate negative ads more often than his opponent.

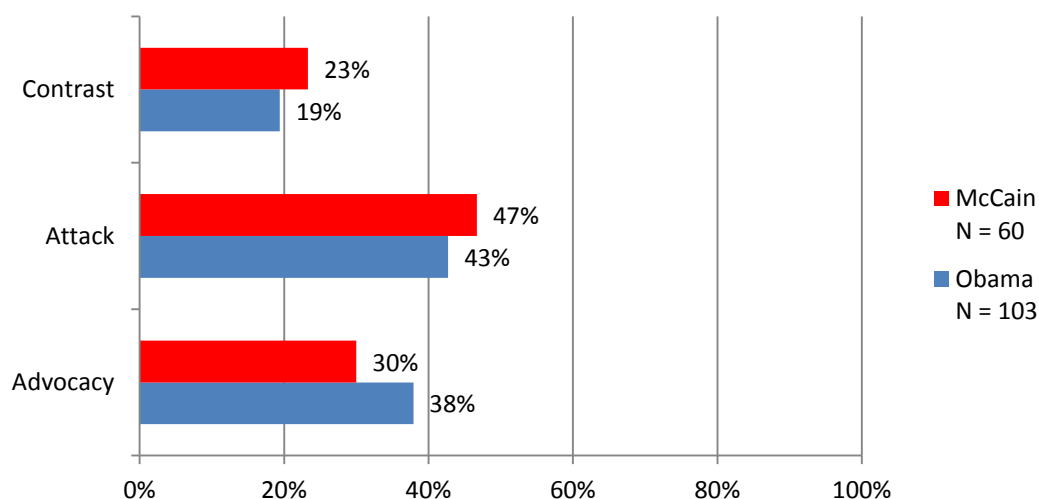


Figure 12. Ad Tone by Sponsor. (N = 163)

To be sure, these data complicate the notion of negativity. Not only does the quantity and mix of produced ads need to be taken into consideration, so do the number of times each type of ad aired. The effects of money are evident in that despite McCain having a larger number of negative ads in his arsenal, Obama aired his smaller number of negative ads more often. More important to the information environment and enabling democratic discourse, however, is that rather than concern over the tone of the ads should be a concern with the accuracy of the claims within the ads.

### *Timing of the Inaccuracies*

Another approach to analyzing political ad accuracy is to consider the trends related to the timing of the campaign. Geer (2006) found that campaigns tended to become more negative as Election Day drew closer (also see Campbell, J., 2008; Goldstein & Freedman, 2002). One can also consider what role accuracy plays as voting day approaches. If campaigns become more negative across time, then the invalidation of H1 suggests that campaigns will become less accurate across time as well.

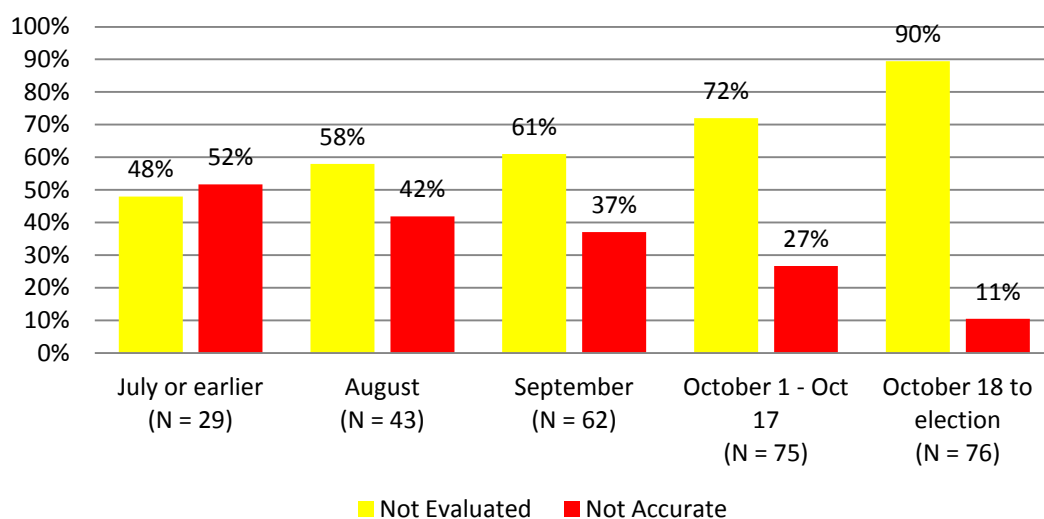


Figure 13. Ad Evaluations by Release Date of Advertisement (among all ads). (N = 285)

There was a significant association between ad evaluation and the release date of the advertisements,  $\chi^2(8) = 27.66, p < .01$ . Rather than increasing as Election Day approached, the proportion of ads with inaccurate claims *decreased* as illustrated in Figure 13. The latest date quintile in the campaign offered the smallest proportion of ads released containing at least one claim inaccuracy ( $z = -2.55, p < 0.05$ , two-tailed). While this may seem counterintuitive to the notion that inaccuracies increase as the campaign progresses, it may be explained because the latest time period also had the greatest proportion of newly released ads not evaluated by either factchecking organization. One can see that as an increasing number of ads was released over the span of the campaign, the fact-checkers evaluated fewer and fewer of them. Thus, the degree to which ads were inaccurate was actually a function of the number of ads evaluated by the fact-checkers.

Focusing on only the ads evaluated during the campaign, Figure 14 illustrates that the proportion of inaccuracies peaked in September and plummeted to the lowest point during the last two weeks of the campaign. Thus, among ads that were evaluated, inaccuracies apparently tended to be less prevalent during the final days of the campaign. What is not known, of course, is the accuracy of the ads that were not formally evaluated by the fact-checkers.

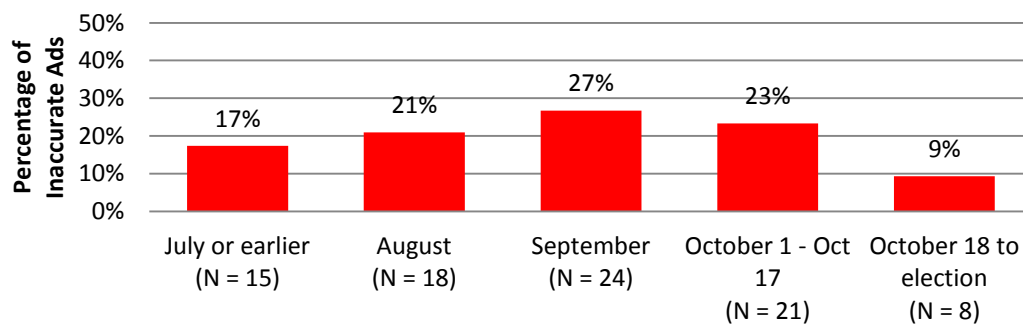


Figure 14. Ad Inaccuracies by Release Date of Advertisement (among evaluated ads). (N = 86)

If the likelihood of an ad evaluation is associated with its release date, this invites additional scrutiny of which groups were advertising at what times during the course of the campaign. Chi-square analysis revealed a significant association between ad sponsor and the release date of the advertisements ( $X^2(12) = 68.54, p < .001$ ). Analysis of the standardized residuals indicates this association is driven mainly by the last two weeks of the campaign. As illustrated in Figure 15, interest groups overwhelmingly owned the share of advertising voice during the final two weeks of the campaign. It was previously noted that 83% of interest group ads had not been evaluated by either of the fact-checkers. It turns out this was largely driven by the release date of ads as nearly half of all interest group ads (46%) were released within the last two weeks of the campaign. Fact-checkers may have been unable to keep up with the onslaught of interest group ads. Thus, the lack of evaluations of interest group ads should not be interpreted as a lack of inaccuracies. If anything, claims from interest group ads that were evaluated tended to have more inaccuracies than ads from Obama or the political parties (see Figure 8).

It has now been demonstrated that political ad accuracy can be systematically measured and varies based upon ad sponsor and ad tone. Using the additional data points of the release date of the ads as well as how frequently each ad aired, an attempt has been made to estimate under which conditions inaccuracies are most likely to occur.

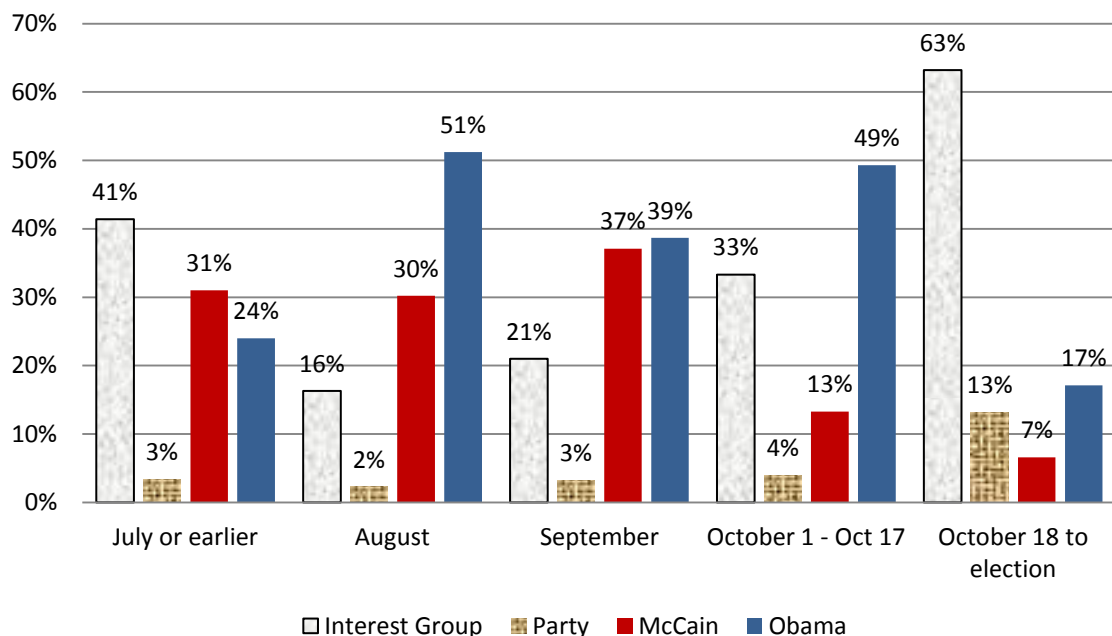


Figure 15. Ad Sponsor by Release Date of Advertisement (among all ads). (N = 285)

### Predicting Inaccuracies

In pursuing answers to the other objectives of this study, particularly the accuracy of political ads in general, it has become clear that the fact-checking organizations either found at least one claim in any given political ad to be inaccurate or an ad was not specifically evaluated. As explained previously, the lack of an evaluation appears to be because of the absence of verifiable claims in some ads and also due to a lack of time or resources to check every ad that is produced. In only two cases did ads which drew an evaluation receive exclusively accurate ratings. Thus, instead of predicting whether or not an ad was accurate, the available data limit efforts to predicting whether or not an ad was evaluated. If an ad was evaluated, in all but two cases it contained an inaccuracy.

To predict which variables affected the evaluation of political ads, several regression models were tested. Both multinomial and binomial logistic regression models were evaluated

because a categorical dependent variable prevents using linear regression models. For the multinomial models, the outcome variable was trichotomous: whether an ad was accurate, inaccurate or not evaluated. Because only two ads were deemed accurate, dropping these cases enabled use of a binomial model. In this logistic model, the outcome variable was dichotomous: an ad was either not evaluated or not accurate. In all models, the predictor variables included the sponsor of the ad (interest groups, party ads, McCain or Obama), the tone of the ad (advocacy, attack or contrast), the number of times an ad aired, and the number of days prior to the election the ad was released.

A logistic regression model was constructed employing a stepwise method with backward entry. As no previous research exists on which to base hypotheses, the use of the stepwise method is defensible. Moreover, to avoid suppressor effects whereby a predictor effect is only significant when a particular variable is held constant, the backward entry method is preferable (Field, 2009). However, multiple entry methods (including backward stepwise, backward elimination, and forward stepwise) yielded similar results. The most parsimonious model is presented below. This model accounted for a significant amount of variability,  $\chi^2(7) = 76.48, p < .001$ . The accounted variance ranged from an  $R^2$  of .24 (Cox and Snell) to .34 (Nagelkerke). In other words, between 24% and 34% of the variance in whether an ad is inaccurate versus not evaluated can be accounted for by this model.

SPSS utilizes automatic dummy coding of categorical predictor variables, but options are available to change which category is the basis for comparative purposes. For the predictor variable of ad sponsor, the interest group category was selected as the base because very few party ads were evaluated, and it makes sense to be able to contrast both of the candidate categories with the interest groups. For the predictor variable of ad tone, the advocacy ad

category had the greatest number of accurate claims, yet it was also the smallest sized category containing the fewest number of ads. Both of the other ad tone categories, attack and contrast, have negativity associated with them. Therefore it is more logical to split the tone categories for comparative purposes by having the “negative” ads contrasted with the more positive advocacy ads. To facilitate interpretation, base reference categories have been bolded in the presented models that follow.

Examining the individual parameter estimates provides details about the roles of the predictors in accounting for variance in the dependent variable when all other variables are held constant (see Table 2). Ad tone appears to have played the greatest role in whether an ad was evaluated. Specifically, the odds of an attack ad having been evaluated as inaccurate were 13.71 times higher than for an advocacy ad. Similarly, contrast ads had a 12.40 times greater chance than advocacy ads to have been rated inaccurate. The sponsor of political ads also played a role in the variance of fact-checkers’ evaluations. Compared to interest group ads, candidate ads had greater odds of having been rated inaccurate. McCain ads had the highest odds ratio with a 4.61 greater chance of having been rated inaccurate while Obama ads had a 3.26 greater chance than interest group ads to have been inaccurate.



Table 2. Logistic Regression Predicting Ad Evaluation

		<i>B</i>		(SE)	95% CI for Odds Ratio		
					Lower	Odds Ratio	Upper
Constant		-4.85		(.65)			
Ad tone	<b>Advocacy</b>						
	Attack	2.62	***	(.51)	5.02	13.71	37.44
	Contrast	2.52	***	(.57)	4.09	12.40	37.58
Ad Sponsor	<b>Interest Group</b>						
	Party	.39		(.70)	.38	1.48	5.81
	McCain	1.53	***	(.44)	1.94	4.62	11.00
	Obama	1.18	**	(.41)	1.47	3.26	7.23
	Ad Release Date	.02	***	(.00)	1.01	1.02	1.03
	# of Airings	.00	*	(.00)	1.00	1.00	1.00

Note:  $R^2 = .24$  (Cox & Snell),  $.34$  (Nagelkerke). Model  $\chi^2(7) = 76.48$ ,  $p < .001$ . (N = 283) \* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

While the descriptive statistics revealed that the evaluation of an ad was associated with their release date, the contribution of the release date variable in the model was negligible when all other variables were held constant. Even when considered as an interaction between both ad release date and ad sponsor, the model did not show this interaction term to be a significant predictor of ad evaluation. The number of ad airings also followed the same pattern. Thus, predicting which political ads would draw an inaccurate rating was primarily accounted for by attack and contrast ads. A secondary predictor of inaccurate ratings was based upon the ad's sponsor – in 2008 it was driven by McCain. Surprisingly, the role of release date was minor according to this model.

Another cut at the data, however, offers a more plausible explanation. Instead of using the number of days an ad was released prior to Election Day, the release date data were grouped into quintiles as depicted in Figure 13. The reference category for this group was the approximate two week period prior to Election Day. Ad airings data were also grouped into two categories: above the median value of 268 airings and at the median value and below. These changes resulted in a two-step model which accounted for a similar amount of variability as the previous model. Additional models were tested employing interactions between the release date quintiles and ad sponsor. These models were not found to offer better accounting of the variance in ad evaluations. In the present model, the dichotomous airings variable was revealed in step one to not have a significant role in accounting for the variance in whether an ad was evaluated or inaccurate. Thus, this variable was dropped from the analysis in the second step of the model. The second and final step in the model is presented in Table 3.

As with the initial model, ad tone appears to have played the greatest role in whether an ad was evaluated. Specifically, the odds of an attack ad having been evaluated as inaccurate were 13.63 times higher than for an advocacy ad. Similarly, contrast ads had an 11.47 times greater chance than advocacy ads to have been rated inaccurate. However, the ads released in July or earlier had even greater odds of having been evaluated as inaccurate as did contrast ads. Compared to ads released in the two weeks prior to Election Day, the earliest released ads had a 13.54 times greater chance of having been rated inaccurate. A pattern revealed by this model suggests the odds of an ad having been evaluated as inaccurate declined as Election Day approached.

Table 3. Logistic Regression Predicting Ad Evaluation with Release Date Quintiles

		<i>B</i>		(SE)	95% CI for Odds Ratio		
					Lower	Odds Ratio	Upper
Ad tone	Constant	-5.05		(.68)			
	<b>Advocacy</b>		***				
	Attack	2.61	***	(.51)	5.07	13.63	36.65
	Contrast	2.44	***	(.56)	3.86	11.47	34.04
Ad Release Date	July or earlier	2.61	***	(.60)	4.19	13.54	43.72
	August	1.17	*	(.55)	1.10	3.21	9.40
	September	1.21	*	(.51)	1.22	3.34	9.14
	Oct 1 to Oct 17	.91		(.50)	.94	2.48	6.56
	<b>Oct 18 to election</b>		**				
Ad Sponsor	<b>Interest Group</b>						
	Party	.77		(.69)	.56	2.16	8.36
	McCain	1.82	***	(.45)	2.54	6.17	14.98
	Obama	1.49	***	(.42)	1.96	4.42	9.96

Note:  $R^2 = .24$  (Cox & Snell),  $.33$  (Nagelkerke). Model  $\chi^2(9) = 75.70$ ,  $p < .001$ . ( $N = 283$ ) \* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

While the sponsor of political ads continued to account for variance in fact-checkers' evaluations in this model, it was to a lesser degree than the earliest released ads. Compared to interest group ads, candidate ads had greater odds of having been rated inaccurate. McCain ads had the highest odds ratio with a 6.17 greater chance of having been rated inaccurate while Obama ads had a 4.42 greater chance than interest group ads to have been rated inaccurate.

Thus, in terms of RQ4, predicting inaccuracies is limited to ads that were evaluated by the fact-checkers. It is possible, however, to predict which ads are more likely to draw an inaccurate evaluation. All else being equal, attack ads have the greatest odds of drawing an inaccurate evaluation followed by the ads released early-on in the general campaign and then ads

that were of the contrast variety. Generally, as the campaign wore on, the odds of an ad being evaluated as inaccurate declined.

These findings suggest cause for concern given the *Citizens United* ruling. As it did in the 2010 mid-term elections and the 2012 GOP presidential primary elections, the role of interest group ads is expected to increase dramatically over 2008 (Peters, 2012). If the same pattern holds as in 2008, nearly half the interest group spending will be in the last weeks of the campaign. In the last two weeks of October 2008, 90% of the released ads were not evaluated. Yet interest group ads, along with McCain ads, were more likely to have inaccurate claims among those evaluated by fact-checkers. While McCain is not running for president in 2012, the interest groups will play an unprecedented role in presidential political advertising. Fact-checkers should distribute their efforts accordingly.

#### Conclusion

The findings offered in this chapter provide a conservative accounting of the prevalence of inaccuracies in the 2008 presidential political ads. They are conservative because they likely underestimate the amount of imprecision. The two fact-checking organizations upon which the accuracy data rely provided a rating for 30% of the 285 television ads that aired during the general election. Among the 44 claims evaluated by both fact-checkers, there was agreement 89% of the time. At the level of the individual ad claim, three out of every four claims evaluated had some degree of inaccuracy. Rolling up the claims to the ad level, 29% of all ads contained at least one inaccurate claim. Less than 1% of the ads (a total of two) contained claims that were evaluated but did not draw any criticism. The remaining 70% of ads did not draw an evaluation. It cannot be discerned whether any of these ads did not draw criticism because they were accurate, because none of the claims were verifiable, or because they were never reviewed.

Nonetheless, these findings do suggest that the selection bias of the fact-checkers was based upon the provocativeness of the claims in an ad. Ads which were evaluated by them aired significantly more often than the ads which were not evaluated. Thus, to the degree that fact-checkers are unable to review every ad that airs, the strategy of evaluating the more provocative ads seems to serve the public interest in that the ads that ran in 2008 tended to contain verifiable facts that were not all accurate.

Based upon the evaluated claims, ad accuracy in 2008 differed by both the sponsor of the ads as well as the tone of the ads. McCain led on inaccuracies as a proportion of his ad arsenal and tied for the lead on inaccuracies with interest groups as a proportion of claims evaluated overall. McCain also had the distinction of not only the greatest proportion of attack ads, but negative ads that most often contained inaccuracies. Moreover, McCain aired a greater number of inaccurate negative ads than did his opponent. Accordingly, these data do not support the hypothesis that attack ads are more likely to be accurate than advocacy ads. Furthermore, the findings are inconsistent with Geer's (2006) contention that because negative ads offer more substance with verifiable evidence, they are better at informing a democratic debate. The most evidence-packed, issue-oriented ads in the world do nothing for the information environment if they are not accurate.

A first step toward a theory of strategic misinformation has also been offered by demonstrating that it is possible to predict the conditions under which ads are more likely to draw an inaccurate evaluation. Attack ads had the greatest likelihood of drawing an inaccurate rating while contrast ads also had a high likelihood. This information can help adwatching organizations and journalists to better focus their attention. Another pattern that may be of concern to adwatchers and journalists is the decreasing likelihood of ads being evaluated as

inaccurate as Election Day approaches. A naïve interpretation would be a belief that the ad makers were becoming more accurate. A more practical explanation is that the fact-checkers were increasingly overwhelmed with the volume of new ad releases to verify and were thus unable to keep up. As revealed in this chapter, nearly half of all interest group ads were released during the last few weeks of the campaign. Given the expected dramatic increase in interest group and Super PAC spending over 2008 levels, fact-checkers, journalists, pundits and even candidates will have a deluge of claims to sort through in the 2012 election. Of course most wary of all should be the voters.

Voters cannot assume that the absence of a review by any of the fact-checkers means the claims in an ad are accurate. This is one of the challenges in the fact-checking philosophies of 2008. FactCheck did not review ads that recycled claims that had been previously evaluated unless a pattern of deception was being established. Some ads were modified slightly and rereleased under a different name. If a voter did not see the original ad's evaluation, he or she may be less likely to discern the veracity of questionable claims in the new ad. Furthermore, PolitiFact did not always tag articles in its database with ad names making it more difficult to match ads with claims. For instance, see McCain's "Original Mavericks," "Tax Man," or "Embrace" ads. These ads only surface when specific claims from the ads are input into the PolitiFact search box. In a perfect world, the goal is to make the ad verification process as easy as possible for the voter.

To further anticipate additional conditions under which candidate ads are more likely to draw an inaccurate rating, the theory of strategic misinformation is extended to consider which sort of public perceptions affect political ad accuracy evaluations. This is the topic of chapter 4.

### Endnote

<sup>1</sup> Television ads longer than sixty seconds in length were omitted from this analysis as the number of claims contained within the longer ads was unwieldy to manage. This decision resulted in dropping two 120 second spots from the Obama campaign as well as his 30-minute “infomercial” which aired on October 29, 2008.

## CHAPTER 4

## BACKWARD “BIG MO”

“Deception can make a situation falsely uncertain as well as falsely certain...Such a manipulation of the dimension of certainty is one of the main ways to gain power over the choices of those deceived.”

- Sissela Bok (1978, p. 20)

In her exploration of lies, deception and moral choice, Bok (1978) noted how specific dimensions can be manipulated to give the upper hand to someone when a choice needs to be made by others. So it is with the proposed political theory of strategic misinformation. While Alvarez (1997) and Carsey (2000) addressed the dimension of certainty in the political realm, the theory of strategic misinformation proposes an exploration of elements beyond certainty. In developing her theory of campaign effects, Vavreck (2009) noted that even though the state of the economy plays a significant role in what candidates are able to say during a campaign, it is still crucial for candidates to recognize how the public perceives their strengths and weaknesses in other areas (also see Geer, 2006). Not only do candidates need to be prepared to take advantage of their perceived strengths, they must also be prepared to attack their opponents when appropriate and defend their own weaknesses if attacked. Given the prevalence of inaccuracies in political advertising revealed in the previous chapter, a good number of political claims are being distorted. The objective of this chapter is to explore whether there is any relationship between how candidates are perceived by the public and which claims the candidates distort in their political ads.

As introduced in chapter 2, two hypotheses are proffered by the theory of strategic misinformation. Essentially, if there is a salient dimension on which a candidate is not strong but



his/her opponent is, it is to the candidate's benefit to distort his/her opponent's record or to distort the issue context. To reiterate, the specific hypotheses are as follows:

H2a: Candidates are more likely to use inaccurate claims in their attack ads for dimensions on which their opponent is perceived more favorably.

H2b: Candidates are more likely to use inaccurate claims in their advocacy ads for dimensions on which they are perceived less favorably than their opponent.

Upon initial inspection of the data from the NAES 2008, a couple challenges became apparent. First, the evaluations of each candidate were highly intra-correlated. When compared to McCain's overall favorability evaluations, the Pearson correlation coefficients, or measures of correspondence, of the other measures for him were as follows: experience (.60), judgment (.88), leadership (.87), and trustworthiness (.84). The statistical significance of these correlations for all measures was at the  $p \leq .001$  level (two-tailed). The evaluations for Obama also had strong correlations to his overall favorability measure: experience (.86), judgment (.89), leadership (.80), and trustworthiness (.64). In essence, given the strong correlations, these five characteristics are measuring dimensions of candidates that are not particularly discriminating from one another. As a result, with the possible exceptions of the McCain experience measure and the Obama trustworthiness measure, these very strong relationships to each candidate's overall evaluation will result in multicollinearity problems when using regression modeling.

Another set of challenges arose from examining subsets of data. The more one drills down into the data for analysis, the fewer cases one has to scrutinize. For instance, the objects of interest for the present study were the candidate-produced ads. Further, attack ads and advocacy ads from each candidate needed to be isolated. Working with data from just a single election, the base sizes for analysis became limited. Specific to attack ads, 21 from Obama and 17 from McCain were identified with inaccuracies to analyze. When considering candidate advocacy ads

with identified inaccuracies only three were from Obama and two from McCain. Thus, a great deal of interpretive power was lost with such small base sizes and the ensuing results therefore need to be considered directional in nature.

### Perceptions of Candidates

Perceived evaluations of each candidate are illustrated in five charts (Figures 16 – 20) which plot the five measures during the progression of the 2008 campaign. Each chart represents a different perceived trait for both candidates. The broken red line represents evaluations of McCain and the solid blue line represents evaluations of Obama. The progression of time during the campaign is plotted along the X axis using the ad release date variable. As illustrated in Figure 16, from mid-September through the end of October, Obama was perceived more favorably overall than McCain. The gap in favorability of the two candidates narrowed at the end of the election.

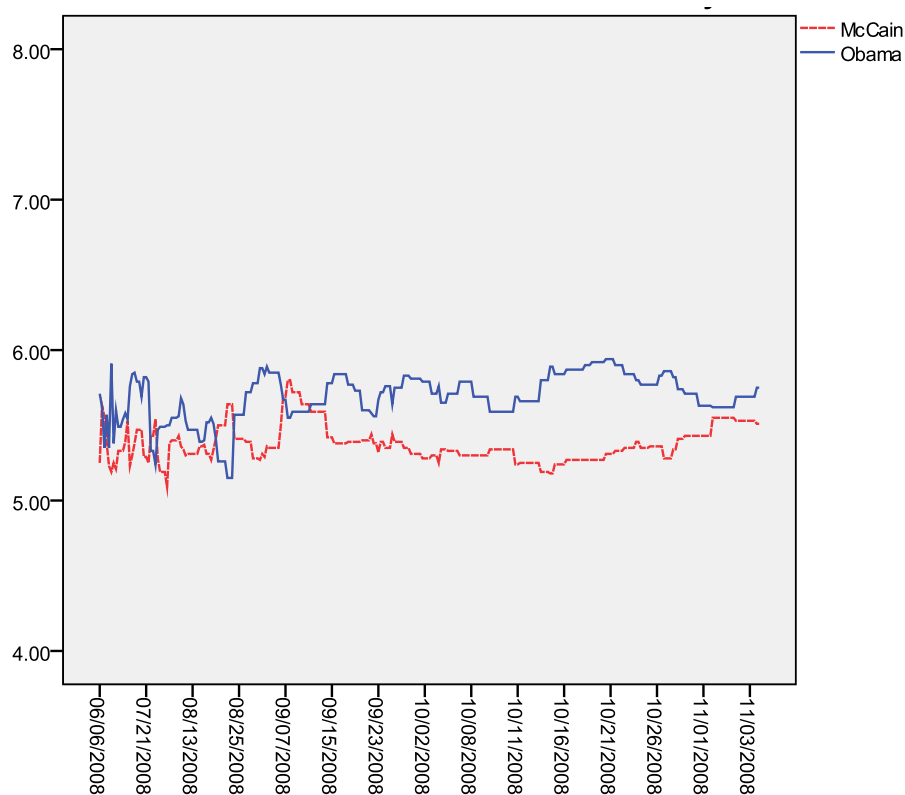


Figure 16. Candidate Overall Favorability (based on NAES 2008)

On the remaining four candidate measures, McCain was consistently evaluated more highly than was Obama. Obama narrowed the gap in mid-October on the measures of leadership and judgment, but the disparity again widened between the two candidates at the very end of the campaign (see Figures 17 – 20).

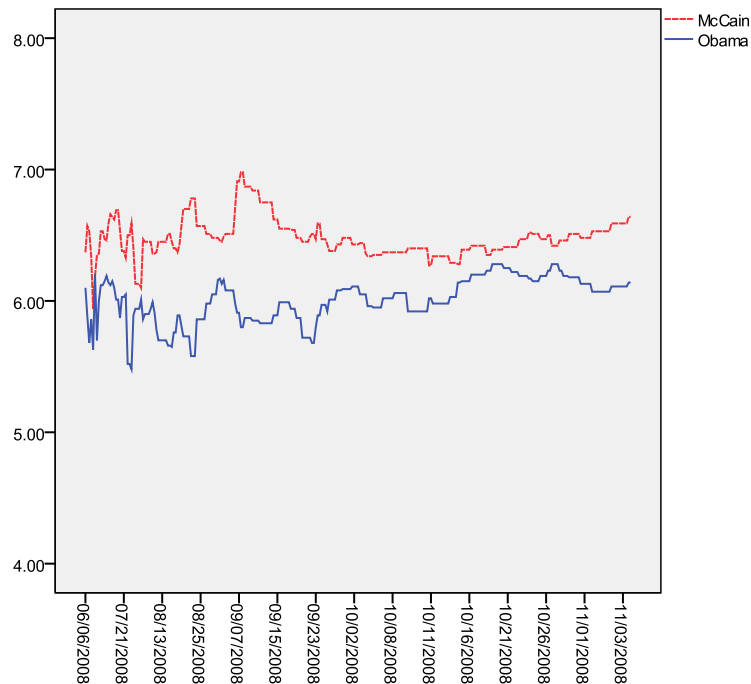


Figure 17. Candidate Leadership

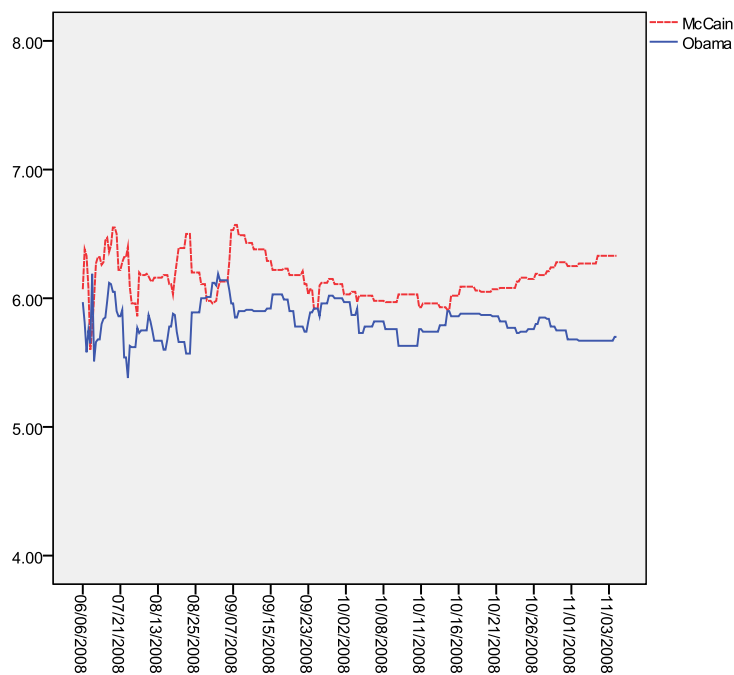


Figure 18. Candidate Trustworthiness

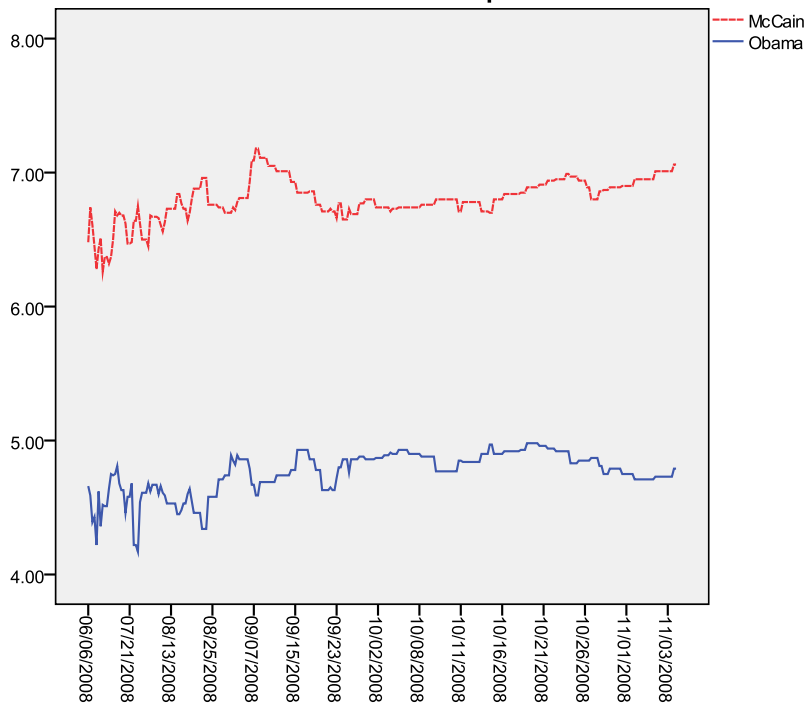


Figure 19. Candidate Experience

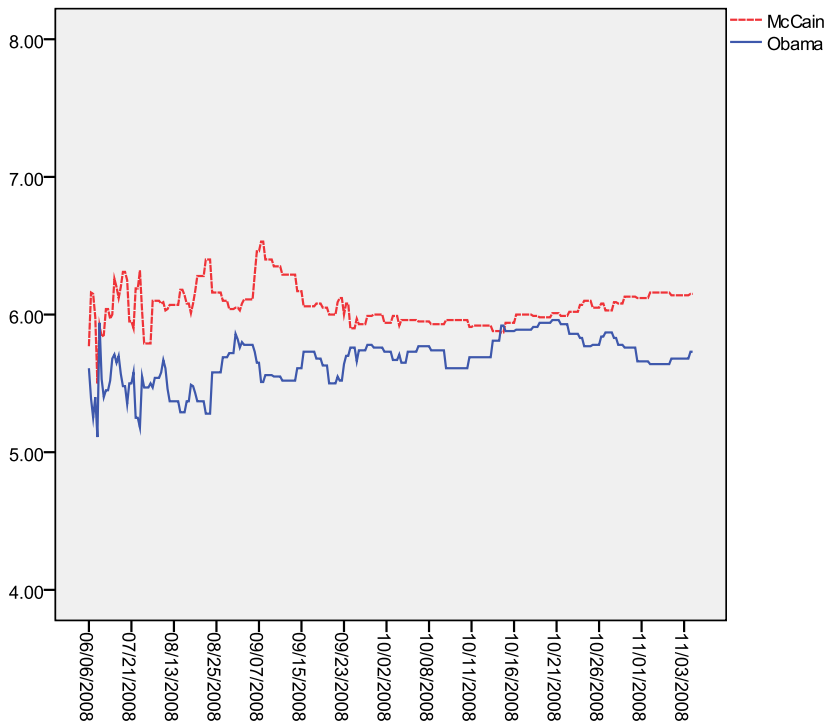


Figure 20. Candidate Judgment

As revealed by the correlation analyses, for McCain, the experience variable seems to be measuring an attribute beyond his favorability. While its relationship with his overall favorability was moderate ( $r = .60$ ), relative to the other measures, it had a weaker association. A visual comparison of the charts in Figures 16 and 19 indeed reveals a slight distinction in the linear properties of McCain's experience measure contrasted with his overall favorability measure. The same distinction can be assigned to the measure of trustworthiness for Obama. Trustworthiness was not as strongly associated with Obama's overall favorability ( $r = .64$ ) as were the other measures which is also borne out by a close inspection of the charts in Figures 16 and 18. Thus, it appears that the available data enable examination of public opinion of each candidate on only a few dimensions rather than five unique ones.

#### Attacking the Opposition Inaccurately

To investigate whether any relationship existed between public opinion of the candidates and the candidates' propensity to make inaccurate claims in their advertising, a look at the timing of the inaccurate ads is in order. Figure 21 illustrates the timing of the release dates of each candidate's attack ads which were deemed to have had at least one inaccurate claim. While the base sizes are limited, the chart reveals that both candidates' inaccuracies were spread across the general campaign with McCain getting an earlier start and Obama having the last inaccurate attack. To make the most of these limited data, attention is focused on the time periods when inaccuracies were most prevalent for each candidate's attack ads.

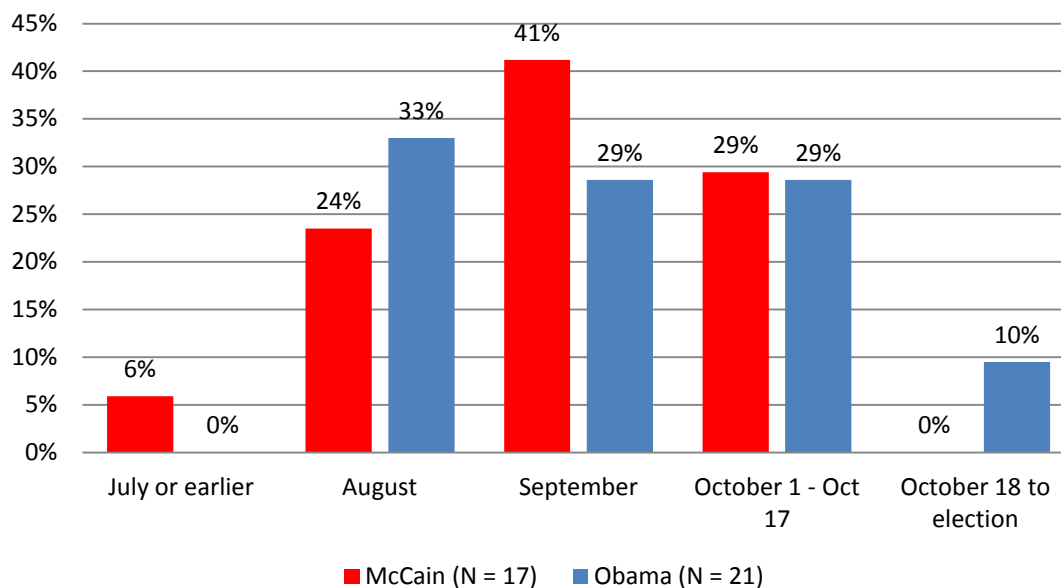


Figure 21. Inaccurate Candidate Attack Ads by Ad Release Date

#### *McCain's Inaccurate Attacks*

Among the 17 attack ads aired by McCain that contained at least one inaccurate claim, the greatest quantity ran in September. While the substantive content of the ads was not quantifiably measured in this study, a qualitative assessment indicates McCain's inaccurate ads in September attacked Obama most consistently on his readiness to lead (see Table 4). Examining McCain's own perceived performance on the measure of leadership, after a post-convention bounce (the Republican National Convention convened September 1 – September 4), his evaluations declined before stabilizing somewhat in October (see Figure 17). While McCain always led Obama on this measure, his attacks on Obama's leadership throughout September (with "Expensive Plans," "Advice," "Chicago Machine," and "Promise") could theoretically be explained by his desire to bolster his own perceived leadership in response to declining evaluations.

With the economy declining throughout the late summer into the fall of 2008, McCain was what Vavreck (2009) referred to as the “insurgent” candidate. McCain had to refocus the campaign away from the economy since he was the incumbent party and thus could be perceived as culpable. As the challenging candidate, Obama needed to run a clarifying campaign focusing more than anything else on the economy. When the U.S. economy went into a freefall throughout September of 2008, it was cited as the most important problem facing Americans by a majority of NAES08 respondents (Kenski et al., 2010). As predicted by Vavreck’s (2009) theory of campaign effects and confirmed by the NAES08 polling, Obama was indeed perceived as the candidate better able to handle the economy (Kenski et al., 2010).<sup>1</sup> Thus, according to the theory of strategic misinformation, under these conditions McCain was more likely to attack on something over which Obama was perceived more favorably. Yet, recognizing that he was at a disadvantage on the economy compared to his opponent and thus could not reasonably attack on this issue, McCain instead attacked Obama on his readiness to lead perhaps in order to stem his own decline on this measure. While H2a predicts a candidate will inaccurately attack an opponent on a dimension on which the opponent is perceived more favorably, in this situation, McCain could not and therefore may have inaccurately attacked on a dimension on which he himself was sliding down in perceived favorability.



Table 4. McCain Attack Ads Containing At Least One Claim Inaccuracy

Release Date	Ad Name	# of Airings	Topic(s)
July 30	Celeb	11,925	Energy, leadership, taxes
August 8	Painful	9,375	Leadership, taxes
August 15	Tax Man	9,097	Economy, leadership, taxes
August 22	Housing Problem	30	Integrity
August 27	Iran/Tiny	10	Experience, foreign affairs
September 1	Expensive Plans	18,906	Budget, deficit, leadership, taxes
September 10	Education	43	Education
September 10	Fact Check	8	Integrity
September 17	Dome	17,467	Economy, taxes
September 20	Advice	21	Economy, integrity, leadership
September 24	Chicago Machine	24	Integrity, leadership
September 29	Promise	79	Defense, leadership
October 3	Tax Cutter	5,319	Energy, integrity, govt spending, taxes
October 6	Dangerous	14,974	Defense, integrity
October 7	Hypo	2	Integrity
October 8	Folks	1	Integrity
October 14	Unethical	13,395	Integrity, taxes

Instead of attacking Obama on the merits of his leadership legitimately, however, each of these ads had at least one inaccurate claim. “Expensive Plans,” for example, was off the mark on its assertion that Obama would raise taxes on working American families. Furthermore, its attacks on years of deficits and unbalanced budgets obscured the fact that McCain’s economic plans would result in the same, if not worse, problems (Kolawole, 2008a). In the ad “Promise,” Obama’s readiness to lead was attacked based upon his alleged lack of support for defense funding for troops. The ad misleadingly invited viewers to believe that Obama opposed funding troops when he instead supported a different bill than did McCain in the support of troop funding (Kolawole, 2008b). It is noteworthy that both of these misleading ads were on issues typically owned (perceptually) by Democrats: raising taxes and less support for defense spending. Where

McCain fumbled, perhaps, was in his misleading attempts to portray Obama within these conventional Democratic frames – frames within which Obama did not fit. Moreover, this finding lends support to the notion that partisanship can be an impediment to informing voters (Alvarez, 1997). Candidate issue stances do not always align with expected ideological positions.

Obama's integrity marked another frequent theme in McCain's inaccurate attack ads that ran in September (see Table 4). From September to mid-October, McCain's own perceived trustworthiness declined (see Figure 18). While McCain had periodically attacked Obama's integrity with inaccurate ad claims in August (with "Housing Problem"), he began an intense assault on his opponent's integrity with ads containing inaccuracies from mid-September to mid-October (with "Fact Check," "Advice," "Chicago Machine," "Tax Cutter," "Dangerous," "Hypo," "Folks," and "Unethical"). After this onslaught, McCain's perceived trustworthiness trended upward while Obama's declined slightly. While McCain consistently led Obama on this measure, his attacks on Obama's integrity from mid-September to mid-October could theoretically be explained by his desire to reaffirm his own trustworthiness (to the degree that trustworthiness is associated with integrity). Limited in his ability to credibly attack on economic issues, the theory of strategic misinformation suggests McCain may have been trying to benefit from another dimension which was owned by Obama: otherness. Scholars have demonstrated that people tend to find it easier to trust people who are like them (McPherson, Smith-Lovin & Cook, 2001). Referred to as homophily, this principle is represented by the metaphor, "birds of a feather flock together." While McCain never explicitly pointed to Obama's physical or cultural differences, these attack ads about Obama's integrity were stitches in a pattern that Kenski and her colleagues (2010) identified as implicitly invoking racial

stereotypes of Obama and linking him to crimes or suspected misconduct. Thus, while this evidence does not directly support H2a as McCain led Obama on the trustworthiness dimension, it does seem noteworthy that McCain had, for a second time, attacked Obama on a dimension on which McCain's own perceptions were declining.

### *Obama's Inaccurate Attacks*

Among the 21 attack ads aired by Obama containing at least one inaccurate claim, the largest quantities ran in August followed closely by September and in the first half of October (see Figure 21). A qualitative assessment indicates most of the inaccurate attack ads in August (such as "Fix the Economy," "Seven," and "Out of Touch") were about the economy juxtaposed with McCain's inability to make appropriate judgments as he was allegedly out of touch. The inaccurate attack ads in October (such as "Tax Healthcare," "Golden Years," "It Gets Worse," and "Looking Out For/Trust") predominantly focused on whether McCain was to be trusted in terms of his healthcare plans (see Table 5).

During August, perceptions of McCain's judgment were on the increase (see Figure 20) while perceptions of Obama's were trending downward up until the Democratic National Convention (August 25 – August 28). According to the theory of strategic misinformation, Obama's attacks on McCain's judgment were designed to blunt his gains. To do so, however, Obama cherry-picked dated quotes from McCain in "Fix the Economy" and took them out of context to make his point (Gore, 2008). The attacks in Obama's "Seven" and "Out of Touch" ads implied McCain's judgment was not sound as demonstrated by his inability to remember how many houses he owned yet claiming the fundamentals of the US economy were strong. These latter two ads, however, do not really support the strategic misinformation theory insofar as Obama's imprecision was actually a conservative accounting of the number of homes McCain

owned. The actual number was eight rather than seven (Garry, 2008). Whether a candidate owns seven houses rather than eight is a material distortion in terms of his ability to make sound judgments and being out-of-touch is unlikely. It should also be noted, however, that “Out of Touch” repeats a claim from “Fix the Economy” that was originally criticized as inaccurate by FactCheck, yet did not draw another criticism from FactCheck when repeated in “Out of Touch.” Thus, to undercut McCain’s gains in perceived judgment, Obama employed misleading tactics to make his attacks.

Table 5. Obama Attack Ads Containing At Least One Claim Inaccuracy

Release Date	Ad Name	# of Airings	Topic(s)
August 13	Embrace	4	Integrity, taxes
August 13	Fix the Economy	791	Economy, judgment
August 13	Fix the Economy Rev	1,969	Economy, judgment
August 14	Punch/Ohio Jobs	311	Integrity, jobs
August 20	Never	4	Integrity
August 22	Seven	4	Economy, judgment
August 25	Out of Touch	10,338	Economy, judgment
September 9	Shaky Economy	1,228	Economy, social security, taxes
September 12	Still	6	Economy, judgment, taxes
September 16	Sold Us Out	10,782	Jobs, taxes
September 16	Social Security/Promise	1,661	Social Security
September 21	Need Education	1,505	Economy, women’s equal pay
September 30	Risk	2,280	Judgment, social security
October 1	Tax Healthcare/R <sub>x</sub>	21,834	Healthcare, taxes
October 7	Floridians Hurting	2185	Economy, judgment
October 8	Unravel	23,930	Healthcare, taxes
October 16	Golden Years	1,518	Healthcare
October 16	Medicare/It Gets Worse	16,096	Healthcare
October 17	Looking Out For/Trust	2,084	Abortion, healthcare, women’s equal pay
October 20	Erratic	3	Economy, leadership
November 2	Rearview Mirror	11,639	Economy, taxes

A qualitative assessment of Obama's inaccurate attack ads which ran during the first half of October indicates the majority addressed healthcare issues. According to the Pew Research Center (2008), healthcare was the third most important national issue in January 2008, concerning 10% of the public. Healthcare, however, trailed significantly behind the public's top two national concerns which were the economy (34%) and terrorism (27%). Nonetheless, many of Obama's ads implied that McCain was not being forthright about his healthcare plans. For example, in "Medicare/It Gets Worse," the ad implied that the public was not getting the whole story from McCain about his plans for Medicare. The ad "Golden Years" suggested that McCain would turn Medicare into a "gamble" rather than something seniors can count on. Some ads were quite explicit about McCain's trustworthiness as in "Tax Healthcare" which stated, "...but here's what he's not telling you..." referring to McCain's healthcare plans. Most explicit of all was the ad "Looking Out For/Trust" in which voter Joanna Hajdics stated, "I used to trust John McCain, but not anymore." Each of these ads either made false claims about McCain cutting healthcare benefits (Jackson, 2008b), offered misleading statements about his healthcare tax credit (Holan, 2008b; Robertson, 2008), or contained misleading statements about McCain's support for women regarding equal pay (Farley, 2008).

Applying the theory of strategic misinformation, Obama's implied and direct attacks on McCain's trustworthiness were tactical. After peaking the first week in September, perceptions of McCain's trustworthiness were steadily declining throughout the rest of the month (see Figure 18) whereas Obama's perceptions on trustworthiness were more up and down. As Vavreck (2009) has suggested, successful candidates take advantage of national conditions as well as characteristics of their opponents. With McCain's perceived trustworthiness still higher than Obama's but on the decline, the theory of strategic misinformation suggests it was advantageous

for Obama to pile on in attempting to further reduce the perceived trustworthiness of McCain. While it is still not clear why candidates must rely on inaccurate claims to do so, this seems to be a recurring pattern. The inaccuracies in attack ads seem to follow a loss of favorability or momentum.

### Advocating One's Candidacy Inaccurately

The corresponding corollary to the theory of strategic misinformation is with respect to advocacy ads. The hypothesis is that candidates are more likely to use inaccurate claims in their advocacy ads for dimensions on which they are perceived less favorably than their opponent. Only five inaccurate advocacy ads were found among the 2008 presidential ads: two from McCain and three from Obama. Once again, the extremely limited quantity of cases requires results to be considered exploratory.

As shown in Figure 22, one of McCain's two advocacy ads containing at least one inaccuracy was released near the beginning of the general election, and the other was in September. For Obama, all of his inaccurate advocacy ads were released early in the campaign.

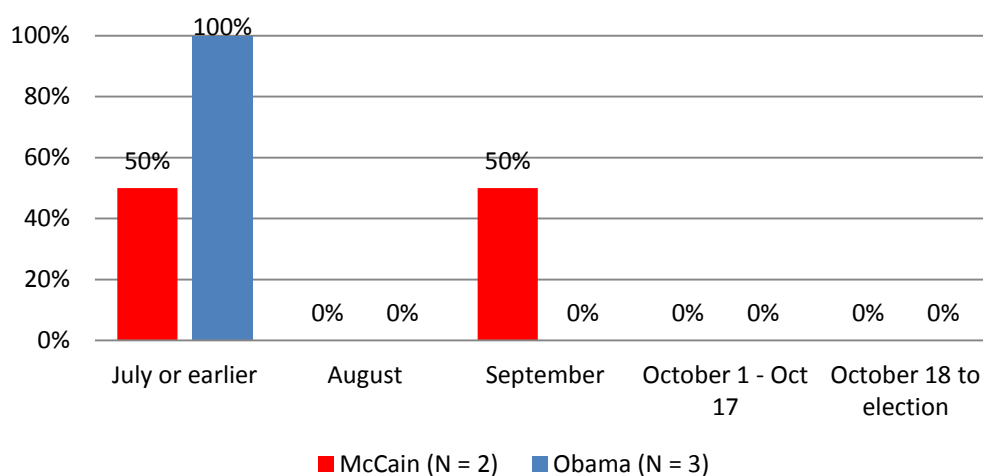


Figure 22. Inaccurate Candidate Advocacy Ads by Ad Release Date

Given that there were only two inaccurate advocacy ads from McCain, drawing conclusions based upon patterns is impossible. As shown in Table 6, the ad “Global” was about McCain’s plans to grow the economy in part based upon an environmentally-friendly energy plan. Rather than inaccurate statements, the ad was found to be misleading for its imagery of windmills and solar technology. “McCain has been less than enthusiastic about the development of wind and solar energy,” noted FactCheck, preferring instead nuclear power. Yet there were no images of nuclear power plants in the ad (Bank & Novak, 2008). The other advocacy ad found to be misleading was “Original Mavericks.” Both fact-checkers found the claim that Governor Palin stopped the Bridge to Nowhere to be inaccurate (Adair & Farley, 2008; Novak, 2008d). FactCheck also quibbled with McCain’s claims about having battled Republicans and reformed Washington as there was evidence of him not doing those things as well (Novak, 2008d). Furthermore, PolitiFact found his claim to fight pork barrel spending less than completely accurate (Bettelheim, 2008). Thus, in his advocacy ads, McCain was found to be imprecise in representing his economic plans and his and his running mate’s records on reform.

Table 6. McCain Advocacy Ads Containing At Least One Claim Inaccuracy

Release Date	Ad Name	# of Airings	Topic(s)
June 17	Global	9,541	Economy, energy/environment
September 8	Original Mavericks	16,084	Government reform

All of the Obama advocacy ads found to contain an inaccurate statement had run in July or earlier. The first two ads (see Table 7), “Country I Love” and “Dignity,” were biographical in nature and were both found to exaggerate his legislative accomplishments by taking too much

credit for passing legislation single-handedly (Henig, 2008; Holan, 2008). FactCheck also found Obama’s claim to have worked his way through school in the “Dignity” ad to be a stretch (Henig, 2008). In “Changing World,” Obama claimed he would “fast-track alternatives” to imported oil. This was found to be misleading because his plans were only a proposal and would be implemented in the form of research across 10 years (Jackson, 2008). Thus, across the three ads, Obama’s inaccuracies appear to be exaggerations of his accomplishments and the plausibility of his energy plan.

Table 7. Obama Advocacy Ads Containing At Least One Claim Inaccuracy

Release Date	Ad Name	# of Airings	Topic(s)
June 20	Country I Love	15,759	Biography
June 30	Dignity	22,091	Biography, jobs, taxes
July 17	Changing World	21	Energy, foreign affairs

According to the theory of strategic misinformation, a candidate is more likely to be inaccurate in advocacy ads for dimensions on which their opponent is perceived more favorably. These limited data offer mixed results. In the case of McCain, one ad misrepresented his economic plans based on his planned energy initiatives. H2b is supported in this example as Obama was perceived as better able to handle the economy than McCain (Kenski et al., 2010). In his other ad, however, McCain was inaccurate in how he represented his and his running mate’s reform efforts – their experience in other words. Throughout the campaign, Obama was perceived as significantly less experienced than McCain, so this example does not lend support to H2b. On the subject of all the Obama ads, however, an argument can be made that Obama



was perceived less favorably than his opponent. Since the first two ads exaggerated his legislative accomplishments, they were, perhaps accommodating for Obama's lack of experience relative to McCain. Furthermore, energy, particularly in the context of foreign affairs, was again an attribute where McCain was perceived more favorably in public opinion (Kenski et al., 2010). Thus, more often than not, these data appear to lend qualitative support to H2b.

### Relating Inaccuracies to Candidate Evaluations Statistically

#### *Bivariate Correlations*

To statistically measure a relationship between an interval-level variable and a dichotomous variable, a point-biserial correlation can be calculated (Field, 2009). In this situation, the public perceptions of the candidates are the interval-level variables and the dichotomous variable is whether the ad was not evaluated or not accurate. None of the point-biserial correlation coefficients reached levels of statistical significance when considering separate measures of either McCain's or Obama's attack ads with the public perceptions of candidates across the campaign as a whole. However, when the data were grouped by ad release date, significant relationships did emerge for the Obama attack ads in two of the date quintiles. While none of the point-biserial correlations for McCain's attack ads by release date reached levels of statistical significance, part of this was due to the small base sizes. In early October, for example, five McCain attack ads were released and all five contained inaccuracies. SPSS was unable to calculate the correlation coefficient because one of the variables was constant – always inaccurate. A similar issue arose in late October. Three McCain attack ads were released, but none were evaluated. Thus, again, there was no relationship between the two variables because one always had the same value. However, even in the month of September when McCain released 12 attack ads, the associations that did exist between each measure of public perception

and whether an ad was inaccurate was not evaluated as statistically significant. The data from the McCain campaign, therefore, is not particularly useful in the forthcoming analyses.

During the month of August, a statistically significant relationship was revealed between Obama's ads being evaluated as inaccurate and perceptions of his experience ( $r_{pb} = .56, p < .05$ , one-tailed), his judgment ( $r_{pb} = .67, p < .05$ , one-tailed), his leadership ( $r_{pb} = .67, p < .05$ , one-tailed), and his trustworthiness ( $r_{pb} = .65, p < .05$ , one-tailed). Put another way, nearly one-third (31%) to almost half (45%) of the variance in whether his attack ads were categorized as inaccurate can be accounted for by public perceptions of Obama's experience, judgment, leadership and trustworthiness (as interpreted by squaring the point-biserial correlation coefficients). There was a weaker association between Obama's overall favorability ratings and whether his attack ads were deemed inaccurate, although this coefficient did not reach standard levels of statistical significance ( $r_{pb} = .47, p < .10$ , one-tailed). It should be noted that these assessments are based upon a small number of ads ( $N = 11$ ). It is also noteworthy that no associations were found with public perceptions of McCain during August among the seven attack ads he released.

During the first half of October, public perceptions of Obama's favorability overall was significantly associated with whether his attack ads were rated inaccurate ( $r_{pb} = .55, p < .05$ , one-tailed). Public perceptions of his experience ( $r_{pb} = .54, p < .05$ , one-tailed) as well as his judgment ( $r_{pb} = .58, p < .05$ , one-tailed) also were related to whether his ads were not evaluated or inaccurate. In other words, roughly one-third of the variance in the evaluations of his attack ads was accounted for by these three public perception measures. Again, these assessments are based upon only 14 ads. Nevertheless, these analyses did reach levels of statistical significance.

Thus far, a qualitative assessment of the candidate attack ads has offered directional support in favor of H2a. First, when McCain's leadership declined through September, he attacked Obama's leadership on issues traditionally owned by Democrats to bolster his own evaluations on leadership. At the same time, McCain's trustworthiness declined, and he attacked Obama's integrity by implicitly addressing Obama's otherness. Evidence supporting H2a is available from Obama as well. In August, Obama's evaluations on judgment declined while McCain's were increasing. Though his inaccurate attacks on the economy do not support H2a as this was a dimension owned by Obama, his related attacks on McCain's judgment do support H2a as McCain had the upper hand on this dimension. Finally, as Obama's trustworthiness bounced up and down in early October, McCain's was on the decline though still more favorable than Obama's. By tying McCain's trustworthiness, a dimension still more favorable for McCain, to healthcare – an issue traditionally owned by Democrats – Obama piled on to try and accelerate McCain's declines on trustworthiness.

Likewise, despite only a handful of inaccurate advocacy ads, a case can be made for directional support of H2b. McCain was inaccurate in ads promoting his economic plans – a dimension on which Obama was perceived more favorably. Obama was inaccurate on his legislative accomplishments as well as on energy in the context of foreign affairs – both dimensions on which McCain was perceived more favorably. While McCain was inaccurate about his and his running mate's reform records, these infractions do not support H2b as McCain owned the experience dimension.

The quantitative data revealed by examining statistical relationships between the variables offer mixed results. No statistical relationships were found between McCain attack ads categorized as inaccurate and public perceptions of the candidates. There were, however,

statistical relationships between Obama's attack ads and the candidate measures. Consistent with the qualitative assessments, there was a relationship during the month of August between the accuracy of Obama's evaluated attack ads and perceptions of his judgment. During the first half of October, the qualitative analysis pointed toward the issue of trustworthiness, yet this measure was not found to be significantly associated with the accuracy of Obama's attack ads. Accordingly, in considering support for the theory of strategic misinformation, the quantitative analysis of data must temper the more optimistic support for H2a offered by the qualitative assessment.

### *Logistic Modeling*

To this point, it has been positioned that the candidate ads have been responding to public opinion. In other words, as perceptions of a candidate change, so too does the likelihood that an attack ad will be evaluated as inaccurate. It could, however, be that the direction of causality is reversed. In other words, instead of candidates creating ads in response to public perceptions, perhaps candidates are shaping public opinion with their ads. As a means to rule out this possibility, another regression model is employed. By holding all predictive variables constant except one, the direction of causality can be established.

In attempting to create a regression model, the challenge of high correlation between variables once again became an issue. For instance, evaluations of Obama's judgment and his leadership had a correlation of .87 ( $p < .001$ , two-tailed). Since perceptions of his judgment had statistically significant associations with whether his ads were inaccurate during multiple date quintiles and leadership did not, only the measure of judgment was retained for the initial regression model.

As in the previous chapter, a binomial regression model was utilized again employing a stepwise method with backward entry. Despite the significant bivariate associations previously noted, simply adding the measure of public perceptions of Obama's judgment to the model shown in Table 3 did not yield any improvement in predicting inaccurate evaluations. Accordingly, a new model had to be constructed. As before, the dependent variable was dichotomous with either the ad not evaluated or the ad not accurate (reference category). Other variables loaded into the model were ad sponsor (with interest groups as the reference category), ad tone (with advocacy ads as the reference category), ad release date quintiles (with July or earlier as the reference category), whether the number of ad airings was above or below the median, and public opinion of Obama's judgment. Since the previously noted associations with Obama's judgment were within particular subgroups of ads (specifically Obama's attack ads), interaction effects were specified for Obama's judgment by ad sponsor by ad tone by date quintile.

The resulting model is quite complex, mostly due to the 1 x 4 x 3 x 5 interaction terms. The four-step model accounted for a significant amount of variability,  $X^2(9) = 112.82, p < .001$ . The accounted variance ranged from an  $R^2$  of .33 (Cox & Snell) to .47 (Nagelkerke). With over two dozen variables in the equation (as a result of all the interactions), the model depicted in Table 8 only lists variables making a statistically significant contribution in accounting for variance in the dependent variable.

As revealed in Table 8, attack ads offered the greatest contribution in accounting for variance in whether an ad was deemed inaccurate. Compared to advocacy ads (the reference group), attack ads had a 6.60 greater chance of being inaccurate. The variable with the next greatest odds of being rated inaccurate was the interactive term between Obama's perceived

judgment and Obama's contrast ads which were released in the month of August. The odds ratio of 3.37 for this interactive term is relative to the reference category of interest group advocacy ads released during the month of July or earlier. In other words, the odds of an Obama contrast ad from August (in interaction with Obama's judgment ratings) being deemed inaccurate were 3.37 times higher than an interest group advocacy ad from July.

Table 8. Logistic Regression Predicting Ad Evaluation (including perceptions of Obama's judgment)

	<i>B</i>		(SE)	95% CI for Odds Ratio		
				Lower	Odds Ratio	Upper
Constant	-0.96		(.56)			
Attack Ads	1.89	***	(.63)	1.93	6.60	22.51
<u>August</u>						
Ojudge x Ocontrast	1.22	+	(.65)	.95	3.37	11.92
<u>Early October</u>						
Ojudge x Mcontrast	.48	+	(.26)	.98	1.62	2.68
Ojudge x Oattack	.21	+	(.13)	.96	1.24	1.59
<u>Late October</u>						
Ojudge x Ocontrast	.55	+	(.29)	.98	1.74	3.07
Ojudge x Oattack	.44	*	(.20)	1.05	1.56	2.31
Ojudge x PartyAttack	.33	+	(.00)	.97	1.39	1.99
Late October	-3.50	***	(.78)	.01	.03	.14
Early October	-2.43	***	(.68)	.02	.09	.33
September	-1.60	*	(.68)	.05	.20	.76

Note:  $R^2 = .33$  (Cox & Snell),  $.47$  (Nagelkerke). Model  $\chi^2(9) = 112.82$ ,  $p < .001$ . (N = 283)  
<sup>+</sup> $p \leq .10$ . \* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

There is a problem with this interactive term, however, which indicates a weakness in this particular model. The confidence interval for this interactive term ranges from a low of .95 to a high of 11.92. In this example, one can be confident that 95 times out of 100, the odds ratio will fall between .95 and 11.92. The problem is that the confidence interval crosses the value of 1. The lower end of the interval is .95. Values greater than 1 indicate that as the predictor variable increases (changing from one category to another), the odds of an ad being inaccurate increase. The opposite is true in values less than 1 (Field, 2009). Thus, according to this model, there is a chance that in the greater population (of all election ads) the direction of the relationship is opposite of what has been observed here. Accordingly, this calls into question the usefulness of incorporating public perceptions of Obama's judgment to predict which ads are more likely to be evaluated as inaccurate.

This same confidence interval problem occurs with other variables interacting with public perceptions of Obama's judgment. These include McCain's contrast ads released in early October, Obama's attack ads from early October, Obama's contrast ads from late October, and political party attack ads from late October. Each of these terms, with marginal statistical significance, had confidence intervals the lower bounds of which crossed the value of 1. Once again, the direction of the relationships of these variables may be the opposite of what is indicated in the model. While the magnitude of the discrepancy from the value of 1 is small, ranging from .96 to .98, it nonetheless weakens the reliability of this model and is perhaps indicative of why the statistical significance of these terms is marginal (at the  $p \leq .10$  level).

To determine whether the predictive value of the public perceptions of Obama variable could be maintained in projecting relationships in a consistent direction, the same model parameters were calculated but with a less stringent confidence interval of 90%. As shown in

Table 9, by loosening the confidence interval to 90%, the range of odds ratios that would be found in the general population does maintain a consistent direction for each listed variable or interaction term. All range of odds ratios are either above or below the value of 1, but do not cross it.

Table 9. Logistic Regression Predicting Ad Evaluation at 90% CI (including perceptions of Obama's judgment)

	<i>B</i>		(SE)	90% CI for Odds Ratio		
				Lower	Odds Ratio	Upper
Constant	-0.96		(.56)			
Attack Ads	1.89	***	(.63)	2.35	6.60	18.48
<u>August</u>						
Ojudge x Ocontrast	1.22	+	(.65)	1.17	3.37	9.73
<u>Early October</u>						
Ojudge x Mcontrast	.48	+	(.26)	1.06	1.62	2.47
Ojudge x Oattack	.21	+	(.13)	1.00	1.24	1.53
<u>Late October</u>						
Ojudge x Ocontrast	.55	+	(.29)	1.07	1.74	2.80
Ojudge x Oattack	.44	*	(.20)	1.12	1.56	2.17
Ojudge x PartyAttack	.33	+	(.00)	1.03	1.39	1.88
Late October	-3.50	***	(.78)	.01	.03	.11
Early October	-2.43	***	(.68)	.03	.09	.27
September	-1.60	*	(.68)	.07	.20	.62

Note:  $R^2 = .33$  (Cox & Snell), .47 (Nagelkerke). Model  $\chi^2(9) = 112.82$ ,  $p < .001$ . (N = 283)  
<sup>+</sup> $p \leq .10$ . \* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

It cannot be said with complete confidence that knowing public perceptions of Obama's judgment will result in the ability to better predict whether an ad will be categorized as



inaccurate. As with all statistical projections, however, a range of confidence can be offered. In this model, it can be said with 90% confidence that knowing public perceptions of Obama's judgment can increase the odds of predicting an inaccurate ad evaluation in certain circumstances. Most notably for this study, when combined with public perceptions of Obama's judgment, Obama *attack* ads from August did *not* have greater odds of being categorized as inaccurate as suggested by the qualitative and correlation analyses reported earlier in this chapter and as predicted by H2a. This model instead found Obama's *contrast* ads during August as accounting for inaccurate evaluations when combined with perceptions of his judgment. No hypotheses were offered for contrast ads as it was theoretically unclear which part of the ad might be more likely to prompt inaccuracy – the positive message or the negative message. Thus, this revelation does nothing to promote H2a.

The model presented in Table 9 does, however, offer some support for H2a. Obama's attack ads in early October interacted with perceptions of his judgment in accounting for variance in ad evaluations. A one unit change in Obama's judgment along with an ad being of the attack rather than advocacy variety resulted in 1.24 greater odds of an inaccurate ad rating as opposed to no evaluation. This is consistent with the findings offered by the correlation analysis but not the qualitative analysis. The qualitative analysis of the ad content from early October instead suggested the focus of these attacks was primarily on McCain's trustworthiness related to healthcare. But trustworthiness was not correlated to inaccurate evaluations for either Obama or McCain. Since perceptions of Obama's trustworthiness were not as highly correlated with perceptions of Obama's judgment ( $r = .43, p \leq .001$ ) relative to the other candidate evaluation variables, this variable was added to the model to see if it offers any contribution in accounting for the variance in predicting ad inaccuracy ratings (see Table 10).

Table 10. Logistic Regression Predicting Ad Evaluation (including perceptions of Obama's judgment and trustworthiness)

	<i>B</i>		(SE)	90% CI for Odds Ratio		
				Lower	Odds Ratio	Upper
Constant	-0.96		(.56)			
Attack Ads	1.90	**	(.63)	2.39	6.67	18.66
<u>August</u>						
Ojudge x Otrust x Oattack	.12	+	(.07)	1.01	1.13	1.26
Ojudge x Otrust x Ocontrast	.18	*	(.08)	1.06	1.20	1.36
<u>Early October</u>						
Ojudge x Otrust x Mcontrast	.08	+	(.04)	1.01	1.09	1.17
Ojudge x Otrust x Oattack	.04	+	(.02)	1.00	1.04	1.08
<u>Late October</u>						
Ojudge x Otrust x Ocontrast	.10	+	(.05)	1.01	1.10	1.20
Ojudge x Otrust x Oattack	.08	*	(.04)	1.02	1.08	1.14
Ojudge x Otrust x PartyAttack	.06	+	(.03)	1.01	1.06	1.12
Late October	-3.51	***	(.78)	.01	.03	.11
Early October	-2.45	***	(.68)	.03	.09	.27
September	-1.61	*	(.68)	.07	.20	.61
August	-4.23	*	(2.10)	.00	.02	.46

Note:  $R^2 = .33$  (Cox & Snell),  $.47$  (Nagelkerke). Model  $\chi^2(9) = 112.12$ ,  $p < .001$ . (N = 283)  
<sup>+</sup> $p \leq .10$ . \* $p \leq .05$ . \*\* $p < .01$ . \*\*\* $p < .001$ .

The binomial logistic regression model depicted in Table 10 lists the statistically significant predictors contributing to the variance in whether an ad was inaccurate versus not evaluated. In addition to all the variables included previously, the resulting five-step model incorporates a variable for the public perceptions of Obama's trustworthiness as well as Obama's trustworthiness in interaction with his perceived judgment, ad sponsor, ad tone and date quintile.

Adding the new variable does not really change the amount of variance accounted for by the model ( $X^2(9) = 112.12, p < .001$ ). The new model does, however, lend additional support to H2a. Obama's attack ads released in August have now risen to the level of marginal significance ( $p \leq .10$ ) when interacting with perceptions of both Obama's judgment as well as his trustworthiness. Behind the use of attack ads in general and the use of Obama's contrast ads released in August interacting with his perceptions on judgment and trustworthiness, Obama's attack ads released in August interacting with his perceived judgment and trustworthiness had the third highest odds of accounting for inaccurate ad ratings. A one unit change in Obama's perceived judgment (which was generally trending downward in August) in combination with a one unit change in his trustworthiness (which was bouncing up and down in August) increased the odds of Obama's attack ads released during August being evaluated as inaccurate. While it is not clear which direction in change for the trustworthiness measure accounted for the variance (since the measure went both up and down), it would seem logical that it was the decreases in Obama's trustworthiness which accounted for the inaccurate ratings.

Also supporting H2a is the early October interaction between Obama's attack ads and perceptions of both his judgment as well as his trustworthiness. The general decline in Obama's perceived trustworthiness in early October interacted with his perceived judgment (roughly steady the first week and somewhat declining the second week) in increasing the odds of Obama's attack ads being evaluated as inaccurate when released during this time period. While the magnitude of the effect size as indicated in the odds ratio of 1.04 is minimal, it does reach the level of marginal significance ( $p \leq .10$ ) and thus lends further support to the hypothesis that public perceptions of candidates can account for whether a candidate uses inaccuracies in his or her political attack ads.

Other models not reported here did indicate other circumstances under which public perceptions of candidates accounted for variance in whether an ad was inaccurate or not evaluated. However these conditions involved contrast ads (for which no hypotheses were offered) or time periods during which less than a handful of inaccurate ads were released making it difficult to discern patterns. While all of the reported models revealed effects generally involving Obama ads, Table 10 does reveal one circumstance when McCain's ads were affected by public perceptions of his opponent. During early October, McCain's contrast ads interacted with perceptions of Obama's judgment and trustworthiness to increase the odds of the ads being evaluated as inaccurate. Moreover, an unreported model also produced an effect for McCain's contrast ads during the early October time period in interaction with public perceptions of McCain's own trustworthiness (which was trending downward). These conditions increased the odds of an ad being evaluated as inaccurate. However, to remain on more solid ground, the focus of these analyses has remained on attack ads released during the months of August and early October as these were the time periods identified in the qualitative and bivariate correlations as offering the most promise.

### Conclusion

The findings in this chapter suggest that a theory of strategic misinformation is promising and warrants further development. While unequivocal, direct support for neither H2a nor H2b can be sustained based upon these results, there are reasons to be optimistic. First, not enough data were available to quantitatively test H2b regarding advocacy ads. An inability to test something, however, does not mean an effect is not present. This hypothesis can be revisited once additional data become available. Moreover, effects were revealed with respect to knowing public perceptions on two of Obama's characteristics and predicting an ad's odds of drawing an

inaccurate rating. Declines in perceptions of Obama's judgment and likely declines in perceptions of Obama's trustworthiness increased the odds that Obama's attack ads would be evaluated as inaccurate during August and early October. While H2a specified that the inaccurate attacks would be driven by an opponent's perceived favorability, the data reveal that it was the candidate's own favorability (or lack thereof) on these dimensions that drove up the odds of inaccurate ratings. Thus, while the specific effects of the proffered hypotheses were not supported, data offering direction for further development of this theory has been produced.

The findings suggest the theory of strategic misinformation should be modified to apply to instances not only when an opponent is perceived more favorably, but also when a candidate's own perceptions by the public are declining or in jeopardy even if they are still ahead. For Obama, his opponent was consistently perceived more favorably on all measures except overall favorability. Yet, the data reveal specific situations under which Obama's attack ads had a greater likelihood of being rated inaccurate – when perceptions of his judgment and trustworthiness were declining. McCain was consistently ahead of Obama except on the measure of overall favorability. Nevertheless, when McCain's perceived trustworthiness declined in early October was when the odds increased for his contrast ads being rated inaccurate.

While a candidate could just as easily accurately attack his or her opponent, the loss of favorability or momentum repeatedly identified in this study is perhaps what makes the situation dire and results in the candidate resorting to inaccuracies in their attack claims. Momentum, or what George H. W. Bush referred to as "Big Mo" after his 1980 primary campaign upset victory in the Iowa caucuses, is something that all candidates desire (Bartels, 1988). Highlighting its

significance is this exchange between CBS anchor Bob Schieffer and Bush as he looked ahead to New Hampshire:

“What we’ll have, you see, is momentum. We will have forward ‘Big Mo’ on our side, as they say in athletics.”

“‘Big Mo’?” Schieffer asked.

“Yeah,” Bush replied, “‘Mo,’ momentum.” (originally relayed by Greenfield (1982) as cited by Bartels, 1988, p. 27)

Perhaps even more critical to the study of political ad inaccuracies is the concept of backward “Big Mo” - something Bush discovered a few weeks later in the 1980 New Hampshire primary (Bartels, 1988). While much scholarship has addressed the ability of political scientists to accurately predict the outcome of an election based simply on a handful of measures including economic factors, incumbency and party identification (Erikson, 1989; Rosenstone, 1983; Wlezien & Erikson, 1996), others argue that the dynamics of campaigns can play a crucial role (Bartels, 1988; Johnston et al., 2004; Kenski et al., 2010; Vavreck, 2009). To the degree that campaigns “enlighten” voters about candidates’ platforms, positions and personalities through the news media (Gelman & King, 1993), it is crucial for candidates to be able to accurately convey their campaign messages. However, Vavreck (2009) found little fidelity between candidate campaign messages and their coverage in the news media (also see Patterson, 1994). Thus, she concluded, candidates increasingly rely on paid advertising to convey the messages they want to the American public. Moreover, candidates with momentum generally receive more media coverage than candidates who have fallen behind (Patterson, 1980). Thus, the stakes are particularly high in maintaining momentum. Accordingly, the results suggested here indicate the public should be particularly circumspect about the messages they receive from paid political

attack ads particularly when a candidate is losing momentum and perhaps becoming increasingly desperate.

For fact-checkers, these findings signal where they should be allocating their scarce resources. Changes in candidate favorability – declines or loss of momentum – increase the odds of inaccurate ratings in attack ads. Thus, the greater the volatility in public perceptions of candidates during campaigns, the greater the likelihood of inaccuracies...and the more work there will be for fact-checkers. Just as the old maxim suggests, stability breeds complacency. As reported earlier, candidates do make provocative statements in their ads in order to gain media attention (Ridout & Smith, 2008). Moreover, the findings presented here suggest it is also in the candidates' interest to make provocative statements in their ads in order to shake things up and fend off losses in momentum. It is at these points when fact-checkers must be most wary. And as revealed in the previous chapter, FactCheck and PolitiFact do seem attuned to this phenomenon as the ads they checked in 2008 were the ones receiving more airtime.

Of course, the findings presented in this chapter should only be considered a first step in exploring the connection between public perceptions of candidates and when candidates distort their political ads. Further study should attempt to offer a more nuanced view of which segments of the public might play more of a role in affecting candidate behavior. For example, party identification has long been known to play a key role in predicting election outcomes (Bartels, 2000; Campbell et al., 1964; Rosenstone & Hansen, 2003). As such, attempts could be made to incorporate political identification measures of the public. Knowing the political leanings of the public could allow for greater discernment in interpreting when candidates might be more inaccurate. Some candidates may be more concerned with perceptions of swing voters while

others have more concern with their party base. The data in this study do not enable making these distinctions.

Finally, these data also suggest that the losing candidate has a greater likelihood of inaccurate ratings of their ads while the frontrunner has a lesser likelihood. Indeed, Obama generally led in the public opinion polls on vote preference and, as revealed in Chapter 3, he had fewer inaccurate ratings as a proportion of his campaign ads. However, this study only considered public opinion. The amount of favorable media coverage can be another consideration. According to a report by The Center for Media and Public Affairs at George Mason University, Obama's coverage by television news media during the 2008 election was twice as favorable as was the coverage of McCain. It is plausible that the media coverage afforded to candidates could also have an influence on the type of information candidates use in their paid political ads. Including an index of media favorability in future research would offer the opportunity to explore the contributions of media coverage in accounting for advertising inaccuracies.

The type of news coverage provided to candidates during the 2008 election is the focus of chapter 5. Specifically, consideration will be given to how news organizations covered political advertising.



### Endnote

<sup>1</sup>The measure of how well each candidate was perceived as being able to handle the economy was not used in this study as it was not added to the NAES08 until August 27, 2008. For the purposes of this study, this late addition to the survey questions does not offer enough data.

## CHAPTER 5

## THE MEDIA DISCONNECT REVISITED:

## NEWS COVERAGE OF POLITICAL ADVERTISING

“I’m looking for reader input on whether and when *New York Times* news reporters should challenge ‘facts’ that are asserted by newsmakers they write about.”

-Arthur S. Brisbane (2012), Public Editor,  
*The New York Times*

There has been a general consensus among scholars that campaign news coverage has changed dramatically since the advent of the television presidency beginning in the early 1950s. It was President Kennedy, of course, who presumably put television journalism on par with the established print media (Zelizer, 1992). However, where the press once relied upon politicians’ own words to drive news reporting, this descriptive journalism has given way to the rise of interpretive journalism, what Patterson (1994) has even referred to as synthetic journalism. The press has been increasingly focusing on campaign strategy and horserace coverage over policy-related substance (Iyengar et al., 2004; Patterson, 1994; Vavreck, 2009; West, 2010). Moreover, coverage has grown increasingly more negative in tone (Geer, 2006; Patterson, 1994). Most recently, Vavreck (2009) found the proportion of candidate-driven news coverage (what candidates did or said on the campaign trail) to be on the decline since 1952. Her findings echo earlier reports of a shift in *The New York Times*’ front page coverage away from policy issues and toward campaign strategy or “game schema” coverage (Patterson, 1994).

According to Vavreck (2009), there was little fidelity between news stories and what candidates were saying in their speeches and ads. Nor did she find news coverage to be associated with public opinion measures. Instead what she found was a systematic over-reporting on foreign policy and candidate traits and an underreporting on issues often of importance to candidates or the public. Thus, she concluded, the news media may be more

influenced by profit-motivated controversy and sensationalism rather than accurate representations of candidate campaign messages and behavior - a conclusion which resonates with those of others (Bennett, 2006; Iyengar et al., 2004; Patterson, 1994). “Perhaps,” wrote Vavreck (p. 65), “one of the reasons candidates strive to get free media time for their advertisements is so they can actually frame the news story about their own campaign.” This notion was exemplified in chapter 1 by the commiserations of campaign advisors Dunn and Wallace in their attempts to influence news coverage by way of political advertising.

While Vavreck (2009) found a disconnect between news coverage and candidate-driven messages, the news reporting she measured was narrowly defined as candidate-driven campaign stories (as opposed to issue analysis pieces, editorials, or ad fact-checking stories) in the front section of *The New York Times* between 1952 and 2000. She focused on the types of stories delineating the previous day’s campaign events. So, for instance, between 1988 and 2000, while press coverage focused primarily on candidate traits, only one of the eight candidates who ran during that time period talked about traits in their speeches and/or ads. The other seven candidates’ discourse was focused on other issues not reflected in press reports. Other scholars, however, have found an increasing amount of news coverage devoted to candidate-driven messages as presented by their ad campaigns (Iyengar, 2008; Jamieson, 2009; Ridout & Smith, 2008; West, 2010). Thus, Vavreck’s “media disconnect” appears to have been due in part to her objects of inquiry. Or was it? This chapter attempts to clarify and extend what is understood about how the news media cover candidate campaigns specifically when political advertising is referenced.

Accordingly, to the degree that the news media do, indeed, set the agenda for what the public thinks about as well as set the standards by which candidates are judged, an understanding

of how the mainstream press covers political campaign ads is useful. As revealed in chapter 3, it is the provocative ads designed to attract media attention which tend to both have inaccuracies and be supported with media buys to air on television more frequently. In keeping with the notion of accountability journalism, then, it is the press corps which is the bulwark against corruption and should therefore hold politicians accountable for their claims. Thus, this chapter addresses the following research questions:

RQ5: How is the press covering political ads - are they just repeating the message of the ads, or are they investigating the veracity of the political claims?

RQ6: How does coverage of the political ad campaigns differ between the mainstream print press, broadcast and cable news organizations and the coverage offered by the two Web-based organizations, PolitiFact.com and FactCheck.org?

#### The Print Press

To determine which print news organizations exhibited similarities in how they reported on political advertising, a cluster analysis was conducted using Crawdad software. The centrality score of each set of articles from news organizations was computed allowing comparison of shared word resonance which is indicative of texts having similar semantic patterns in their reporting. Newspaper articles exhibiting resonance with one another suggest similarities in covering concepts associated with political advertising. Consistent with the political science literature, horse race/campaign strategy reporting predominated in this sample. But as will be demonstrated by the four clusters which emerged (see Table 11), there were differences in how the print news organizations approached coverage of the political ads.

Table 11. Print Press Semantic Network Cluster Analysis Results

Cluster	Cluster Resonance	News Organization	Nodes	Density	Focus
Game Schema	.139	<i>Chicago Tribune</i> <i>Los Angeles Times</i> <i>New York Post</i> <i>The New York Times</i> <i>USA Today</i> <i>The Washington Post</i> <i>The Washington Times</i>	12977	.002	.157
AdWatchers	.088	<i>Cincinnati Enquirer</i> FactCheck.org <i>The Plain Dealer</i> PolitiFact.com	5279	.003	.196
Conflict Reporting	.061	<i>The Des Moines Register</i> <i>The Gazette (Iowa)</i> <i>St. Louis Post-Dispatch</i>	2490	.003	.278
Partisan Reporting	.050	<i>The Arizona Republic</i> <i>The Christian Science Monitor</i> <i>Richmond Times-Dispatch</i> <i>The Tampa Tribune</i>	3943	.003	.239

#### *AdWatchers*

One cluster to emerge, labeled the “AdWatchers,” includes the *Cincinnati Enquirer*, *The Plain Dealer* (from Cleveland), FactCheck.org and PolitiFact.com. The within-cluster resonance score of the AdWatchers is .088. The resonance score is a normalized measure with a minimum value of 0 and maximum of 1. A low score, as with the AdWatchers, suggests text that is not particularly focused. One must consider, however, that what is being measured are loosely- (if at

all) related news articles about political advertisements across five months. Relative to the other clusters, the AdWatchers actually had the second strongest resonance score. What links these four news organizations within the AdWatchers cluster is their almost exclusive focus on detailed analyses about many of the political ads from the campaign. Commonly, stories from these organizations provided a transcript of the ad along with a description of the video. They also provided either qualitative or quantitative analyses about the accuracy of the ad claims. In addition, FactCheck and the *Cincinnati Enquirer* both offered qualitative assessments of the ads. As detailed in chapter 2, PolitiFact offered a qualitative ordered scale of accuracy assessments beginning with True followed by Mostly True, Half True, Barely True, False, and Pants on Fire: a ridiculously inaccurate claim. *The Plain Dealer* used a quantitative 0 (misleading) – 10 (truthful) scale. Essentially, the stories in this cluster can be characterized as “watchdog” ad watching as there was concentration on both explicit and implicit factual claims from the ads (Just et al., 1996, p. 124).

A map of the semantic network for the AdWatchers cluster is illustrated in Figure 23. The listed words are those which are most influential in the semantic structure of the articles. These words create coherence in the meaning of the texts by linking together the other terms. While all of the words in the illustration are highly influential, the words near the top of the illustration have greater influence than do those closer to the bottom. The most influential words are circumscribed by dark boxes, the next most influential by light boxes. Words with lesser influence have no boxes. The lines represent associations between the words; the darker the line, the greater the association.

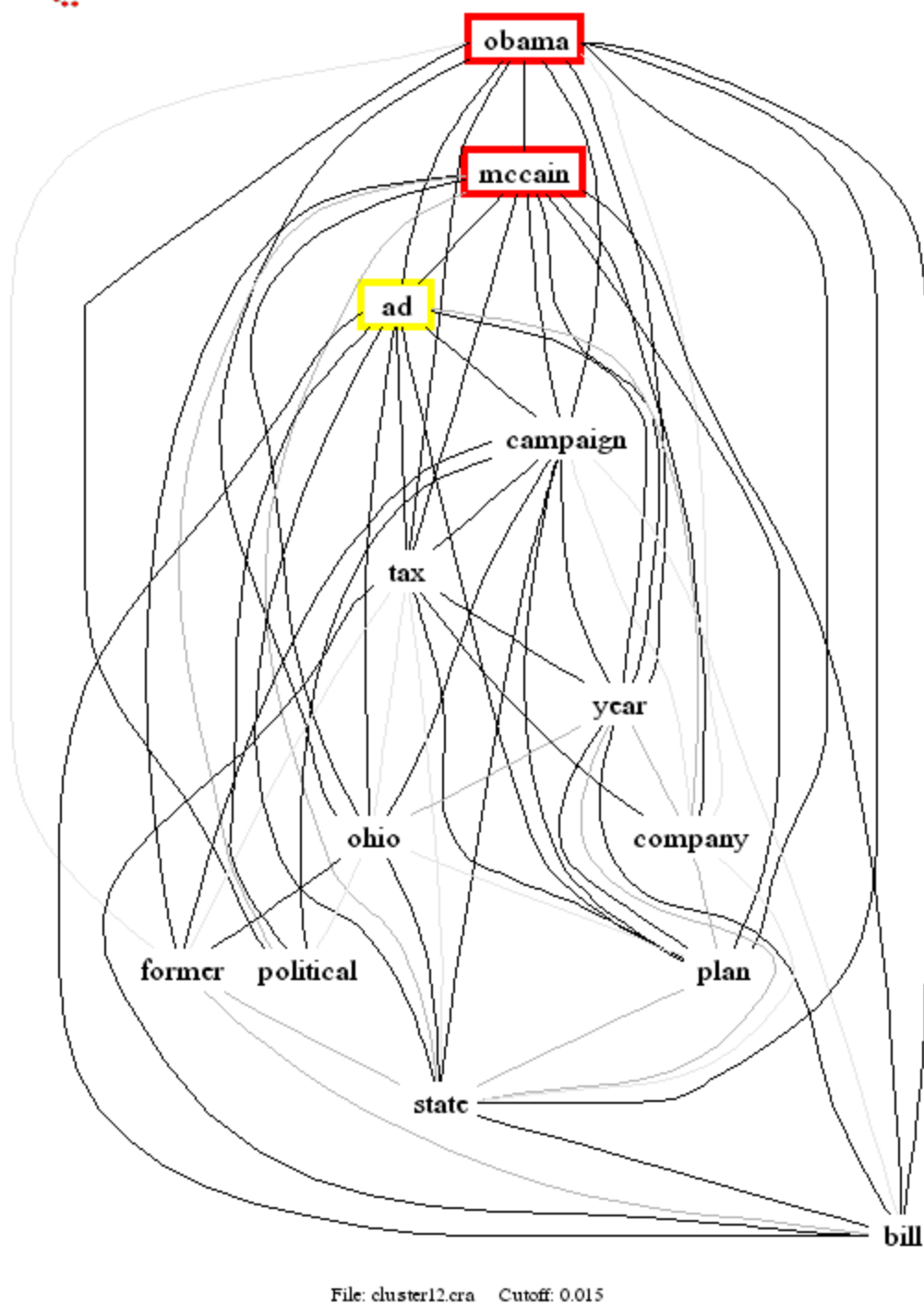


Figure 23. AdWatchers Semantic Network Map

As illustrated by Figure 23, the coherence of the articles in this cluster is clearly driven by a focus on the advertisements of “Obama” and “McCain.” This is to be expected as these were the search terms used in locating these articles. Within the confines of the “campaign,” the ad claims that received the most scrutiny were the ones evaluating the candidate “tax” claims. Ad claims were often scrutinized within specific time periods, as indicated by the influence of the word “year,” rather than in the abstract. Much of the scrutiny analyzed either how various companies would be affected by a particular claim or provided information about how a particular “company” was involved with a particular claim. For example, in evaluating claims about cap-and-trade programs, a FactCheck article explained that a “company” received credits for its carbon dioxide emissions (Miller, 2008a). Similarly, a *Cincinnati Enquirer* article evaluated a claim that McCain “helped pave the way for foreign-owned DHL to take over an American shipping company” (Korte, 2008).

The influence of the word “Ohio” can be attributed to two of the publications in this cluster being published in that state. Thus, many articles mentioned how the claims related to Ohio. Evaluations frequently focused on the claimed “plans” of each candidate. The analyses often were retrospective in nature in order to investigate how various people related to candidate claims. The word “former” is a designation these AdWatchers used to contextualize the way claims were made about “plans” for the future related to people from the past. For example, the role of “former” lobbyists was often scrutinized to distinguish any potential influence on political claims which would result in plans that could benefit a former lobbyist’s industry. References to “state” either contextualized how different states in the union related to a claim or were used as part of an individual’s title, such as “State Attorney General.” Finally, the influence of the word “bill,” most frequently as in legislation but also as in an itemized statement of money owed,



further demonstrates the substantive focus of these AdWatchers on verifying claims candidates made in their political ads.

### *Game Schema*

Another cluster, labeled Game Schema, had the highest within-cluster resonance (.139), meaning these newspapers had the greatest similarity in their reporting style within this sample of articles (see Table 11). These newspapers included *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post*, *Los Angeles Times*, *The Washington Times*, *Chicago Tribune*, *USA Today*, and *The New York Post*. While this combination of publications may initially seem implausible, a look at its semantic network map (Figure 24) begins to explain the grouping. Although these articles were about Obama's and McCain's campaigns, what distinguished them from their focus on the candidate advertisements was their focus on the horserace. Horserace reporting, or Patterson's (1994) game schema, interprets for readers who is ahead, who is behind and why (Iyengar, et al., 2004). For example, *The New York Times* encouraged readers to stay tuned because "the two presumptive presidential nominees are still searching for ways to connect with voters on the economy" (Healy & Seelye, 2008). Similarly, *The Washington Times* explained why Alaska Governor Sarah Palin was selected as McCain's running mate: "Her pick was aimed at attracting female voters" (Dinan, 2008).

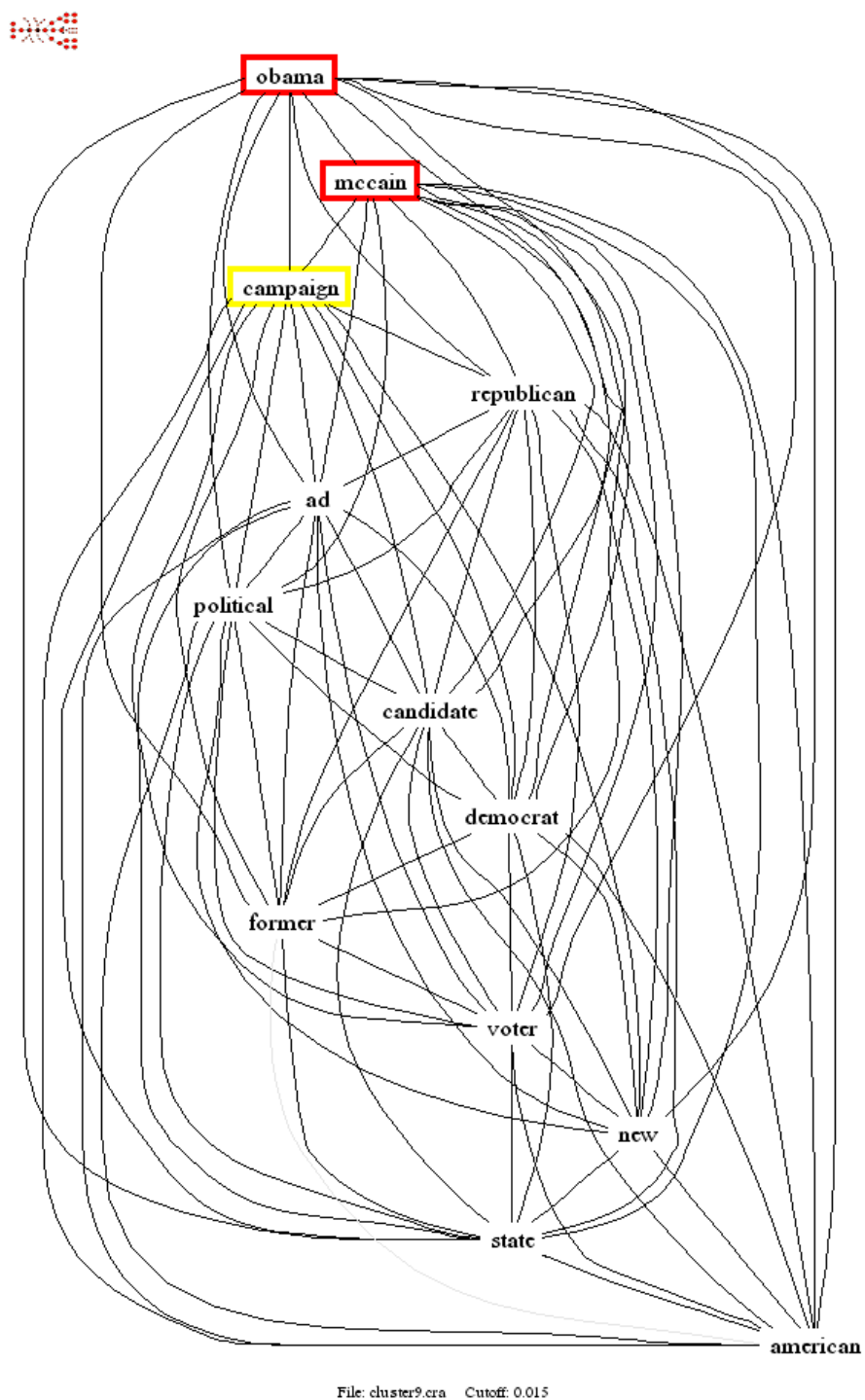


Figure 24. Game Schema Semantic Network Map

Absent from the semantic map in Figure 24 are all the staid policy-related words such as “tax,” “plan,” and “bill” which lack newsworthiness once they have been established. As Iyengar and his colleagues (2004) explained, “analysis of the candidates’ competing policy visions is stale and repetitive” (p. 159). The controversy inherent in horserace-reporting style is a marketplace-driven phenomenon (Bennett, 2006; Iyengar et al., 2004; Patterson, 1994). Thus, it is not coincidental that six of the seven publications in this cluster had the largest circulations in this sample.

The words that are on the semantic map are the actors in the horserace: the Democrats, the Republicans and the voters. The articles made reference to party-specific competitors, as in “the Republican rival,” or “the Republican nominee,” or “the Arizona Republican,” or “the Republican presidential candidate” rather than “Senator McCain.” While this pattern also held true with references to the Democratic candidates, it should be noted that the word “Republican” was significantly more influential in this cluster than was “Democrat,” as indicated by the standardized resonance scores of .037 and .018, respectively. Thus, this cluster’s focus was more influenced by Republican-related words.

Other influential words in the Game Schema cluster relate directly to the keywords used in the article search parameters. Thus, the articles are framed within the realm of politics as they relate to the candidate ads. Just as in the AdWatchers cluster, contextualization of the individuals mentioned in the articles indicates the influence of the word “former.” Similarly, “state” offers the same contextualization as it did in the AdWatchers cluster. The influence of “new” and “American” are additional indicators of marketplace pressures. These publications strive to scoop their competitors at getting information to readers first. Thus, “new” designates the propensity of these publications to emphasize the originality of their information.

“American” specifies not only a nationalistic overtone to the judges of the horserace but also journalistic sourcing conventions. Many of the sourced references originated from political action committees, institutes and organizations with names such as the American Benefits Council or the American Issues Project.

### *Conflict Reporting*

The third cluster, labeled Conflict Reporting, is comprised of the *Des Moines Register*, *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*, and *The Gazette* (from the Cedar Rapids-Marion region of Iowa). As indicated by the within-cluster resonance score of .061, the word similarities of the three papers within this cluster are not as strong as the other two clusters already observed (see Table 11). However, this cluster has the highest group influence, or focus score, at .278 suggesting a CRA network that is more centralized than the other clusters. What this means is that despite fewer word similarities, the between-article coherence and focus are greater within this cluster relative to the others.

Examining the semantic map in Figure 25 reveals the words which most influence the contextual meaning of these articles. While aspects of horserace reporting are still present, as indicated by the high influence of the words “Republican,” “Democrat,” and “voter,” the focus of these articles is highly influenced by how the campaign ads relate locally to readers in Missouri and Iowa – the two states where these newspapers are published. The amount of scrutiny given to the claims in the television ads varied widely. Although seemingly substantive influence words such as “tax” and “energy” suggest close scrutiny of ad claims, they were instead part of a larger corpus of campaign discourse.

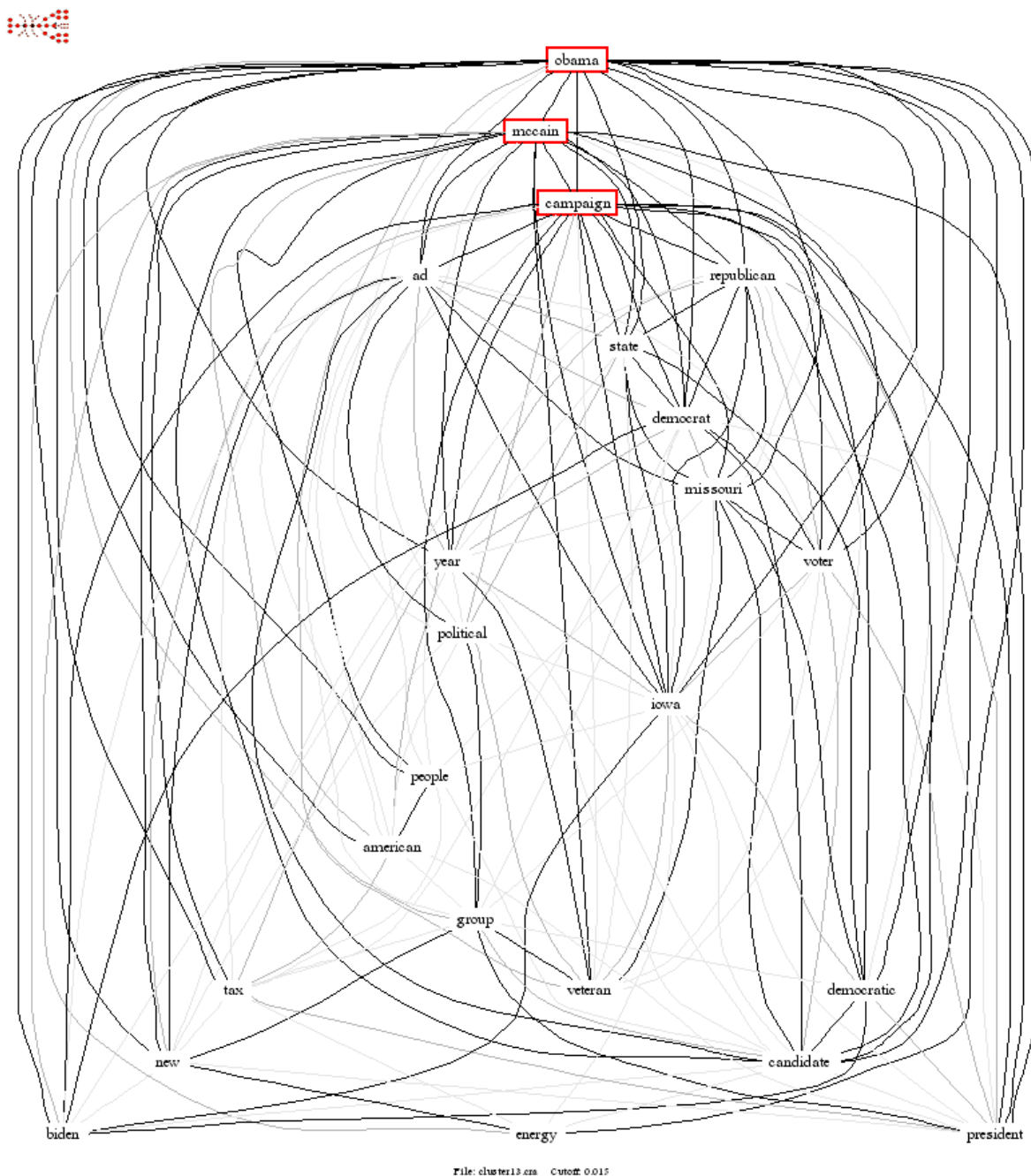


Figure 25. Conflict Reporting Semantic Network Map

Frequently the ads were summarized with little, if any, analysis of the message. Nonetheless, a conflict-oriented style of reporting characterizes this cluster which offered oppositional views in reaction to an ad release. For example, in an article about Obama's 30-

minute television ad, the *Post-Dispatch* summarized the ad as “blend[ing] the views of Obama as well as statements of Americans discussing their economic and health care troubles” (Glover & Espo, 2008). This summary was then followed up by McCain’s response, “He’s got a few things he wants to sell you: he’s offering government-run health care...an energy plan guaranteed to work without drilling...and an automatic wealth spreader that folds neatly and fits under any bed.” Similarly, in an article referring to McCain’s “Celebrity” ad,<sup>1</sup> *The Gazette* summarized the ad’s message and offered clarification about the intended meaning of the ad from the McCain campaign, yet also offered a response from the Obama campaign (Lynch, 2008a). Another article again referenced the “Celebrity” ad because Obama mentioned it at a campaign stop in Iowa. *The Gazette* reported that Obama dismissed the ad as one of many negative ads from his opponent that “won’t do a thing to lower your gas prices” (Lynch, 2008b).

Apart from contrasting the views of the candidates, this cluster offered angles about how various groups perceived the candidates or were affecting the campaign usually as a function of generating conflict. Thus, the presence of “veteran” on the semantic map is indicative of how the Swift Boat Veterans’ group,<sup>2</sup> for example, influenced the campaign. The word “president” is influential for two reasons: first, as a reference to the office to which the candidates aspired, and second, as a sourcing convention when referring to, for example, the President of the American Issues Project. “Biden” also shows up as a prominent concept in this cluster. According to one report, he made a lasting, favorable impression in Iowa during his presidential run 20 years ago. Another report contends, “Biden, who is Irish Catholic, has typically run well among white men, a group where Obama trails McCain...” (Beaumont, 2008b). Thus, groups or individuals who may bring controversy or challenge to the campaign are influential in this cluster.

Despite the tendency for the Conflict Reporting cluster to offer opposing perspectives, the reports were not necessarily balanced. While bias was not perceptible in the articles from *The Gazette*,<sup>3</sup> reports about the candidates' advertisements in both *The Des Moines Register* and the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* tended to favor Obama. To be sure, many ads were just mentioned in passing as part of a larger story. However, the ads that did receive more attention were generally unfavorable to McCain. For example, in the *Register*, both the "Celebrity" ad and the "Troop" ad were singled out and discredited as being disappointing and offensive. "Is that the best you can come up with?" the *Register* quoted Obama as saying in response to the "Celebrity" ad (Beaumont, 2008a). The *Register* also refuted a claim from the "Troop" ad that Obama refused to visit troops during his overseas visit by clarifying, "Pentagon officials barred Obama from visiting the injured troops in Germany because the visit was not a preauthorized congressional visit" (Beaumont, 2008a). An ad that associated Obama to William Ayers was also discredited by the *Register*, which disclosed the extent of their association: "Ayers lives near Obama in Chicago, once sat on a charity board with the Senator and hosted a political event for Obama more than 10 years ago" (Beaumont, 2008c).

The perceived bias against McCain could be attributed to the argument that McCain produced more ads that were factually problematic. This was, in fact, an argument made by the *Post-Dispatch* – an argument supported by the results noted in chapter 3. After debunking a series of McCain ads, the *Post-Dispatch* reported that the McCain campaign remained defiant about the criticisms of his campaign's ad claims. While the *Post-Dispatch* did note that there were inaccuracies in Obama's ad claims, they reported that the Obama campaign was "quicker to react to news accounts challenging his accuracy" (Babington, 2008). Interestingly, when noting an Obama ad about Social Security which claimed that McCain wanted to privatize the program,

the *Post-Dispatch* failed to debunk this claim even though other organizations did so. The *Post-Dispatch* did, however, offer a response from the McCain campaign that likened the ad to using “scare tactics.” The closing words of the article even seemed to legitimize Obama’s ad: “McCain has said ‘nothing’s off the table’ when it comes to Social Security” (Hefling, 2008).

### *Partisan Reporting*

The final cluster is labeled Partisan Reporting and includes *The Arizona Republic*, the *Richmond Times-Dispatch*, *The Christian Science Monitor*, and *The Tampa Tribune* (see Table 11). What distinguishes this cluster from the others is the absence of policy-related words, such as taxes and energy, and the presence of “Virginia,” “Palin,” and “Hillary”<sup>4</sup> (see Figure 26). The articles within this cluster generally did not scrutinize the candidate ads for their accuracy, but rather used them to demonstrate broader narratives, often involving campaign strategy.

“Virginia” was influential not only because it was the locale of the *Times-Dispatch*, but also because it was a stage – a battlefield - on which most of these publications repeatedly focused. While the Iowa and Missouri battlegrounds were influential in the previous cluster, much of this was driven by all three of the publications being based in those two states. In this cluster, however, only one of the four publications was based in Virginia. Reporting on what was happening in Virginia went beyond publication proximity; in this cluster, it signifies a focus on partisan politics.



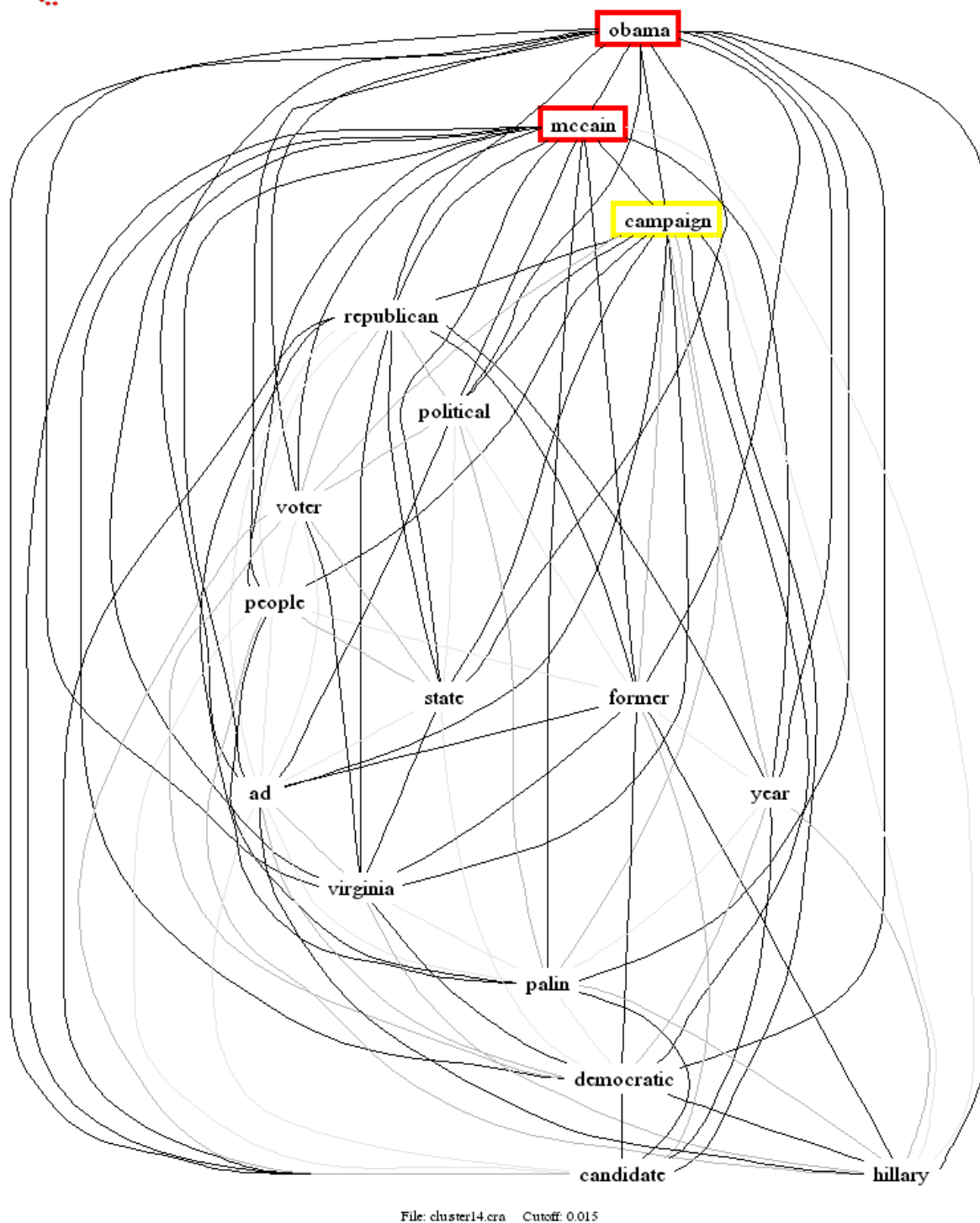


Figure 26. Partisan Reporting Semantic Network Map

Using the terminology of Pollock and Whitney (1997), the reporting style of the newspapers in this cluster can be described as partisan: highlighting differences and maintaining divisiveness, exemplified by the valence given to “Palin” and “Hillary.” While it can be argued that the point of political reporting is to clarify differences between candidates so that voters can make an informed decision, in this cluster the information selected for reporting was frequently unfavorable toward Obama. For example, as illustrated in Figure 26, “Palin” is an influential node in the semantic structure of this cluster. References to her frequently appeared in association with ads linking Obama to William Ayers and her claims in the *Times-Dispatch* that Obama was “palling around with terrorists” (“Obama Allies,” 2008). In an article entitled “Palin-Obama Comparisons Ramp Up: Move to Highlight Rookie Status, Experts Say,” *The Tampa Tribune* referred to a McCain ad that contrasted the qualifications of his opponent to his running mate, Palin, rather than himself. The *Tribune* reported:

It may be a way of denigrating Obama by comparing him to the lower half of the GOP ticket. Or it may be a way of countering the historic nature of the candidacy of Obama, the first black, major-party presidential nominee. Palin is the first woman on a GOP ticket and would be the nation's first female vice president. "What they are saying is if you want to vote for history, now you have a choice," said New York-based national political pollster John Zogby. (March & House, 2008)

Buried within this rhetoric of historical choice, a seed of divisiveness was planted. In another example, *The Christian Science Monitor* referenced an ad the Obama campaign purportedly produced to challenge Palin’s image as a reformer. Without referring to the ad by name, or considering its claim that Palin was for the Bridge to Nowhere in Alaska before she was against it (which many other news outlets debunked), this article used the ad to exemplify that the Obama campaign had been thrown off stride by the nomination of Palin (Feldmann, 2008).

Perceptions of biased media reporting correspond to the results of Just and her colleagues (1996). Among their focus group and interview participants, “campaign process ad critiques,” they wrote, “provoked talk about possible media bias” (p. 126). Accordingly, references to “Hillary” often signified an attempt by these publications to highlight the divisions in the Democratic Party remaining from the contentious primary campaign between Obama and Hillary Clinton rather than report on the efforts at unity the party was accomplishing. For example, there were multiple mentions of McCain’s ad about party-defector Debra Bartoshevich, the former Hillary Clinton delegate who *The Arizona Republic* quoted as saying, “A lot of Democrats will vote McCain. It’s OK. Really!” (“McCain ad,” 2008).

Finally, as further demonstration of the partisan nature of reporting in this cluster, it is worth mention that some articles did acknowledge that many reports were surfacing about the ad campaign taking on a negative tone and that McCain had been guiltier of this strategy than Obama. However, these articles seemed to legitimize the practice. For example, *The Arizona Republic* repeatedly offered interviews with scholars and scientists who defended this tactic: “People often say that attack ads are ineffective and that they are turned off by them. Yet political campaigns use them all the time. The reason is because they work, said Joel Weinberger, a New York City-based neuroscience researcher” (Ryman, 2008). Similarly, in *The Tampa Tribune*, McCain’s use of ads such as “Celebrity” was legitimized. Even in an ad such as McCain’s “Troop Funding,” which the *Tribune* had disclosed as being evaluated as “false and misleading by independent watchdog groups,” the inaccuracy was not disclosed; it was glossed over with the conclusion that critics were making petty arguments about semantics (March, 2008). A political scientist was offered to downplay the issue. Basically, in these articles ad accuracy was conflated with ad negativity. To be fair, some of the reports did address the

facticity of some of the ad claims and in a balanced manner. But what draws this cluster of newspapers together is the tendency for partisan-style reporting.

### Television News

In analyzing how television newscasts reported on political ads, the greatest challenge was in how to extract just their treatment of the ads from the rest of the program segment. Ads were infrequently the sole focus of a program segment, instead relegated to a minor component of illustrating the candidates' broad campaigning strategies. Thus, while some newscasts did offer more attempts at fact-checking ad content than others, this did not result in a cluster of television "adwatchers" on par with FactCheck.org or PolitiFact.com because the vast majority of the time, the ads were used simply to illustrate campaign strategy. Instead, a four-cluster solution was revealed (see Table 12). Three clusters contained various television news programs, and the remaining cluster contained FactCheck.org and PolitiFact.com.<sup>5</sup>

Table 12. Television News Semantic Network Cluster Analysis Results

Cluster	Cluster Resonance	News Organization	Nodes	Density	Focus
AdWatchers	.139	FactCheck.org PolitiFact.com	4079	.003	.195
Scooping Strategic Punditry	.129	CNN's <i>The Situation Room</i> CNN's <i>Anderson Cooper 360</i>	3389	.003	.230
Evaluative Dramatism	.101	FOX <i>The O'Reilly Factor</i> FOX <i>Special Report</i> MSNBC <i>Race for White House</i> NBC <i>Nightly News</i> PBS <i>NewsHour</i>	7418	.002	.177
Descriptive Attacks	.074	ABC <i>World News</i> CBS <i>Evening News</i>	2520	.003	.306

As with print news coverage of the campaign ads, television news coverage across the board was influenced primarily by Obama and less so by McCain. This finding is consistent with the results of others who found Obama to have received more frequent attention from the media during the campaign (Jamieson, 2009; Jurkowitz, 2008; Kenski et al., 2010).

### *Strategic Punditry Scoops*

Among the televised news casts, the cluster named “Strategic Punditry Scoops” had the greatest semantic similarities between news programs (see Table 12) as evidenced by the highest within-cluster resonance of .129. This cluster included CNN’s *Anderson Cooper 360°* and CNN’s *The Situation Room*. Given that both programs in this cluster were from the same cable network and thus shared resources including on-air talent, this finding is reasonable. As illustrated in the semantic network map (Figure 27), the programming in this cluster was focused on “political” “campaign” “ads” - often the “new” ones - from “candidates” “Obama” and “McCain” and how “voters” and “people” may react to the ads specifically and to the campaign strategies more generally. Offering viewers the scoop on new ads was an influential tactic in this cluster, as in the July 30th installment of *The Situation Room* when Wolf Blitzer said, “Let's get to John McCain's new ad.”

Campaign strategy discussions dominated the programming in this cluster, particularly as it related to “Republicans.” For instance, on the August 4th installment of *AC-360*, Ed Henry said, “To the relief of some Republicans, John McCain is finally driving a consistent message by getting tough with Barack Obama.” It is noteworthy that Democrats are absent from this semantic map. Their degree of influence, as indicated by their CRA score, was smaller than Republicans’ as was the influence of Palin and Biden who are also absent from this semantic



the October 16th edition of the same show. Strategy discussions were often among a variety of political pundits such as former Clinton advisor and Democratic strategist James Carville, Republican consultant Alex Castellanos, radio talk show host Roland Martin, former Clinton White House Press Secretary Dee Dee Myers, or former Reagan advisor and Republican strategist Ed Rollins. These discussions were evaluative in nature as revealed by the high influence of the word “good” on the semantic map (which accounts for references to “better” and “best” as well). For instance, on the July 30th edition of *The Situation Room*, CNN’s Jack Cafferty said, “...the McCain ad was better because it was more entertaining...” Similarly, on the October 27th installment of *AC-360*, Cooper asks, “...this 30-minute political commercial that he is going to be airing in a couple of days on a couple of networks, is that a good idea?” Thus, evaluative campaign strategy discussions in general, and discussions influenced heavily by President Bush and Hillary Clinton are what distinguish this cluster.

Both programs in the Strategic Punditry cluster had specific, named segments of their news shows which, along with other issues, sometimes scrutinized the claims in political ads. *AC-360* had a segment called “Keeping them Honest,” and *The Situation Room* had one hosted by Howard Kurtz called “Reliable Sources.” Out of the 28 program segments from *AC-360* with references to political ads that qualified for this analysis, only three scrutinized a handful of ads for their accuracy. On two of these segments, FactCheck.org’s Viveca Novak was a guest on the show. According to CMAG data, however, one of the scrutinized ads was not a paid ad that aired on television. “Reliable Sources” was featured fact-checking three ads on only one out of the 42 program segments from *The Situation Room* that qualified for this analysis. Once again, one of these ads from the Obama campaign that linked McCain to Carly Fiorina and Phil Gramm was not a paid ad that aired on television according to CMAG data. Another handful of ads that

aired on *The Situation Room* had claims that were fact-checked apart from the “Reliable Sources” segment. For instance, after playing a clip of Obama’s “Punch/Ohio Jobs” ad, Mary Snow reported that, “The ads [sic] blamed McCain for the current [Ohio] job mess, which FactCheck.org said was a stretch.” In all, between 6 and 8 ads were subjected to some degree of fact-checking on each of these two programs, although there was some overlap where both programs scrutinized the same ad. Despite these efforts, the vast majority of the ads shown during these shows or referenced in passing were used to illustrate larger campaign strategy rather than to scrutinize the accuracy of claims. This is what some scholars have referred to as “campaign process” adwatching (Just et al., 1996, p. 124). Nonetheless, this cluster appears to offer the most extensive fact-checking of any of the television news program clusters.

#### *Evaluative Dramatism*

The largest and most eclectic cluster among television news programming is named “Evaluative Dramatism.” This cluster has five news programs, three of which were from cable stations (FOX’s *The O’Reilly Factor*, FOX’s *Special Report with Brit Hume*, and MSNBC’s *Race for the White House with David Gregory*), one from a commercial network broadcast station (*NBC Nightly News*) and one from a public broadcasting network (PBS’s *The NewsHour with Jim Lehrer*). Stylistically, this cluster contains a great deal of between-program variance in that some relied more heavily on internal reporting efforts while other programs relied less on traditional reporting and more often on political pundits. A within-cluster resonance score of .101 indicates the word similarities of the news broadcasts in the Evaluative Dramatism cluster are at a level between that of the other two clusters (see Table 12). However, this cluster has the lowest group influence, or focus, score at .177 suggesting a CRA network that is less centralized than the other clusters. Thus, despite moderate word similarities, these program segments are



less focused and more diverse relative to those in the other clusters. This is not surprising given the dissimilarity of reporting and stylistic conventions across these news programs.

One unifying theme of the Evaluative Dramatism cluster in its approach to using political ads was a greater emphasis on Republicans in general and on Bush and Palin in particular (see Figure 28). While Democrats were on the semantic map, they had a lower influence score than did Republicans. Like the previous cluster, a focus on how Republicans responded to and affected Obama's election chances was frequent. For example, on August 27th, Fox's Bill O'Reilly said, "...no doubt the Republicans will continue to demonize Barack Obama by bringing up his radical friends..." Also similar to the previous cluster was the influence of President Bush, as when Carl Cameron indicated on the June 17th edition of *Fox Special Report*, "He [McCain] touts his environmental differences with President Bush in a new ad." It was references to Palin, however, that had a demonstrably greater influence on the Evaluative Dramatism cluster relative to the Strategic Punditry cluster. For instance, NBC's Kelly O'Donnell reported on September 12th that "In a new TV ad, McCain is accusing Obama's campaign of treating Palin with disrespect." Even more illustrative was David Gregory's statement on the September 17th installment of *Race for the White House*: "Governor Sarah Palin single handedly changed the political terrain of this race, reenergizing Senator McCain's base, replenishing his war chest, and shifting up the electoral amount." It was along these lines that Palin provided much grist for the news programs in the Evaluative Dramatism cluster.

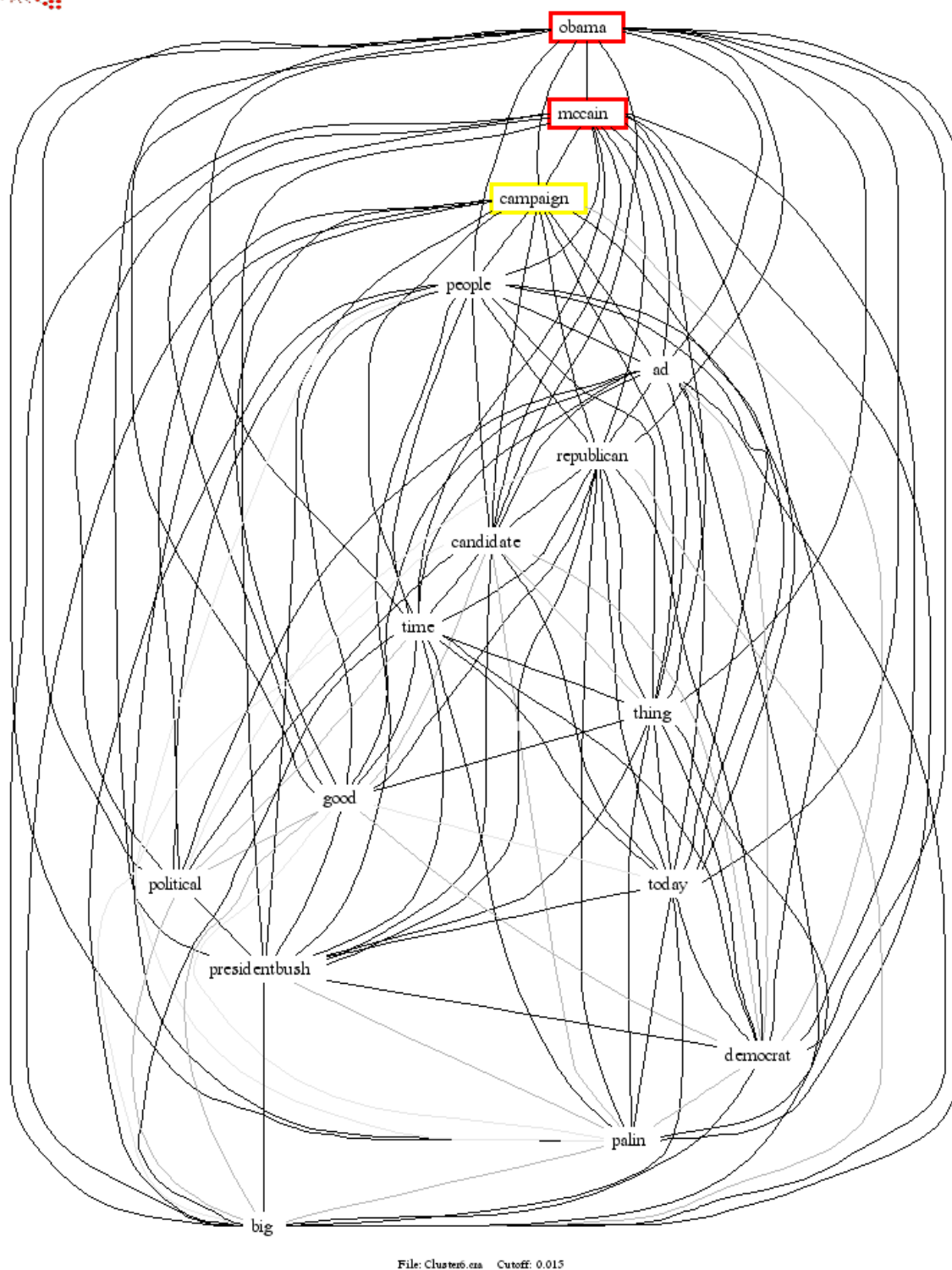


Figure 28. Evaluative Dramatism Semantic Network Map

Another unifying feature of this cluster is the semantic influence of the word “thing” which appears to be synonymous with the words “issue,” or “item.” For example, on July 18th, *Fox Special Report*’s Major Garrett indicated, “One thing the Campaign Obama [sic] wants to stress while they’re in Europe is that yes, he will be a new face, more diplomatic.” “Thing” also appears to be a conversational television news practice associated with panel discussions. For example, during a *NewsHour* panel on October 27th, Susan Page said, “You know, the other thing I’ve noticed in these big rallies is increasing numbers of these people are people who’ve already voted...” Or as MSNBC’s David Gregory asked one of his panelists on October 29th, “Does anybody like infomercials? What do undecided voters think they’ll get by watching this thing tonight?” As an apparent linguistic practice of panel discussions, “thing” was influential in the previous cluster of CNN news programming as well but, as will be revealed, is absent from the ABC/CBS broadcast cluster. It is unsurprising, then, that references to “thing” are also absent from the individual semantic map of the only broadcast network in this cluster, NBC. Because of other commonalities (perhaps with MSNBC), however, NBC is incorporated in the present cluster rather than with the other broadcasters.

References to “good/better/best” were also influential in this cluster. Just as in the Strategic Punditry cluster, these terms signify the evaluative nature of the discussions surrounding the political ads. For instance, on October 23rd, analysis from MSNBC’s Richard Wolffe concluded, “...it’s the best argument they have on the economy right now...” Likewise, on the September 23rd edition of *The O’Reilly Factor*, Dr. Caroline Heldman deduced, “Well, you would be better qualified than Sarah Palin at this point.” Thus, passing judgments on the ads was an influential theme in multiple clusters of television news programs.

A concept that did distinguish the Evaluative Dramatism cluster, in particular, was the greater influence of the interpretive term, “big.” Rather than discussing issues and strategies in a straightforward manner, the influence of “big” signifies the sensationalism and drama associated with this cluster. So, for instance, rather than referring blandly to Obama’s 30-minute commercial, *Fox Special Report’s* Brit Hume on October 29th, named it “the big money appeal.” Speaking September 17th on MSNBC, former secretary of labor in the Clinton administration Robert Reich dramatized McCain’s positions by stating, “Now, John McCain says let’s give big tax cuts to the very wealthy, let’s continue the Bush policies, but I want to go further, he says, more tax cuts for the wealthy and for big corporations.” Even on PBS, during an October 8th exchange with Jim Lehrer about two battleground states, a pair of reporters alternately explains that in Pennsylvania “Obama has taken a big lead,” that a trend toward Obama in Florida since the convention has been “a big shift,” and that race is going to play “a big role” in southwestern Pennsylvania. Thus, part of what distinguishes this cluster is the dramatism exemplified in descriptive language such as “big.”

While all programs in this cluster occasionally checked the facts of an ad, this occurred only a handful of times on each program. The overwhelming majority of the time ads were used in the programs to illustrate campaign strategy. On MSNBC’s *Race to the White House*, for instance, Rachel Maddow explained to viewers on June 30th, “The war room, that deeply mysterious, sometimes daunting place where all of the decisions are made in a campaign, well, it’s time for us to head inside that special place and decide which strategies are working and which are not.” The few times the accuracy of ads was scrutinized, it was rarely by invoking independent experts like FactCheck.org as did *NewsHour* on July 30th. More frequently, partisans were utilized to refute claims as happened on July 31st when MSNBC attempted to

dissect McCain's "Celebrity" ad by pitting the assertions of Democratic Senator John Kerry against the assertions of Republican Senator Jon Kyl. Similarly, on July 28th *The O'Reilly Factor* relied upon former Bush White House advisor Karl Rove to assert the accuracy of four of five claims from McCain's "Troops" ad. Another common strategy was to allow campaign officials to refute the claims of an opponent's ad as did both *NewsHour* on September 10th for McCain's "Education" ad and as did the *NBC Nightly News* on September 9th. Specifically, NBC's Kelly O'Donnell reported that

...late today the McCain campaign put out a tough TV spot responding to Obama's comments on education today, claiming that Obama supports legislation to teach sex education to kindergartners before they can learn to read. The Obama campaign calls that a shameful and perverse political attack.

By relying upon partisans or campaign officials to refute ad claims rather than independent experts, the credibility of the political actors seems questionable. This tactic also demonstrates the proliferation of controversy in this cluster.

Most illustrative of the fabricated nature of drama in this cluster was Fox's *Special Report with Brit Hume*. Not only did it air "vapor" ads (as did other programs),<sup>6</sup> but *Special Report* went so far as to air fake/spoof ads which made it all the more difficult to determine what was legitimate discussion and what was not. One of at least five spoof ads in this study was this one which aired on October 2nd:

HUME: Finally, yesterday, on the eve of the Palin-Biden debate, the McCain campaign released a new ad on the environment. Were they just trying to change the subject? Not exactly.

(BEGIN VIDEO CLIP)

UNIDENTIFIED MALE: Our environment is too precious to be spoiled. If we want to leave a beautiful world for our children, we simply must cut back on energy usage.

So John McCain is asking all Americans to turn off their televisions tomorrow night from 9:00 to 10:30.

MCCAIN: I'm John McCain and I approve this message.

(END VIDEO CLIP)

Taking a page from the programming of Comedy Central, *Special Report* blurs the line between legitimate news programming and what Patterson (1994) referred to as synthetic reporting.

### *Descriptive Attacks*

As indicated by the within-cluster resonance score of .074, the word similarities of the two news broadcasts within the “Descriptive Attacks” cluster (ABC’s *World News with Charles Gibson* and CBS’s *Evening News*) are not as strong as the other two television news clusters already observed (see Table 12). However, this cluster has the highest group influence, or focus, score at .306 suggesting a CRA network that is more centralized than the other clusters. Thus, despite fewer word similarities, these program segments are more coherent and focused relative to those in the other clusters. This is unsurprising given that both programs are half hour evening network news broadcasts which likely have similar reporting and stylistic conventions. Both, for instance, were less likely to have had panel discussions in their programs where political ads were referenced. Mention of political ads tended to be in program segments which were shorter in duration than programs in the other clusters. Thus, shorter program segments would likely have greater focus than would segments that are prolonged.

Broadcast news conventions dictated by marketplace pressures are evident in this cluster as revealed by the high influence of the words “today” and “new” (see Figure 29). What is newsworthy are the latest events happening today. For this cluster in particular, it is the new “attack” ads that are influential as indicated on July 30th by CBS’s Chip Reid who reported, “Today an Obama campaign spokesman responded to the McCain attack ad by quoting Britney

Spears, saying about McCain, ‘Oops, he did it again.’” Likewise, on October 17th, ABC’s David Wright reported, “Today, in key battleground states, vicious attacks, including a new ad from Obama.” Resonating with the “if it bleeds, it leads” news standard, the prominence of attack ads in this cluster is consistent with the findings of other scholars who have found these types of ads to draw the most media attention (Fowler & Ridout, 2009; Iyengar, 2008; Ridout & Smith, 2008).

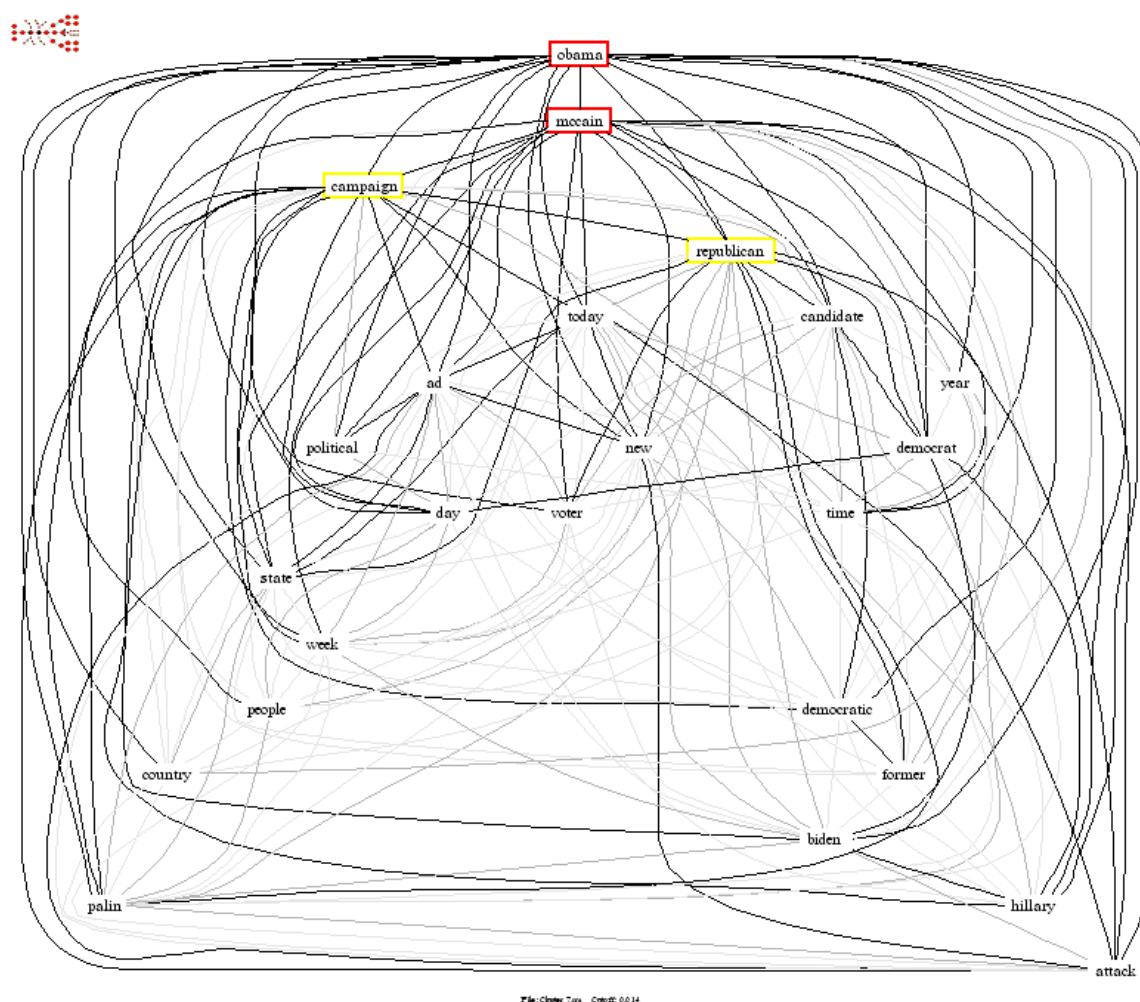


Figure 29. Descriptive Attacks Semantic Network Map

Other words on the semantic map (or lack thereof) are noteworthy (see Figure 29). Similar to the other two television news clusters, “Republicans” were more influential in the presented story narratives, although “Democrats” did appear on this semantic map as well. To some degree, references to these words are indicative of horserace reporting as on August 25th when ABC’s Charles Gibson said that “...knowing Republicans are ready to pounce on any signs of Democratic division.” Similarly demonstrative of horserace reporting is reliance on polling data. While it was not quite influential enough to appear on the semantic map, the word “poll” is within the top 30 most influential words in the Descriptive Attacks cluster. Illustrative, then, was a reference like that on September 8th by CBS’s Chip Reid: “...the new CBS News Poll shows that the enthusiasm gap with Barack Obama has narrowed dramatically.” Likewise, on June 17th ABC’s Gibson stated, “If the election were today, the poll shows Obama with a six-point lead over McCain.” Thus, reliance on polling data along with the influence of party labels were distinguishing characteristics of this cluster.

Evaluative positions signified by references to “good/better/best” were absent from the Descriptive Attacks cluster. Rather than value-laden discussions, programs in this cluster provided descriptive offerings of campaign ads for purposes of considering campaign strategy. For instance, on August 27th, CBS’s Dean Reynolds reported, “But the McCain campaign has been hard at work trying to undo those efforts, first with an ad attacking what it said was Obama's position on Iran.” Relative to other clusters, there was a roughly equal influence from “Biden,” “Hillary” Clinton and “Palin” on discussions about how each affected the campaign. Moreover, also missing from this cluster was a focus – often negative in other clusters - on the influence of President Bush. Thus, the less valenced and more descriptive language aspects are what characterize this cluster.



As in the other clusters, occasionally the ads used to illustrate campaign strategies were also vetted for accuracy. For instance, after Reynolds played that clip on August 27th of the McCain ad he just referenced, he went on to scrutinize it by saying, “But the ad is a stretch, because this is what Obama really said last May in Pendleton, Oregon, on the need for diplomacy...” Likewise, on September 8th, CBS fact-checked McCain’s “Alaska Maverick” ad in which Palin claimed to have stopped the Bridge to Nowhere. Not only did CBS allow the Obama campaign to refute the claim, but it also aired a clip from PolitiFact.com’s Bill Adair to lend independent credibility to the refutation. When CBS vetted ad claims, it was often within the context of its “Reality Check” segment. However, following the other clusters, only a handful of ads (on ABC) to just under a dozen (on CBS) were scrutinized for accuracy. Instead, the majority of ads were referenced in the context of campaign strategy.

#### Ads as Proxy

In the epigraph to this chapter, an editor of *The New York Times* seemingly struggled with whether and when to fact-check claims offered by the subjects of their articles. With many an eyebrow raised by this query coming from a paper regarded with such renown, the editor quickly clarified his statement. What he meant, he explained, was whether the *Times* “should more aggressively rebut ‘facts’ that are offered by newsmakers when those ‘facts’ are in question” (Brisbane, 2012a, para. 3). Indeed, specific to RQ5, the results in this chapter confirm the paucity of fact-checking political ad claims that existed during the 2008 presidential election by mainstream news media. Consistent with the political science literature, a plurality of media outlets from this sample are characterized foremost by their focus on campaign strategy rather than fact-checking. According to Iyengar and his colleagues (2004), campaign strategy reporting predominates in the U.S. “at the expense of providing meaningful information about policy and

governance” (p. 157). Similarly, Fowler and Ridout (2009) found the media attention given to political advertising was typically of low-quality, focusing on candidate personalities and traits or campaign tactics and tone rather than discussing the merits or accuracy of claims in the ads. The findings revealed here generally suggest no different. It was campaign strategy stories that typically predominated the news of political ads.

In response to RQ6, however, there is variance between how the different media outlets covered the political ad campaigns in 2008. Out of the over two dozen news organizations in this sample, one cluster did emerge as AdWatchers: those committed to using political ads to scrutinize the accuracy of what candidates and their surrogates were claiming. Distinguishing themselves along with the two Web-based fact-checking organizations, FactCheck.org and PolitiFact.com, were the two Ohio newspapers of *The Plain Dealer* and the *Cincinnati Enquirer*. From a social responsibility or accountability perspective, then, these are the organizations which focused more than anything else on holding politicians accountable for the claims in their political ads. Using the language of Just and her colleagues (1996, p. 124), these are the “watchdog” ad watchers.

To be sure, other news organizations did have occasional columns or program segments which fact-checked claims in political ads. For example, *The Washington Post* resides within the Game Schema cluster despite the presence of the “Fact Checker,” their effort to “shed as much light as possible on controversial claims and counter-claims involving important national issues” (Dobbs, 2007).<sup>7</sup> Perhaps the content of the captured columns did not predominate the *Post*’s sampled articles enough to align it with the AdWatchers cluster either because the columns were too infrequent or because the Fact Checker did not focus on ad claims as much as the other adwatching organizations. Similarly, *The New York Times* checked the accuracy of 25 ads in its

“The Ad Campaign” column while CNN and CBS scrutinized between a half and just under a dozen ads. While print news organizations appeared to have had more opportunity to offer adwatch reporting compared with television news media, all but those in the Adwatchers cluster offered so much additional coverage beyond fact-checking that the predominating focus was on campaign strategy. For instance, the *Times* ran columns entitled “Now Playing” (such as on October 27, 2008, p. A17) for the purpose of summarizing ads airing during the campaign with no other contextualization or scrutiny. It was, in essence, free exposure of the political ad message and representative of the *Times*’ continued uncertainty over “whether and when” it should be challenging facts presented in its pages. Thus, despite attempts by news organizations beyond the AdWatchers cluster to pursue fact-checking during the 2008 presidential campaign, other often strategic coverage of the political ads diluted these efforts.

While there were differences beyond fact-checking in how the broadcast and print news media covered the political ads during the campaign, these differences are essentially variations on the same theme. The domination in election news of what Iyengar et al. refer to as “horseracism” (2004, p. 158) is a concept that covers descriptions of not only which candidate is ahead in polls and which candidate trails but interpretations as to why each is winning or losing. Thus to a certain extent, the various clusters are descriptive of how the campaign strategy frame was activated. At the most general level was the Game Schema cluster which included the larger-circulation newspapers. Surely some of the papers in this cluster were more partisan in their reporting than others. The common denominator, however, was the propensity to focus on the horserace and strategy. At the same time, there were two additional clusters of newspapers which were united based upon styles of partisan and conflict reporting. Campaign strategy coverage was present in these news journals too, but it was the reporting style which

distinguished them more than the focus of their content. Likewise, television news programs were clustered by their propensity to provide descriptions of the latest campaign attacks, offer the latest punditry on campaign strategy, or provide the most dramatized evaluations of the election. Again, within each of these clusters varying degrees of partisanship was present as was some policy-oriented reporting. What predominated, however, were these different stylistic lenses through which game schema reporting was refracted.

Some scholars have suggested that despite the decline in election coverage using the candidates' own words, candidate messages are still getting through to the public. Just and her colleagues (1996) found that two-thirds of the ad watches they studied during the 1992 election described the ads, thus amplifying the voices of candidates beyond paid media buys. Vavreck (2009), however, described a disconnect between candidate messages and what she found reported in the news media. The results offered in this chapter suggest how hamstrung candidates may actually be in trying to get around the media. Despite the "idiotic press ads" referenced by Dunn (Jamieson, 2009, p. 145) which are designed to drive news coverage, the present research demonstrates the attention offered by the press is still primarily within its own terms of campaign strategy coverage. These findings do not contradict Vavreck or Just et al., but rather expand understanding of the complexity surrounding political news reporting.

The tensions between campaigns and journalists in election coverage are evident in these results. On the one hand, candidates are dependent upon the news media to accurately convey their positions and tell their story. Their only way to directly reach the public around the filter of the media is through paid advertising and increasingly, though nowhere near the same level as television advertising, also through the use of new media technologies. As the findings in this chapter demonstrate, the news media can and does have its own agenda which in 2008 was to

primarily use candidate advertising for the purposes of conveying campaign strategy efforts to viewers and readers.

On the other hand, campaigns need the news media to legitimize their ad messages because of the low regard with which the public holds advertising. In 2004, for example, nearly two out of three people contended that political advertising neither provided new information about presidential candidates nor was useful in contributing to their voting decisions (CBS News, 2004). More recently, in 2007, nearly three in four people (74%) found political ads to be more confusing than helpful (CBS News, 2007). In the same survey of nearly 1,000 U.S. adults, one in three felt they could “hardly ever” trust what political candidates said in their ads while just over half (55%) felt they could only “some of the time” (CBS News, 2007). The results from chapter 3 would seem to support the skepticism the public holds regarding the accuracy of political ads. Furthermore, according to Gallup’s (2010) annual professional honesty and ethics poll, people consistently rate advertising practitioners significantly lower than television and newspaper reporters. The low credibility of advertising thus explains the necessity of media legitimization. As West (1999) explained, “[t]he most effective [political] ads are those whose basic message is reinforced by the news media” (p. 27).

Furthermore, campaigns have previously demonstrated their adeptness at impression management facilitated by an uncritical news media as when the 1988 presidential candidate Michael Dukakis was inseparably linked to prison furlough programs via strategic use of the “Willie Horton” and “Revolving Door” ad campaigns among other tactics (Iyengar et al., 2004; Jamieson, 1989; Just et al., 1996). In the end, both sides contend they must be wary of not being taken advantage of by the other.

## The Wedge

These findings also reinforce Lippmann's (1922) prognostications from nearly a century ago. He identified a disconnection between the practical reality of people's dispositions and what was theoretically required of a representative democracy (Alterman, 2011). In other words, what people want is not necessarily what they need. Furthermore, Patterson (1994) identified that, "When voters encounter game-centered stories, they behave more like spectators than participants in the election..." (p. 89). Nevertheless, according to the market-driven hypothesis and supported by empirical evidence, it is the game-schema oriented stories which are most appealing to potential voters (Iyengar et al., 2004). Thus, the contradiction between the type of election reporting citizens are offered and what they need to make informed decisions is apparent.

There is hope, however, with the emergence of the independent fact-checking organizations. The results revealed in this chapter suggest FactCheck.org and PolitiFact.com are providing the "watchdog" ad watching lacking in the coverage of a lot of the mainstream news media. An argument can even be made that these organizations are becoming the intelligence bureaus envisioned by Lippmann, wedging themselves between the press and the public. As Lippmann (1922/2009) wrote, they are "interposing some form of expertness between the private citizen and the vast environment in which he [sic] is entangled" (p. 213). To be sure, FactCheck and PolitiFact were cited by several of the news organizations to legitimize their fact-checking efforts.<sup>8</sup>

These political intelligence bureaus upon which citizens can rely are becoming even more robust. In 2009, PolitiFact was awarded a Pulitzer Prize for National Reporting for its coverage of the 2008 U.S. presidential election (Adair, 2009). In 2010, PolitiFact began to partner with

other newspapers in various states, the first being Florida's *Miami Herald* on March 1st (Sharockman, 2011). Since then, they have partnered with newspapers in nine additional states: Georgia, New Jersey, Ohio<sup>9</sup>, Oregon, Rhode Island, Tennessee, Texas, Virginia and Wisconsin. In 2012, FactCheck expanded to include a sister organization, FlackCheck.org, which monitors the amount of free airtime given to political ads by the news media. Furthermore, the efforts of all of these organizations have embraced a tenet of crowdsourcing – relying upon the public to bring to their attention questionable political claims from any type of media. This direct communication with the public is symbolic of how these intelligence bureaus are coming to exemplify the dialogic communication of John Dewey.

In one sense, then, the evolution of both FactCheck and PolitiFact can be conceived of as a convergence of the philosophies of Lippmann and Dewey with regards to the functioning of the press. The continued unwillingness or inability of the mainstream press to offer a consistent bulwark to protect the public from political ad deceptions has resulted in multiple versions of Lippmann's (political) intelligence bureaus. Among the purported elite of these fact-checking intelligence bureaus (Graves & Glaisyer, 2012), this study has demonstrated that FactCheck and PolitiFact were in agreement in their assessments of the presence of political ad inaccuracies in nearly 9 out of 10 cases. While Dewey was against elite intelligence bureaus for the purposes of democratic enlightenment, he did envision increased discourse among the public as beneficial to democracy. Thus, to the extent that FactCheck and PolitiFact are now directly engaging the public via the Internet in dialogic communication, aspects of Dewey's philosophy of democracy are also arguably satisfied by these organizations.

Beyond these intelligence bureaus, however, it is the paradoxical behavior of the mainstream news media which may, in part, explain why candidates continuously strive to get

around their filter. The press predominately offers game schema reporting because it attracts the viewers and readers necessary for a commercially-supported media system (Iyengar et al., 2004; Patterson, 1994). At the same time, however, the news media claim they do not want campaigns dictating their agenda which has increasingly been borne out in the practice of less descriptive reporting and more interpretive reporting (Patterson, 1994; Vavreck, 2009). Then again, the news media have been simultaneously showcasing political press ads to further elucidate their focus on campaign strategy. In this way, ads have seemingly become a proxy for the candidates' own words. The paradox, then, is that despite a proclivity by the press for controversy, there is a general avoidance of accounting for the many inaccuracies lurking within political ads. As a result, questions perpetuate as to the ability of the commercial press to provide citizens with the type of political reporting necessary to make informed voting choices (Jamieson & Hardy, 2008; Lippmann, 1922; Nichols & McChesney, 2011; Patterson, 1994). Accordingly, it is on the institutional structure of the media that the next chapter shall focus.



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>The “Celebrity” ad was produced by the McCain campaign and received an extraordinary amount of ad amplification – unpaid media coverage – because of its provocativeness in comparing Obama to the celebrities Paris Hilton and Britney Spears.

<sup>2</sup>The Swift Boat Veterans for Truth was a political 527 group opposed to the candidacy of Senator John Kerry (D-Massachusetts) during the 2004 presidential election.

<sup>3</sup>It is worth reiterating that only four articles from *The Gazette* met the criteria used in gathering articles for this study. Therefore, while conclusions should be drawn cautiously, it also suggests that attention to political advertising was not a large part of this publication’s election reporting.

<sup>4</sup>It should be noted that references to Senator Hillary Clinton were recoded during data pre-processing into the standardized form of “Hillary” rather than “Clinton” so as to distinguish her from references to her husband, former President Bill Clinton. Since Governor Sarah Palin’s husband was not a public figure, references to her were recoded into the convention of last name.

<sup>5</sup>A cluster analysis was also conducted among all news media across both print and television formats. The solution was essentially the same as the medium-specific cluster analyses. The one exception was that both CNN news programs were combined into the cluster with the other cable news shows.

<sup>6</sup>Vapor ads, or press ads, are political ads which are supported with minimal or no television media buys yet receive a great deal of attention from the news media (Fowler & Ridout, 2009; Jamieson, 2009; Novak, 2008b; Ridout & Smith, 2008; West, 2010).

<sup>7</sup>The “Fact Checker” was a blog affiliated with the *Post* that also had an accompanying column.

<sup>8</sup>PolitiFact, however, was denigrated multiple times by Rachel Maddow in 2012, as will be addressed in chapter 8.

<sup>9</sup>Cleveland’s *The Plain Dealer* is now in partnership with PolitiFact.com, branded as PolitiFact Ohio. Given *The Plain Dealer*’s propensity for watchdog ad watching revealed in this chapter, this partnership is unsurprising.

## CHAPTER 6

## BROADCAST MEDIA INDUSTRY: ECONOMICS AND ACCOUNTABILITY

“...[T]rust in some degree of veracity functions as a *foundation* of relations among human beings; when this trust shatters or wears away, institutions collapse.”

-Sissela Bok (1978, p. 31)

The previous chapter concluded with references to the general public’s perceived uselessness for and distrust of political advertising. Yet as a proportion of the Gross Domestic Product the U.S. continues to spend increasingly more money on political campaigning (Amazeen, 2012). Approximately \$2.1 billion was spent in 2008 on television ads by presidential candidates, political parties and interest groups (Wheatley, 2011). Moreover, regardless of what people say in political polls, research demonstrates that political ads can effectively influence the outcome of an election (Bartels, 2008; Brader, 2006; Carsey, 2000; Huber & Arceneaux, 2007; Johnston et al., 2004; Kenski et al., 2010; Shaw, 1999a; Vavreck, 2009). Alas, even with the public’s disdain for it, political advertising is here to stay.

Despite the accelerated spending on political campaigning in the last decade, political science professors Robin Kolodny and Michael Hagen both observe that these figures pale in comparison to the spending for the marketing of consumer goods. According to TNS Media Intelligence, \$141.7 billion was spent on U.S. advertising in 2008. Presumably, this figure includes the \$361.4 million allocated to television ads for the presidential election. The top television ad spenders in 2008 were Proctor & Gamble (at \$2.15 billion), Verizon (\$1.16 billion), and AT&T (\$1.33 billion) (Johnson, 2009). “Some people would argue,” contended Kolodny, “that not enough money is spent on politics, actually” (personal communication, November 16, 2009). Political practitioner Scott Fairchild advanced the same argument, rhetorically asking

whether we shouldn't be spending just as much if not more money on politics than we do on potato chips (personal communication, October 24, 2009). We may already be doing so.

Most would readily agree that advertising drives an essential and influential part of our consumption-driven economy. Functionally, advertising creates awareness about available products and services. It provides information about features and benefits of these products. It even serves as its own form of entertainment as exemplified by the anxious anticipation with which Superbowl ads are greeted each year. Aesthetically, advertising seduces and persuades by creating illusions akin to art and poetry (Levitt, 1970). Michael Maynard, Chair of the Department of Advertising at Temple University boldly stated "Advertising is the Poetry of Capitalism" (personal communication, December 12, 2011). It has been called one of the "pillars of our popular culture" reflecting social tendencies (Fox, 1984, p. 7; also see Schudson, 1986). Others argue, however, that as cultural texts of our society, advertisements not only are reflective of history but are also part of the process of history and thus shape it (Storey, 1996). Most notably, advertising supports the majority of the mass media in the U.S., allowing audiences to enjoy content generally free from government influence. Indeed, as observed by Campbell, Martin and Fabos (2012) "advertising is the economic glue that holds most media industries together" (p. 321). Accordingly, it is this supportive property of advertising that is considered in examining the U.S. mass media industry and how it interacts with the practice of political advertising. Specific research questions addressed are,

RQ7: How has political communication, advertising in particular, been shaped by the economic structure of U.S. media?

RQ8: What are the resulting relationships between the institutions of political advertising and the news media as a result of the economic structure of the U.S. media?

RQ9: Whose interests are served by the current structure of the political advertising industry?

### Structure of U.S. Broadcast Media

At the inception of broadcasting in the U.S., commercialization of the media system was not a foregone conclusion (although see Fox, 1984<sup>1</sup>). Elements of our communication systems have operated independent of the private marketplace (McChesney, 2008). Leading up to and during World War I, for instance, the development and practical application of wireless telegraphy and telephony was a joint effort between the U.S. military and government-sanctioned monopolies such as Radio Corporation of America (RCA) (Campbell et al., 2012). Moreover, in the mid-1920s, several hundred non-profit broadcasters were affiliated with colleges and universities. Over two hundred of these remained on the air in 1925, comprising approximately two-fifths of all stations broadcasting at the time (McChesney, 2008). During this time amateurs ran many other radio stations for non-commercial purposes (Campbell et al., 2012).

It was the prevalence of these amateur radio operators who increasingly led to the airwaves becoming overburdened and thus in need of regulation (Campbell et al., 2012). With an inadequate supply of radio frequencies available for the level of demand, the number of stations able to transmit simultaneously was limited (Overbeck, 2007). As a result, the Radio Act of 1912 relied upon this “scarcity rationale” (p. 420) to require wireless station operators to obtain a license from the U.S. Commerce Department. It was also at this point when legislators determined that because radio waves crossed state lines and national borders, they should be considered a natural resource. Similar to how national parks were considered the collective property of all Americans, radio waves were also thought to be collective property and thus should not be privatized. This directive that radio waves should be considered a natural resource set the foundation for the “public interest” concept later adopted by the Radio Act of 1927<sup>2</sup> and reaffirmed in the Communications Act of 1934 (Campbell et al., 2012; Waldman, 2011). It was

Herbert Hoover, serving as secretary of commerce under President Calvin Coolidge, who officially stated in 1924 that radio

...is not to be considered as merely a business carried on for private gain.... It is a public concern impressed with the public trust and is to be considered primarily from the standpoint of public interest to the same extent and upon the basis of the same general principles as our public utilities. (Waldman, 2011, p. 280)

Thus, the public interest obligation set the stage for how broadcasting would develop.

### *Rise of Broadcast Commercialism*

Broadcast advertising began in 1922 when AT&T's affiliate WEAJ in New York City (which has since become WNBC) offered ten minutes of radio time for \$100 (Fox, 1985). It was the first radio station to regularly sell air time to advertisers, a practice which AT&T initially referred to as "toll broadcasting" (Campbell et al., 2012, p. 116). In this sense, advertisers undertook the cost of offering radio broadcasting as a public information service. While most radio executives were initially adverse to the idea of using the public airwaves for advertising purposes, its profit appeal soon became apparent and ended the idea of promoting the emerging radio medium as a public service (Campbell et al., 2012; Fox, 1985). Instead, radio came to be increasingly dependent upon advertising revenue as were the newspapers and magazines of this time (Fox, 1985; Schudson, 1986). Similar to the radio programs throughout the 1930s and 1940s, early television programs after World War II were often developed, produced and supported by a single sponsor who would have its name in the show's title. As the costs of sponsoring individual shows began to increase, however, more affordable advertisements during breaks in the shows were offered to advertisers – a trend led by NBC. It was in this way that spot advertising was born as a revenue stream for television programming (Campbell et al., 2012).

In observing the developing tension between the growing profit-driven media and those wishing to preserve service in the interest of the public, it is worth noting that the profitability of communication systems was not in the auspices of the framers when the First Amendment was added to the Constitution guaranteeing the freedom of the press. To the degree that the print press was one of the early mass communication systems in the U.S., McChesney (2008) argued that in considering the meaning of press freedom under the First Amendment, the Supreme Court did not endorse the model of “maximum profits equal maximum public service” (p. 133). More important was to broadcast information to the public via the press to facilitate holding together a democracy. To be sure, Jefferson and Madison supported newspapers through both post office and printing subsidies (Copp, 2011; McChesney, 2008). Even the father of the free market system, Adam Smith, understood that profit maximization was an inadequate guarantee for public “goods.” In his recognition that private industries would not be able or willing to supply all the necessary provisions to maintain a good society, Smith recommended various public interventions that would serve to increase the level of public knowledge (Golding & Murdock, 1991). This is why public libraries, public parks and public hospitals exist - to increase public knowledge and welfare (Minow & Cate, 2003). Indeed, this was the position that would eventually be taken by the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) as explained by Waldman (2011):

A premise of all these rules is that the “trustee” obligations of broadcasters meant that they were required to provide programming beyond what the market would normally produce. Policymakers implicitly were taking the position that some types of programming ought to be provided—and are good for a community—even if there isn’t a large enough consumer demand to lead to its provision in a pure free market. (p. 281)

To this day the tension between the seemingly conflicting objectives of profits and public interest continues to plague the broadcast media.

### *Regulating Broadcast Media*

The early radio industry was a proponent of federal regulation of the broadcast spectrum (Overbeck, 2007) – even the National Association of Broadcasters supported the idea of public interest obligations (Waldman, 2011). In demanding that the government bring order to the chaos of the broadcast radio spectrum, the Radio Act of 1927 established the Federal Radio Commission, only to be replaced by the FCC as a directive of the 1934 Communications Act. The FCC was tasked with overseeing two general areas of broadcast (and later cable and satellite<sup>3</sup>) development: structural and content-related issues. Structurally, the FCC has been involved in the licensing of stations at the local level within a nationwide system in order to facilitate the availability of local content, competition and control – three characteristics that would be deemed essential to serving the public interest. The FCC was also integral in setting aside spectrum for noncommercial use and has established specific ownership and must-carry rules for those entities affecting broadcasting. Furthermore, the FCC has affected the development and distribution of program content through rules requiring sponsorship identification and disclosure, the Fairness Doctrine, and public interest standards (Waldman, 2011). Following the trustee model of broadcasting, where in exchange for use of the public airwaves broadcasters would serve the public interest, all of the rulemaking and regulatory powers of the FCC were ultimately to uphold the public interest.

The 1934 Communications Act expanded the governance of the (as yet undefined) public interest standard beyond licensing and interference issues so that the FCC could also consider programming issues and licensee conduct. Material deemed unacceptable in fulfilling public obligations was outlined in a 1939 FCC memorandum and included defamation, racial or religious intolerance, obscenity and excessive playing of music to fill airtime. In 1946, the FCC

finally released a policy statement detailing that acceptable programming included material of local interest, news and information programming, and what would stimulate public discussion. A list of 14 “major elements” was released outlining specific acceptable programming in serving the public interest but which were “neither all-embracing nor constant” (Waldman, 2011, p. 281).

Because each station was licensed to a particular community, it was required by the FCC to discover and fulfill the tastes, needs and desires of its service area. The process by which stations determined these concerns became known as ascertainment. Throughout the 1960s and 1970s, stations were encouraged to find out their community’s needs. In 1971, the FCC released a document entitled, *Primer on Ascertainment of Community Problems by Broadcast Applicants* which detailed how stations were supposed to ascertain the needs of a community including the requirement of station executives and management to personally speak with community leaders. Moreover, in fulfilling the needs of service areas, in 1973 the FCC put in place minimum hourly requirements for non-entertainment and informational programming that would be considered for broadcasters to maintain their licenses at renewal time. Of particular note, the *Primer* distinguished between determining important community issues versus programming predicted to be most popular (Waldman, 2011). In essence, the FCC was taking the position that public interest obligations had to be met even if unprofitable.

In addition to efforts at establishing and maintaining public service and improving the “vast wasteland” of programming<sup>4</sup> (Minow & Cate, 2003; Overbeck, 2007), additional regulatory initiatives included Congress passing the Public Broadcasting Act of 1967. This legislation created the Corporation for Public Broadcasting (CPB) and mandated the provision of alternatives to commercial broadcasting through the networks of National Public Radio (NPR)



and the Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) (Campbell et al., 2012). In effect, these non-commercial networks exemplified the philosophy that by removing the profit motive, broadcasting could better serve the public interest.

Tides would soon turn, however, as a deregulatory era began in the early 1980s and prevailed throughout the next thirty years. Many broadcasting regulations were relaxed or altogether dismantled under the philosophy that adequate programming would emerge simply as a result of market forces. Instead, cutbacks in local news and informational programming ensued and were more prevalent than the theoretical increases in public service programming that were supposed to emerge from market dictates. Besides decreases in news programming, scholars such as Temple University's John Kittross also noted substantial declines in other public affairs programming such as debates, discussions and documentaries (Waldman, 2011). Alas, in a trend that would be repeated many times, the market neglected products or services benefitting public goods because the benefits to society could not be readily monetized (Hamilton, 2011).

Deregulation continued with the 1996 Telecommunications Act that relaxed many of the longstanding rules and regulations that existed to restrict media ownership in service of the public interest (Overbeck, 2007). According to Congress, the Act was intended to spur competition that would purportedly benefit consumers. By knocking down regulatory barriers, cable companies, long-distance phone carriers, and regional carriers would theoretically enter one another's markets offering consumers more choices and lower rates. In practice, however, cable and phone companies merged operations which resulted in minimal competition and premium prices (Campbell et al., 2012). U.S. radio was even more directly influenced by this legislation. Prior to 1996, a single company could own 28 radio stations nationally with a limit to four in a single community. Since the Telecomm Act, consolidation has been rampant with

over half of U.S. stations changing ownership (McChesney, 2008). Between 1995 and 2005, the number of different radio station owners declined by one-third (from roughly 6,600 to 4,400). Moreover, ClearChannel, the top radio company in terms of 2009 revenues, now owns nearly 900 stations (Campbell et al., 2012) – a 32-fold increase from 1996. Thus, to say that the Telecomm Act increased competition – an important tenet of serving the public interest - would not be accurate.

The consolidation of companies for profit maximization has not been limited to cable, phone, and radio; it has occurred across media. In the first decade of the twenty-first century, most U.S. book publishers, magazines, motion picture studios, newspapers and radio and television stations were owned by five global conglomerates: Sony (\$78 billion in 2009 revenues), The Walt Disney Company (\$36.1 billion), Comcast/NBC Universal (\$35.8 billion), News Corporation (\$30.4 billion), and Time-Warner (\$25.78 billion) (Campbell et al., 2012). This widespread consolidation has been a contributing factor to radio being stripped of much of its local content, print and broadcast journalism being in a state of collapse, the duplicative nature of media content, and the precipitous increase in advertising and commercialism (Bagdikian, 2004; Campbell et al., 2012; McChesney, 2008; McChesney & Pickard, 2011; Potter, Matsa & Mitchell, 2011). All these outcomes fly in the face of obligations to the public. And yet, as profits seemingly eclipse the importance of public interest in practice – in theory, the FCC has never officially abandoned the public interest concept (Waldman, 2011).

Our media systems have evolved into a structure that frequently rewards profitability at the expense of public service. For some, the current state of our media ecosystem is the result of deregulation. FCC commissioner Michael J. Copps (2011) has lamented that “much of the blame for this ruination of credible information [in journalism] sits squarely on the shoulders of

the Federal Communications Commission – an agency designed for the protection of consumers that has spent most of the past 30 years eviscerating its public interest oversight role” (p. 291; also see Bagdikian, 2004; Jamieson & Cappella, 2008; McChesney, 2008). For others, the increasing over-commercialization of society has led to undue influence by advertisers wherein under the guise of giving consumers what they want, only a narrow range of commercially-viable products are offered (Campbell et al., 2012; Hamilton, 2011; McChesney, 2008; Schudson; 1986). And even insofar as the concession by Schudson (1986) that advertising benefits our media system, it is “by no means in a way ideal for the democratic process” (p. 239).

Recent research has empirically demonstrated a causative link between the commercialization of newspapers and their independence from the political parties of the 19th century (Petrova, 2011). Although advertising helped extract 19th century newspapers from partisan control, unfortunately one master simply has been replaced by another. Today’s advertising-supported media are now beholden to their commercial sponsors. Where once the partisan press served the interests of the political parties, now contemporary commercialized media arguably serve the interests of their advertisers (Bagdikian, 2004; Campbell et al., 2012; McChesney, 2008; Schudson, 1986). As explained by Jerald N. Fritz, an executive at Allbritton Communications Company and former chief of staff of FCC Chairman Mark Fowler:

[B]roadcasters, as content creators, monitor what the public wants on a daily basis. We evaluate who they are, what they watch, where they watch, and how they watch. We even speculate on why they watch. The trick is to amalgamate large enough audiences that advertisers will pay to reach and offset the expenses necessary to provide that programming. (Waldman, 2011, p. 294)

Program content is ultimately contingent upon advertiser support.

Moreover, we may even be witnessing a corollary to the benefits of commercialized media as political ad spending continues to escalate. In 2012, political advertising (across all

ances) is expected to increase by 17% over 2008 levels for total ad spending of \$4.9 billion (Ryvicker, Bellehsen, Bisson & Katz, 2012). For television advertising in particular, projections are that 2012 spending on the presidential campaign will be in the range of \$2.3 - \$3.3 billion (Wheatley, 2011). This may now put presidential TV ad spending well ahead of the leading U.S. advertisers.<sup>5</sup> As the advertisers supporting the media – television in particular - are increasingly becoming political interests, television may find itself in the place newspapers were over a century ago. In this regard, news media are reluctant to criticize the interests that fund their paychecks. A result of these media economics as will be addressed in the pages that follow, is that the realities of adwatching has created a so called “chilling effect” on watchdog reporting.

The rise and popularity of partisan “talking heads” is another paradoxical return to the news structure of the seventeenth and eighteenth centuries. The rise in celebrity punditry has come at the expense of responsible journalism that uses reporters to interview key sources and document stories. Moreover, along with the charisma and strong opinions of the pundits has frequently been an oversight of facts (Bagdikian, 2004; Campbell et al., 2012; Jamieson & Cappella, 2008). Not only have mainstream media generally abandoned their obligation to hold political actors accountable for their claims, certain media outlets actually facilitate the spread of inaccuracies.

#### Mass Media Profitability

Critical to addressing RQ7, then, is interrogating how political advertising has been shaped by the U.S. media structure through the profit-driven economic business model. To reiterate, the news media of the nineteenth century, particularly newspapers, moved away from the partisan press economic model to an advertiser-supported model. Along with the technology advancements of the printing press, newspaper owners realized they could make the most money

with one highly circulated press that appealed to the broadest base. In so doing, however, partisan reporting threatened to alienate large segments of readers who were not of the same political affiliation. A more widely circulated newspaper that was politically neutral would also result in higher ad prices. More readers meant more profits. This underlying economic factor contributed to the development of the objective reporting style which has affected how news media – ultimately both print and broadcast - report on political advertising (Bennett, 2006; Hamilton, 2006; Patterson, 1994).

Brendan Nyhan, who has worked on political campaigns, co-founded the fact-checking web site Spinsanity, and is now a political scientist at Dartmouth observed how this economic model has affected contemporary political advertising and news reporting. “Most major metro areas have one newspaper now,” he said. “They can’t afford to alienate half of their readers. And aggressive fact-checking that says one side is wrong is a great way to upset people.” He witnessed this firsthand when he was working on Spinsanity, indicating that “All of our readers were upset half the time” (personal communication, May 18, 2011). At *The Plain Dealer*, one of the newspapers cited in chapter 5 as offering a high level of adwatching, journalist Tom Feran reported similar experiences. “No matter how carefully you back something up,” he explained, “it doesn’t matter because people will call in and scream and you’ll hear them literally spitting in the phone they’re so angry, just foaming” (personal communication, June 14, 2011). As a result, said Nyhan, there is an economic incentive to retreat to the “he said/she said” reporting style evidenced in some of the news media clusters in chapter 5 (personal communication, May 18, 2011).

The economic constraints on broadcast adwatching may even be greater. First, as Feran and others have observed (c.f. Bagdikian, 2004; McChesney, 2008) local broadcast news

reporting has experienced the same cutbacks and financial pressures as have the print news media. Moreover, the volume of political advertising has deluged battleground states such as Ohio. “It squeezes out everything else,” Feran explained. “And as the buying increases, not only does it squeeze out other advertising...I think it tends to squeeze the news time itself because stations just didn’t have the inventory to meet the demand.” While Feran made it clear he wasn’t trying to excuse local news broadcasters from adwatching, evaluating so few ads that program time would allow would be like “trying to empty the ocean with a teaspoon.”

Furthermore, he felt that news directors find adwatching to be a turnoff for viewers. Adwatching does not offer visceral videos that connect with the audience, and, echoing Nyhan, “you’re going to tick off somebody who has a partisan interest” explained Feran (personal communication, June 14, 2011). He concluded that from a TV standpoint in general, there does not seem to be a lot of upside to adwatching. Even if one applies the moral argument that adwatching is the right thing to do or that broadcasters have a responsibility to the public interest especially given all the money stations are making from political ads, FactCheck’s Brooks Jackson said “moral arguments don’t get you very far with network suits or news executives...” (personal communication, November 11, 2009). Thus the drive for profits appears to outweigh the commitment to public interest.

PolitiFact’s Editor, Bill Adair, admitted some degree of surprise that in 2008, PolitiFact and FactCheck were “really the only two games in town” as far as adwatching. “Other news organizations did some fact-checking,” he conceded, “but PolitiFact and FactCheck were the only ones with teams dedicated to it.” The reason again came down to economics. “Fact-checking,” explained Adair, “is time-consuming, takes considerable resources, and it's hard.”

Because of the current philosophy that news reporting needs to generate a profit, choices must be made in how to allocate resources. Adair said,

I guess the people who are in charge of political journalism are, like everyone, divvying up scarce resources, and so they're saying, "Where am I going to get the most bang for my buck?" Well, if you have a writer who's writing five stories a week about who's up and who's down in American politics, that's a sure thing and there's an appetite for that and that sort of horserace coverage has often been preferred by editors to the sort of "accountability" journalism that we do. I guess if you think of it like a continuum, at one end of the spectrum is the daily who's up who's down/what's being said in American politics. That's not that hard to do...you can get a lot out of one reporter to justify their salary - that's seen as a wise investment. At the other end of the spectrum: investigative reporting into political officials. Big news organizations invest some in that. We're probably toward that end of the spectrum, the sort of fact-checking that we do. But, it's a tougher call for a news executive to spend that kind of money. (personal communication, May 31, 2010)

FactCheck's Jackson agreed that adwatching consumes too much time, saying he could seldom turn around a fact-check report in one day. "[A] typical T.V. station is looking to get two or three stories a day out of any given reporter," he explained. "They're looking for quantity more than they are quality. They don't want to assign somebody to go off for two days looking into an ad and then find out it's true and you've got no story, which sometimes happens" (personal communication, November 11, 2009).

Others as well have documented the general decline of accountability journalism (Bagdikian, 2004; Downie & Schudson, 2011; McChesney, 2008). Media ownership rules as a result of the deregulatory efforts of the late twentieth century have benefited the media conglomerates. Rather than offering accountability journalism or providing substantive thematic coverage of pressing issues facing the country, the news media have turned to the more profitable episodic stories about the challenges and tragedies of individuals (Bagdikian, 2004; Iyengar & Simon, 1993). With the decline in accountability journalism, then, the rise in political

advertising has often gone unchecked. While political adwatching reached its height during the 1990s, it decreased around the turn of the twenty-first century. However TV and newspaper adwatch stories have reportedly been on the rebound (Bank, 2007; Papper, 2007; West, 2010; although also see Graves & Glaisyer, 2012) with Jamieson and Jackson (2008) noting the most aggressive fact-checking ever during the 2008 presidential election. Nonetheless, the prevalence of inaccurate political ads revealed in chapter 3 and the minimal amount of consistent watchdog-type adwatching depicted in chapter 5 suggest more work remains to be done.

Given the overall declines in journalism, an arguable concern with political advertising is the prevalence of inaccuracies allowed to circulate particularly on television airwaves. As no systematic studies of inaccuracies in political ads have yet been undertaken, it is impossible to say whether the amount of incorrect information has been on the rise. But the lack of watchdog adwatching reported in chapter 5 certainly suggests minimal penalties for ads that run fast and loose with the facts. Consistent with scholars who observe that news reporting in general is more episodic than thematic, the specific theme of inaccuracies in political advertising is not a subject generating much media attention. McCain's widely covered "Education" ad in 2008, of course, is an exception. So, too, is FactCheck.org which, incidentally, is not constrained by the economic profitability model – FactCheck is a non-profit organization. In fact, as economic pressures to differentiate news organizations grow stronger, Nyhan sees fact-checking as a means for adding value if news is commoditized (personal communication, May 18, 2011). This may explain the motives behind the newspapers that have partnered with PolitiFact.com since the last presidential election. For the most part, though, the news media offer little disincentive to politicians and others to misinform the public through political ads.



## Relating Political Advertising to News Media

As evidenced in chapter 5, the relationship between the news media and political campaigning is fraught with tensions. My informants were helpful in providing insights into RQ8 – explaining the consequences of commercially-driven news media in relationship to political advertising.

From the practitioner perspective, political media consultant Chris Mottola contended that paid advertising is crucial because it allows candidates to get their message out around the filter of the mass media. For consultants and their candidates, explained Mottola, this is desirable and necessary because “most of the [media] coverage of campaigns is all process” rather than policy-oriented (personal communication, July 20, 2011). Indeed, his observations are consistent with the findings of other scholars and from chapter 5. The constant pressure for ratings and readership often leads to news frames within the context of controversy and sensationalism (Campbell et al., 2012; Simons & Jones, 2011). For example, the increased use of pundits is a cost- and ratings-driven strategy. Creating a news program based around punditry is easier to produce from both a time and expense perspective. The more extreme and controversial pundits tend to drive up television ratings (Campbell et al., 2012). However, as Mottola pointed out, “...with the exception of a handful of people, everybody you see talking on TV about political campaigns has never worked on a meaningful political campaign.” Regardless of campaign experience, these are the people television news programs rely on to assess the meaning, impact and significance of, for instance, candidate press conferences. “As somebody who does this for a living, it’s very frustrating and frankly it makes you truly angry. Because it’s like, ‘Who the hell are you? You couldn’t even get in here’” (personal communication, July 20, 2011).

But, conceded Mottola, the news media have a very tough job to do in part because of the immediacy of the now 24/7 news cycle. Instead of having time to reflect and research the meaning and potential impact of issues and events, reporters and news editors are frequently faced with what Mottola characterized as the “Oh my God” instance. “I have 15 minutes [to air time]. What does this mean *right now*?” (personal communication, July 20, 2011). Fellow political consultant Jim Mulhall agreed that the profit-making structure puts the news media under tremendous time pressure. To this he echoed Adair’s statements that having the writing skills, the knowledge, and the judgment to sift through all the information in real time is incredibly important (personal communication, June 1, 2011).

The commercial nature of the news media also requires artificial manipulation to give the appearance of evenhandedness. As Nyhan explained, his Spinsanity web site resulted in a regular column in the *Philadelphia Inquirer* in which balance was mandatory:

“[There] had to be something a liberal did and something a conservative did. And if there wasn’t that much happening on the liberal side of the aisle that week, then it was a little tougher to find something to write about. That doesn’t mean it was objectionable, it was just often the magnitude or the importance wasn’t necessarily parallel.” (personal communication, May 18, 2011)

Feran has observed similar issues regarding balance. Despite his efforts in fact-checking that is “ruthlessly, scrupulously accurate,” his reader feedback often chides him for not being very balanced. “And I say ‘well, I don’t think balance enters into it at all.’” Feran said that the *Plain Dealer* has been accused of rating more Republicans and rating them more harshly. “We’re probably rating more Republicans,” he explained, “because there is a Republican Governor and House Speaker and Senate president and the majority of the Congressional delegation. On sheer numbers, that’s the way it happens” (personal communication, June 14, 2011).

### *Press Ads*

Another dynamic resulting from the for-profit structure of the news media has been the increasing reliance on press ads. Press ads are political ads that are supported with minimal or no television media buys yet receive a great deal of attention from the news media (Fowler & Ridout, 2009; Jamieson, 2009; Novak, 2008b; Ridout & Smith, 2008; West, 2010). Candidates rely on them to circumvent the filter of the media, and the broadcast media play them because they are often designed to be provocative and provide ready-made material for them to illustrate campaign strategy stories. For example, in the 2008 presidential election, the “idiotic press ads” (Jamieson, 2009, p. 145) were supposedly produced for the sole purpose of achieving free press coverage. According to Obama campaign senior advisor Jim Margolis, “Both campaigns were staying up all night producing a spot [press ad] to be at the stations at 6:00 a.m. It went from something that we would all periodically do to a daily thing” (p. 130). Anita Dunn, the Obama campaign’s chief communications officer, explained that this strategy was the result of the lack of any context or analysis provided by the nature of press coverage. According to Dunn, the national press was almost completely disconnected from the health care debate and other issues of substance that were being engaged in within the battleground states. Evidence presented in chapter 5 supports the claim that the press tends to focus on the horserace or on controversial or spectacular aspects of campaigns. As a result, Dunn said their campaign would work around the filter of the press and feed content to the Internet and cable in order to drive the news cycle.

Dunn explained:

We would occasionally say [cynically], ‘They need new bright, shiny things to go play with,’ which would be that [Web] advertising we forced [the ad team] to produce. We tried to resist that and keep our campaign integrity for a while but at the end of the day, there was a national narrative that cable and the Internet were telling. There was a campaign they were talking about that was actually not the real campaign. (Jamieson, 2009, p. 139)

Despite having created press ads himself, Mottola doubted their usefulness. “The best viral political spots,” he explained, “are spots that have meaning to the electorate, not to the political reporters...” While the “Celebrity” ad was not a press ad (it was supported with strong paid media support airing 11,925 times according to CMAG data), it did garner tremendous incremental media attention and went viral on the Internet. Mottola thought the “Celebrity” ad (produced by Fred Davis) caught fire because it went to the heart of an argument the McCain team was trying to make. They knew people liked Obama, but what did the public really know about him? This gap in awareness of Obama’s identity offered the opportunity for seeding doubt about his character. Mottola concluded that “the press won’t fall for provocative stuff unless there’s some meat there” (personal communication, July 20, 2011).

From the vantage point of political consultant Jon Vogel, presidential campaigns exploit the use of press ads because of the rise of cable news networks – a perspective consistent with Dunn’s anecdote. “It gives them [cable news] something to talk about and fill up their day,” he explained. Party committees and outside interest groups also rely on press ads, he added. For example, they may purchase \$5,000 or so worth of radio and then release the ad to the press. “It’s less about influencing the overall public and the electorate,” said Vogel, “and more about shaping the dialogue around an issue” (personal communication, June 14, 2011). Indeed, political narratives are now driven by the commercials rather than by the journalists (Nichols & McChesney, 2011).

When Nyhan worked on campaigns, he observed the consultant strategy as often making the ad “a little extra bit misleading because they want that controversy in the free media to extend the reach of the ad.” They are careful not to cross the line with an outright lie, but they do make it provocative. “You stretch it just far enough that the media won’t aggressively cover

you as lying,” he explained, “and then you get a story that says, ‘Candidate X says that Candidate Y voted for blah. Candidate Y says something else.’” This is the he said/she said news reporting frame referenced previously. Nyhan concluded, “It’s a win for the person who wrote the ad because not only are they making the claim on TV, but it’s being reinforced in free media” (personal communication, May 18, 2011).

Mulhall suggested that the media in general has stopped covering individual television ads unless there is an extraordinary reason to do so, although he does concede that press ads successfully draw attention. “Ad watches,” he observed, “used to be more commonplace. Now it seems they’re barely done.” He concluded that a vacuum has developed as a result of this lack of media coverage now being filled by the likes of FactCheck.org and PolitiFact.com (personal communication, June 1, 2011).

Press ads present a challenge even for dedicated adwatchers. With limited time to check all ads being released, Feran likened his experience in 2008 to “a death march of trying to get to every one of these ads that you could.” To help him prioritize, however, he would visit the Cleveland television stations to check their political files. “I wanted to know what the buy was on these ads,” he explained. He gave lower priority to evaluating ads that were essentially press ads, particularly those posted online and not receiving air play. “If they’re not spending money putting it actually on TV where people are going to see it,” said Feran, “if you have to go and seek it out yourself online, it’s not the same as something that’s being run wall to wall on local television” (personal communication, June 14, 2011). FactCheck’s Jackson initiated adwatching while he worked for CNN. He said he frequently lost arguments with CNN management about whether they should be fact-checking what he referred to as “video press releases.” At the time,

he felt there should have been a rule limiting CNN's criticisms only to ads that had actually aired to a significant degree. In retrospect, he said,

I've given up trying to screen those out because it doesn't matter if it's a paid run or if it's just the media getting suckered again. It gets seen and it gets talked about and ordinary citizens wonder if this is true or not. So our job ought to be not to worry about whether these are paid instances or the press granting free publicity to the ads. If it's getting seen and talked about, we ought to look at it and see if it's true or not. (personal communication, November 11, 2009)

Thus, when the news media provide free, uncritical coverage of press ads, they are actually making the work of dedicated adwatchers that much more difficult.

### *The Role of Political Ad Accuracy*

If the commercially-driven nature of the news media results in little disincentive to misinform the public through political ads, then what can be expected in terms of their accuracy? Political scientist Kevin Arceneaux along with his colleagues Hagen and Kolodny believe that political ads are more accurate than popular rhetoric might suggest. The issue is context. Notwithstanding a few notorious examples, explained Arceneaux, "most political ads don't out and out lie to people...they're tendentious. They focus your attention on the facts that are more favorable to one side...so they're misleading, but I'm not sure they're just making stuff up" (personal communication, October 20, 2009). Hagen agreed that they are misleading. "I think people making ads now are pretty careful to make charges that are defensible," he explained. "But often, they don't characterize fairly where a person actually stands on an issue or on a topic" (personal communication, October 19, 2009). Nyhan offered a similar assessment drawing upon his experiences at Spinsanity. "A lot of the ads," he explained, "are more in the vein of out of context or a one-sided interpretation or presentation of the facts than outright fraudulence" (personal communication, May 18, 2011). PolitiFact's Adair was even more

critical, suggesting that political advertising is “often filled with exaggerations and [even] falsehoods...” (personal communication, May 31, 2010).

The political practitioners offered additional insights on the issue of ad accuracy. Tim Persico, former finance director for Patrick Murphy’s Congressional campaigns, emphasized the perspective of the Murphy campaign, saying “I think if there’s one rule of the road it’s ‘don’t lie,’ because as soon as you lie, it’s over” (personal communication, October 24, 2009). Mottola agreed, indicating that candidates rarely present factual inaccuracies. “And when it happens,” he explained, “it’s always a mistake and people tend to correct it almost immediately” (personal communication, July 20, 2011).<sup>6</sup> In Mulhall’s experience, “candidates’ consultants don’t want to level charges that they can’t back up” (personal communication, June 1, 2011). Mottola concurred. “Nobody purposely puts a spot on the air you know is untrue,” explained Mottola, “because there’s too many people like me who live for that.” Inaccurate ads still airing after being debunked “gives me the opportunity to take a 2 x 4 and beat you over the head until you’re bleeding out of all orifices.” He offered another metaphoric comparison: “An inaccurate spot for a professional political consultant in a major campaign is like having 20 rabid dogs at a T-bone steak. And it’s just going to be like, who can get to it first and rip it apart the most?” (personal communication, June 20, 2011) Not only will the opposition use inaccuracies against a candidate, added Vogel, “you run the risk of being called out in the press” (personal communication, June 14, 2011). In theory then, the opposition and the press are inhibiting factors on what is stated in campaign advertisements.<sup>7</sup>

Political scientist Daniel Chomsky was less sanguine about political ad campaigns finding them “neither accurate nor particularly useful” (personal communication, September 30, 2009). He referred to the work of political ad scholar Kathleen Hall Jamieson. “She was

originally quite optimistic when you look at her earlier work, like *Packaging the Presidency*” (see Jamieson, 1984). Chomsky continued with his version of Jamieson:

She kind of believed that ads would tell the truth. And she had a reason why she thought that ads would tell the truth, and that is if they lie, they'd be found out, and they would pay enormous penalties. If the candidate lied, either the media would expose them as liars – and even if the media didn't have the guts to do it - the rival campaign would expose them as liars. And so, the penalty of lying would be so great, people wouldn't do it. And then she spent years looking at these ads and she decided they're all filled with lies.

Despite the testimonials of the practitioners, there still seems to be little penalty for lying in political ads, contended Chomsky. Candidates accuse each other of lying and it becomes “a spitting match and nobody can make heads or tails of it.” Or as political practitioner Rosemary Wuenschel said, “it becomes a he said/she said debate in the media if you can get them to even cover that” (personal communication, November 15, 2009). Wuenschel's comments exemplify the profit-driven guise of the objective reporting style Nyhan had referred to previously. While the media occasionally report on inaccuracies, one story is unlikely to counteract all the damage done by misleading ads that air thousands of times sometimes even continuing after the inaccuracies have been noted by the news media.

This contention is borne out by data from a 2008 post-election poll conducted by the National Annenberg Election Survey. As a result of all the inaccurate political ads, Jamieson and Jackson (2008) reported “millions of voters were bamboozled by false claims made by both sides in the 2008 presidential campaign.” Among those responding to the poll, more than half believed McCain's false claim that Obama's tax plan would raise taxes on most small businesses (it would not have). This particular McCain campaign ad message was able to misinform voters despite the fact that campaign ad spending was significantly out of balance in favor of Obama. Moreover, the Obama campaign was able to effectively misinform voters as well. More than



two out of five people (42%) believed the false claim that McCain planned to cut Medicare benefits. Thus, as Daniel Chomsky said, “what we learn is what’s in the ads” (personal communication, September 30, 2009). In essence, Jamieson and Jackson’s findings demonstrate that political ads can be effective at misinforming voters. And while political ads may not typically fabricate information or flat-out lie to voters, the results from chapter 3 revealed that most of the ad claims verified by fact-checkers had some degree of inaccuracy.

### Beneficiaries of Political Advertising

A final consideration as addressed by RQ9 was whose interests are served by political advertising. In theory, the primary beneficiaries of political advertising are the voters. But is this so?

#### *Voter Benefits*

##### *Information*

The optimists were, not surprisingly, the political practitioners. To Patrick Murphy, political ads are useful at election time to help remind voters of all the work he had done in the previous two years. For example, in discussing his successful 2006 challenge at unseating an incumbent for U.S. Congress, Murphy contended he was trying to lead by example “running campaigns about policy distinctions,” distinctions that were relevant to his constituents in the 8th district of Pennsylvania. “When I was running for reelection in 2008,” explained Murphy, “I ran a campaign that was positive about what we got done, about creating green jobs, about the National Veterans Cemetery, about flooding mitigation efforts.” Murphy felt these policy-oriented ads were one way his constituents were kept fully informed of important issues (personal communication, October 24, 2009). Similarly, Vogel suggested that political ads give voters the “opportunity to hear directly from candidates on what they care about, what they think

the issues are, and what they think the campaign is about” (personal communication, June 14, 2011). While lamenting some of the more ugly aspects of his trade, Mulhall said, “I do think that voters pick up important cues and signals as to where their prospective candidates stand...they learn the sort of fundamentals as to where their candidates stand.” He conceded, though, that not every issue effectively could be addressed solely through advertising (personal communication, June 1, 2011).

Mulhall’s references to campaign fundamentals resonate with Gelman and King’s (1993) hypothesis of “enlightened preferences.” Essentially, campaigns are responsible for informing voters on the fundamentals of each candidate’s ideology and positions on important issues so that citizens are able to vote in line with their own preferences. But empirical evidence on the informativeness of political advertising in particular offers mixed reviews. Some evidence has shown that survey respondents who recalled political advertisements had greater knowledge levels of candidate positions than those who did not recall ads (Brians & Wattenberg, 1996; Johnston et al., 2004). However the Brians and Wattenberg study relied on self-reports of advertising exposure which could confound the results with the effects from personal attentiveness (Huber & Arceneaux, 2007). While Huber and Arceneaux (2007) found campaign ads to be informative only on highly salient issues, most noteworthy was the far more likely ability for political ads to persuade voters (also see Johnston et al., 2004). Huber and Arceneaux concluded that “popular concerns about presidential advertisements being uninformative and misleading may be more appropriate than scholarly claims that they purely enhance democratic accountability” (p. 958).

Rather than informing voters, linguist and political activist Noam Chomsky argued that political advertising actually serves to “undermine democracy.” He drew a parallel to advertisers

who try to “undermine markets” when they sell consumer products like toothpaste or cars. Economically speaking, explained Chomsky, “markets are based on informed consumers making rational choices...but anybody who’s turned on the television set knows that business is spending hundreds of billions of dollars a year to create uninformed consumers who make irrational choices.” In a real market system, he said, the advertisers would provide factual information about their products, how well they performed based upon empirical data, and so forth. Instead, car companies provide actresses or football stars to endorse their products. By creating uninformed consumers who make irrational choices markets are undermined. “Politics is the same,” contended Chomsky. He explained:

You want to make sure issues are kept out of the election...Party managers read polls, obviously. They know that on major issues, both parties are way to the right of the population. So you keep issues out of the election and focus on personalities, rhetoric, slogans, gossip...anything. As much glitz as possible. That’s how you undermine democracy, by creating an uninformed electorate that will make irrational choices. That’s the commitment of the PR industry. Make sure that people are uninformed and act irrationally...And the media are part of it. Have to be. If they weren’t, they’d be out of business. They wouldn’t get advertising. (personal communication, November 6, 2009)

Chomsky maintained that political advertising generally does not address the issues important to voters. As an example, he referenced health care. While both candidates from the 2008 presidential election ran ads pertaining to the issue, neither addressed the issue that, according to Chomsky, “a considerable majority of the population has wanted: some sort of national health care system” (personal communication, November 6, 2009). Thus, argued Chomsky, politically inconvenient topics will not be addressed in political advertising.

### *Mobilization*

Besides whether or not the political ads inform or persuade voters, it was suggested that political advertisements serve to motivate citizens to vote. “People don’t participate in the process of electing their government unless it’s brought to their attention and they have some

understanding of what relevance it will have for them,” explained Wuenschel (personal communication, November 15, 2009). The significance of mobilization efforts in getting Americans to vote was a central argument of Rosenstone and Hansen (2003). They found that since peaking during the 1960s, voter turnout had been steadily declining into the early 21st century. A reverse in the declining voting trend was evidenced in the 2004 and 2008 elections. Particularly in 2008, increased voter turnout has been attributed to mobilization of the youth vote and the African American/Latino vote (Pillsbury, 2008). Advertising was among the many tactics devoted to this effort.<sup>8</sup> Illustrating this point were the many “get-out-the-vote” (GOTV) ads the Obama campaign ran in 2008 to encourage voter registration and early voting. From just under 10 repetitions to over 160, fifteen-second ads such as the following were aired in ten states: “...Make sure your vote is counted. Vote early. You can even register and vote all at once...”

#### *Corporate Campaign Contributors*

Rather than benefitting voters, Noam Chomsky contended that political advertising and the need for much of it advantages corporate campaign contributors. He noted that Obama won the *Advertising Age* 2008 Marketer of the Year award. “The basic line,” Chomsky explained, “was that we’ve been marketing candidates like commodities ever since Reagan, and this is our greatest triumph...Now we have the Obama model.” The corporate contributors reap the rewards of their election influence, he argued, stating, “They’re getting paid back for it exactly as you’d expect.” He contended these contributors – particularly in the financial industry - are getting political favors and preferential treatment (personal communication, November 6, 2009). Echoing Chomsky, Bonilla-Silva (2010) suggested checking “which companies received bailout money and which did not and then assess if there is any relation to their contributions to

Obama's campaign" (p. 231). Indeed, three of the top ten contributors to Obama's campaign were Goldman Sachs, JPMorgan Chase and Citigroup (Center for Responsive Politics, 2009b), the same three financial institutions Chomsky singled out as beneficiaries of the political advertising system.

### *Political Consultants*

The consultants are yet other beneficiaries of the political advertising industry. In the 2008 presidential election, political consultants were paid nearly \$25.8 million for their consulting services. Other campaign expenditures included nearly \$45 million for polling, surveys and research. An additional \$11.4 million was paid to media consultants (Center for Responsive Politics, 2009c). Fairchild observed that "there are a lot of [media] consultants in both parties that are just 'chop shops'..." simply out to make a buck. However, he argued, "With really top-notch, reputable consultants, they're not trying to make a quick buck. They're trying to figure out the best strategy to win" (personal communication, October 24, 2009). Persico agreed that the best consultants are those who will pass up earning a percentage of a media buy in order to direct their client to a better-suited medium, perhaps direct-mail, for a given election (personal communication, October 24, 2009). "You get [the] reputable ones," contended Fairchild, and "they'll tell you what makes the most sense to win even if it's not their product" (personal communication, October 24, 2009).

While recognizing that political consultants stand to benefit financially from their efforts at creating political ads, Kolodny noted that reward also comes in the form of creative challenges afforded by the discipline. "Creating the political commercial in and of itself is an art form to many of these political consultants," argued Kolodny. "It's the height of their creativity. How do you use visual images, audio cues, like music or voiceovers, and issue content to persuade

people?” (personal communication, November 16, 2009). Arceneaux also pointed out that, “There’s a good bit of advertising that’s art and not science” (personal communication, October 20, 2009). From this perspective, then, political advertising is more than just a meal ticket to consultants; it offers benefit in the form of creative expression.

### *TV Stations*

The stakeholders likely to gain most directly from political advertising, however, have been the television stations that air the political ads and their media company owners. According to Mottola, the survival of television stations during the 2008 economic downturn was heavily dependent upon political advertising. “Television stations,” he explained, “were able to avoid massive layoffs and programming cutbacks because of the significant influx of political advertising dollars. Campaigns were the only consistent revenue source they had when the economy was going into the toilet” (personal communication, July 20, 2011). Hagen also observed that a “windfall” comes the way of TV stations during election years saying, “they make an enormous amount of money off of political advertising” (personal communication, October 19, 2009). Indeed, confirmed Davis Hebert, an equity analyst with Wells Fargo Securities, “Political ad spending is on a significant growth trend, especially over the past decade (five election cycles)...Drivers of that continue to be issue ad spending (the PACs) and now, the Supreme Court ruling that removed limits on corporate and other forms of political support” (personal communication, January 10, 2012). As a result, average TV station revenues from political advertising have risen from about three percent in the 1990s to as much as 20 percent in 2010 (Nichols & McChesney, 2011).

Between the Obama and the McCain campaigns, in 2008 over \$30 million in political ad spending went to network television. However because of the diversification of the media

conglomerates that own the networks (like ABC's owner Disney, NBC's owner Comcast, and FOX's owner NewsCorp), this ad revenue was a relatively small part of their business (Carr, 2008). Nonetheless, in spite of these political ad revenues, network news programming still continued to suffer staff cutbacks over the last few years, and viewership continues to decline (Guskin, Rosenstiel, & Moore, 2011). And as revealed in chapter 5, little in the way of watchdog adwatching was offered by network broadcast news programming.

However, only some of the windfall from political advertising goes to the big national networks. 2012 projections are that more than 80% of the profits from ad spending will benefit local television stations (Wheatley, 2011). According to the Equity Research Department of Wells Fargo Securities, the media companies earning the greatest ratio of political ad revenues to total station revenues in 2008 were Gray Television Inc. (15% of total revenue), Gannett Company Inc. (12%), and Nexstar Broadcasting Group (12%). These media companies were also the top beneficiaries from 2010 political ad spending with respective ratios of political advertising to total revenues of 17%, 12% and 13% (Ryvicker et al., 2012).<sup>9</sup>

But are these broadcasters who are benefitting the most from political advertising reinvesting the profits into their public interest obligations? According to Moody's Investor Service, the most likely scenario is that these media companies are using the windfall profits to pay down station debt (Friedman, 2011). Others contend there is little incentive to improve public affairs programming and every incentive to provide the profits to shareholders (Stearns & Wright, 2011).

Given recent accounts of the state of news reporting, reinvestment toward public interest obligations seems unlikely. For example, according to a Pew report on the State of the Media, local stations are the public's number one source for television news. Furthermore, news

programming generates the largest proportion (45%) of station ad revenues. Yet, increasing numbers of television stations are airing sponsored news stories<sup>10</sup> or outsourcing their news programming altogether (Potter et al., 2011). Similarly, an FCC report on the future of the media indicated that almost one in three stations was running news programming produced by another station. Another one out of five television stations aired no local news programming at all (Stearns & Wright, 2011). Rather than reinvesting the windfall profits reaped by television stations into better journalism efforts, the FCC reported that the money instead went to the bottom line (Waldman, 2011).

Despite generating the largest proportion of station ad revenues, and despite windfall profits from political advertising, local television stations are increasingly falling victim to what Stearns and Wright (2011) referred to as covert consolidation. This phenomenon is when one television station produces the news programming for another station within some form of a broadcast sharing arrangement (Potter et al., 2011). These joint news partnerships are varyingly referred to as a Local News Service (LNS) Agreement, Shared Services Agreement, Joint Sale Agreement, Local Marketing Agreement, or an Options Agreement (Stearns & Wright, 2011). This trend gained momentum in 2008 when FOX and NBC stations in Philadelphia entered into an LNS agreement. While the sharing of news resources was initially to reduce the costs of covering routine press conferences, increasingly more of the local news content has been originating from one room and a single news staff (Stearns & Wright, 2011). In 2009, 224 television stations were producing news programming for another station (Potter et al., 2011). Viewers are not necessarily aware of the source of the news program as local stations will put their own logo in the corner of the screen. Covert consolidation not only has the potential to mislead viewers, these agreements are also purported to circumvent FCC ownership regulations



and disclosure rules. As a result, the public is often presented with less localized programming offering fewer independent voices and viewpoints in a market that is ultimately less competitive (Stearns & Wright, 2011). Even the FCC acknowledges that “enhanced service to local communities is not always the result” of broadcast sharing arrangements (Waldman, 2011, p. 97). Once again, public interest obligations are seemingly being sacrificed to accommodate profit margins.

To demonstrate the effects of these news consolidation agreements on local communities, Stearns and Wright (2011) offered a number of case studies. One case study in particular involves one of the media companies identified as a leading beneficiary of political advertising revenue: Nexstar Broadcasting Group. An agreement between Nexstar and Mission Broadcasting in Scranton, Pennsylvania led to what Stearns and Wright characterized as a “rapid deterioration in local news.” They explained:

In the agreement, Nexstar’s WBRE began to produce newscasts of Mission’s WYOU in the same studio. While Nexstar initially aired both newscasts, it later took WYOU’s newscast off of the air. It fired the staff at WYOU and left just two people on staff (the legal minimum for any station). When it canceled WYOU’s newscast, a Mission executive told Broadcasting & Cable that in spite of ending all WYOU local news production in Scranton, Mission remained committed to providing local news. (Stearns & Wright, 2011, p. 13)

In place of the local news programming canceled on WYOU were syndicated entertainment shows such as “Judge Judy,” “Access Hollywood,” and “Entertainment Tonight.” The general manager for Nexstar called the programming changes a “win-win situation for the entire community” (Brelje, 2009). It is unclear how Nexstar fulfills its public interest obligation by reducing the amount of local public affairs programming in the Scranton community while wiping out its local news programming competition at the same time as it profits from a windfall in political advertising.

In general, among the local news programming that does continue, little in the way of election news coverage is typically offered despite stations benefitting tremendously from political advertising. The FCC report on the future of the media indicated that local stations gave four times as many hours to airing political ads compared to election coverage. A 2004 study cited by the FCC revealed that among over 4,000 local news broadcasts airing in the month before an election only 8% even mentioned local races. When election coverage was provided, less than one percent of the stories critiqued the ads that were inundating viewers (Waldman, 2011). Thus, to the degree that the public benefits from being informed about local elections and political affairs, it is evident their interests are not served particularly well by the presence of paid political advertising. While local television stations and their media company owners reap the windfall profits of political advertising, these revenues are not being reinvested into journalism that serves the interests of the public.

### Conclusion

Despite Petrova's (2011) research demonstrating the benefits of advertising in extracting nineteenth century newspapers from partisan control, she concluded that "economic development alone does not guarantee freedom of the press" (p. 805) because of how other powerful actors can influence the incentives of media outlets to become independent. As argued in this chapter, advertising itself has become the powerful political actor constraining how the commercially supported news media report on political advertising. Perhaps Mottola put it best when he lamented that the commercial structure of the news media renders it incapable of arbitrating what is correct in political advertising. "If you work for the media," he said, "you're under such editorial pressure and budget pressure you can't do it honestly...academia is really the only place you can go" (personal communication, July 20, 2011).

This chapter also argues that the increasing spending on political advertising may further contribute to the decay of journalism. In effect, the news media are seemingly reluctant to criticize the political interests which fund their paychecks. These media economics hold back adwatching on several fronts. First, there is a desire by news organizations to protect audience size by avoiding content that may irritate partisans. Second, adwatching is extremely costly to execute. Third, content critical of candidates or organizations – as is often the case with adwatching – runs the risk of causing journalists or entire news organizations to lose access to candidates or officials. Due to these realities of adwatching, there is a so called “chilling effect” on watchdog adwatching. Moreover, the dearth of televised adwatching despite airwaves filled with political ads exemplifies the recurring tensions between the incompatible objectives of profits and public interest that plague the broadcast media.

The lofty notion that the news media will hold political actors accountable remains largely a theory. As revealed in chapter 5, little evidence exists of watchdog adwatching in practice. Even anecdotally, practitioners and adwatchers find instances of the news media calling out inaccuracies to be the exception rather than the rule. Thus, as argued by Hamilton (2011), products or services offering benefits in the way of public goods tend to be underprovided by the market because the benefits to society cannot be readily monetized. His economic explanation is consistent with why watchdog adwatching is minimal. The costs of accountability journalism are high in that experienced journalists are needed to do the time-consuming and detail-oriented task of fact-checking. Furthermore, while adwatching arguably provides a much needed public service, its very nature is problematic to the commercially-driven guise of objectivity thus threatening to turn off partisan audience members and ultimately threatening potential profit margins.

Trust in the U.S. news media's ability to hold political actors accountable seems questionable given the prevalence of political inaccuracies. Today as the U.S. is experiencing the deterioration of journalism, Bok's (1978) prediction of institutional collapse in the face of a foundational breach of trust looms large. While some are questioning the future utility and viability of the classic print and broadcast press given the availability of new technologies (Picard, 2008), it is perhaps the need for broadcast licensing which may itself preserve one area of mediated communication where standards of public interest and accuracy can be maintained. Accordingly, regulatory issues surrounding the practice of political advertising as they relate to broadcast media is the topic of chapter 7.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Fox (1984) referred to the corruption of radio broadcasting by Madison Avenue a “persistent mythology” (p. 151). Due to the absence of a central authority as radio developed throughout the 1920s, he found it hard to imagine how radio could have developed as anything but a commercial medium. Fox made no mention of the Radio Acts of 1912 or 1927.

<sup>2</sup>As reported by Overbeck (2007), the Radio Act of 1927 was at the behest of broadcasters who wanted government regulation to bring order out of chaos that had besieged the industry – “a move that some in the industry have regretted ever since” (p. 427).

<sup>3</sup> While cable systems do not broadcast over the air, they are subjected to many of the same regulations affecting broadcasters since their operations affect on-the-air broadcasting as does satellite television programming (Overbeck, 2007).

<sup>4</sup>Former FCC Commissioner, Newton Minow, gave one of his first public speeches as Chairman of the Commission to a gathering of the National Association of Broadcasters in 1961. He implored the executives to take a hard look at the programming they were putting out on the airwaves. Stated Minow, “I can assure you that you will observe a vast wasteland” (Minow & Cate, 2003, p. 408).

<sup>5</sup>The most recently available data show 2010 television ad spending for the top three advertisers was \$1.85 billion for Proctor & Gamble, \$1.52 billion for AT&T, and \$1.2 billion for GM (Johnson, 2011).

<sup>6</sup>While Mottola’s statement seems to contradict the news media accounts offered in chapter 5 that the McCain campaign was slow to respond to reported inaccuracies, he did concede that McCain’s “Education” spot “was pulled because the back end of it was incorrect.” The way their research team interpreted the law, he said, was a “stretch.” (personal communication, July 20, 2011)

<sup>7</sup>Implicit in the practitioner arguments was the assumption that a campaign had enough finances to be able to defend against misleading or false ads by the opposition.

<sup>8</sup>While the demobilization hypothesis of Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995) suggested that negative political ads suppressed voter turnout, this theory has been widely debunked (cf. Jackson, Mondak & Huckfeldt, 2009; Jamieson & Cappella, 1997; Lau, Sigelman & Rovner, 2007; Wattenberg & Brians, 1999).

<sup>9</sup>It should be noted that political ad spending figures were not disclosed for television stations owned by Disney/ABC, Comcast/NBC, or NewsCorp/FOX, thus these stations were not included in the analyses by Wells Fargo. These omissions may explain why these figures are lower than what was noted by Nichols and McChesney (2011).

<sup>10</sup>Sponsored news stories, also referred to as “fake news” or “pay-to-play” stories, involve news segments that promote a sponsor’s product or service without disclosing to viewers that the station was being compensated for airing the story (Waldman, 2011).

## CHAPTER 7

## BROADCAST REGULATORY AND COMPLIANCE ISSUES:

## PRESERVING POLITICAL AD INTEGRITY

“Groups like ours are potentially very dangerous to the political process...A group like ours could lie through its teeth and the candidate it helps stays clean.”

- Terry Dolan, Chairman,  
National Conservative Political Action Committee (MacPherson, 1980)

It was revealed in chapter 3 that of all of the paid political ads that ran on television during the 2008 general election, just under 30% contained at least one inaccuracy. This figure, however, is likely a gross under representation of the prevalence of inaccuracies in the political ads from 2008 because most (70%) were never evaluated.<sup>1</sup> Among those that were, however, more than three out of four claims were inaccurate to some degree. Furthermore, those ads containing at least one inaccuracy aired twice as often on television as ads that were never evaluated. To the degree that inaccurate ads air on television more frequently, then, there is cause for concern particularly given the broadcasters’ mandate to serve the public interest. If broadcasters are supposed to be serving the interests of the public, then why are ads with inaccurate claims airing an average of over 4,000 times each?

Also of concern, as discussed in chapter 3, political interest groups were found to be most likely (along with the McCain campaign) to have inaccuracies in their ads (also see West, 2010). In effect, this evidence lends credence to the statement by Terry Dolan that a political action committee (PAC) “...could lie through its teeth...” (MacPherson, 1980). Whether or not the inaccuracies in 2008 were purposeful, of course, is another discussion. However, more than four out of five interest group ad claims checked by fact-checkers were not accurate. Moreover, nearly half of interest group ad spending came in the last weeks of the 2008 election. Given that

interest group spending is predicted to play an unprecedented role in presidential campaign advertising in 2012, attempts by fact-checkers to review the onslaught of ads during the final weeks will be challenging.

Accordingly, this chapter investigates the regulatory and compliance issues that govern how broadcasters can and cannot approach political advertising. Furthermore, given the *Citizens United* ruling, particular consideration will be given to commercial interests and their role in political advertising. Specific research questions addressed are:

RQ10: How have commercial interests and independent expenditure groups influenced political advertising?

RQ11: How will/has this change/d given the *Citizens United* ruling by the Supreme Court?

### Regulating Political Broadcast Advertising

Upon initial consideration, broadcaster responsibility for the content of what they air may seem straightforward. For instance, posted to the website of the FCC's Consumer and Governmental Affairs Bureau (2009) is the following statement,

Broadcasters are responsible for selecting the broadcast material that airs on their stations, including advertisements. The FCC expects broadcasters to be responsible to the community they serve and act with reasonable care to ensure that advertisements aired on their stations are not false or misleading.

According to sources from the FCC, however, political speech is a special case (personal communication, May 26, 2011). Indeed, political ads in particular have been described as a hybrid between political speech and commercial speech (Day, 1999). However, while advertising as a form of commercial speech can be regulated, as a general rule the political ads from candidates cannot be censored even if the information they contain is demonstrably false or misleading. As Day (1999) explained, "false political speech is fully protected under the First Amendment as long as it is done without 'actual malice,' as defined in the *Sullivan* decision"



(pp. 70-71). Actual malice would include being able to demonstrate that an ad claim is factually false as well as demonstrating a willful disregard of its falsity by the ad's creator(s) and/or disseminators. As a result of the *New York Times Co. v. Sullivan* case,<sup>2</sup> broadcasters have effectively been absolved of any liability in reputational damage resulting from the content of the political ads they air barring a reckless disregard for the truth or falsity of an ad's claims (Zelezny, 2011).

Even if broadcasters could be held responsible for libelous claims in the ads they air, Andrew Schwartzman of the Media Access Project argued that the principle of libel – which is what was established by the *Sullivan* case - is not a particularly useful remedy for false and/or misleading claims in the middle of a political campaign. First, he explained, “Not everything that is false is libelous. Not everything that's false causes damage to somebody. So not everything that is false is actionable under libel law.” Second, argued Schwartzman, libel is an after-the-fact remedy. “In theory, a candidate can sue for libel. But libel can't stop somebody from carrying something. It's damages after the fact. You can't enjoin speech and say you have to stop carrying this ad because it's libelous,” said Schwartzman. Finally, even if a candidate does go through a trial, how can a candidate demonstrate being damaged in a financial sense, which is what libel laws address? Other than a court order awarding financial damages after the fact, there is not much else the courts can do. Schwartzman rhetorically asked, “Can [the court] order somebody to carry corrective ads saying last year I carried an ad which said that John Jones is a liar and I want everybody to know John Jones is not a liar?” That would not be a meaningful damage resolution, contended Schwartzman, even if it could be done (personal communication, June 7, 2011).

### *Ad Source Considerations*

It is important to distinguish that the responsibilities and culpability of broadcasters vary based upon the source of the political ad.<sup>3</sup> Depending upon whether an ad is released by a candidate, a political party or an independent expenditure/interest group, broadcasters have fewer or greater restrictions on how they can handle an ad. As Schwartzman observed, “broadcasters are immune from liability when they carry an ad of a *candidate*” which originates from the Supreme Court decision in *Farmers Union v. WDAY* (personal communication, June 7, 2011). Specifically, this 1959 ruling stated,

Section 315(a) of the Federal Communications Act of 1934 provides, in effect, that, if anyone licensed to operate a radio broadcasting station shall permit any person who is a legally qualified candidate for public office to broadcast over such station, he shall “afford equal opportunities” to all other such candidates for that office, and “shall have no power of censorship” over the material broadcast under this section.

This “no censorship provision” indicates that regardless of how defamatory any of the material in a political ad may be, broadcast licensees may not delete or alter information contained in the communication. Most importantly, this ruling over-rides any existing state laws and firmly indemnifies licensees indicating they are “not liable for defamatory statements made...by a candidate for public office...” (*Farmers Union v. WDAY*, 1959). Ultimately, candidate ads are granted the greatest degree of constitutional protections.

#### *Candidate Political Ads*

In the political world, ads authorized and sponsored by a legally qualified candidate for *federal* public office must be accepted to run uncensored by licensed broadcasters. It is different on the state level. Stations have a choice as to whether or not they wish to sell time for particular state and local elections. But at the federal level, all official candidate-authorized ads must be accepted by stations. Furthermore, the no censorship provision indicates that candidate –

authorized ads may not be edited or “channeled” to a specific time slot because of concern that its material may be disturbing to young viewers (FCC, personal communication, May 31, 2011).<sup>4</sup>

These broad protections of candidate communications originate in the philosophy of a free marketplace of ideas as afforded by the First Amendment. As addressed in chapter 1, from the advent of broadcasting, Congress regarded it as a very powerful medium relative to the newspapers and pamphlets of the day. Congress’s fear of the power of broadcasting extended to concerns over broadcasters having the ability to censor material. In the view of Congress, broadcasters might censor political material because of their owners’ partisan positions. Thus, protecting political speech – including candidate authorized political ads – is to ensure that candidates have the right to speak as they choose no matter how disturbing or offensive their message may be (FCC, personal communication, May 31, 2011).

The protections afforded to candidate-authorized ads, however, have been exploited by some political contenders. According to Meredith McGehee of the Campaign Legal Center, for instance, candidates have utilized the no censorship provision as a means to promote their antiabortion position by “showing dead babies, etcetera that would normally be rejected by TV stations. But because they’re now being done under the guise of candidate advertising, [stations] cannot do anything about it” (personal communication, June 2, 2011). Similarly, in the late 1970s, *Hustler* magazine founder Larry Flynt had announced that he was going to run for president. As part of his campaign, he contended he was going to run ads that would contain explicit pornographic material. However, the FCC was never put in the position of having to deal with Flynt’s pornographic presidential ads as he was shot and left paralyzed, thus ending his plan to run for office (FCC, personal communication, May 31, 2011).<sup>5</sup>

While federal law mandates that broadcasters have no right to alter, edit, seek substantiation of, or censor ad material from federal candidates even if the claims are untrue, they do have a few options in dealing with problematic candidate ads. First, broadcasters can choose to run disclaimers non-selectively prior to the start of and after the conclusion of political ads. The disclaimers must be applied randomly in order to avoid the appearance of bias against particular ads. The disclaimer can state something along the lines of “we are required by federal law to carry these ads in an uncensored fashion.” From the perspective of the FCC, the broadcaster cannot get into the substance of why they are running such a disclaimer. Nonetheless, the disclaimer can at least serve to alert viewers who might question why a broadcaster is running an ad that many may know to contain false claims. Second, broadcasters are free to discuss questionable political ads in news stories or public affairs programming on their stations (personal communication, May 31, 2011). As shown in chapter 5, though, many news programs do not critically consider the accuracy of ad claims. Finally, broadcasters can choose to ignore their accountability for running political ads that contain false and/or misleading information which seems to be the predominant choice.

In addition to the no censorship provision for authorized candidate ads, broadcasters must provide all federal candidates reasonable access to their station.<sup>6</sup> “It’s basically saying,” explained McGehee, “that stations do not have to sell you time, but they [do] have to provide reasonable access to all [federal] candidates.” This provision applies to all classes and dayparts of commercial time. However, notes McGehee, “you can’t come in and demand the time or demand a particular [ad] buy.” But the station does have to be able to show what McGehee referred to as “a kind of good faith test” of not treating one candidate differently from any others (personal communication, June 2, 2011).

Another provision afforded only to federal candidates is the concept of equal opportunity. If one candidate is given the opportunity to buy time from a station, then the station cannot discriminate against the opponent as long as he or she has as much money as the original candidate.<sup>7</sup> “You have to provide an equal opportunity for similar air time to the other candidates for that office,” explained McGehee, “so that you can’t basically use the program to favor one candidate” (personal communication, June 2, 2011). The equal opportunity provision is also grounded in the philosophy of a marketplace of ideas where more speech ultimately enables truth to prevail. If candidate A says x, y, and z, his or her opponent can come back using the equal opportunity provision to refute x, y, and z (FCC, personal communication, May 31, 2011). The limitation, of course, is that candidates only get equal opportunity with advertising to the extent that they can pay for the ads. In the words of Schwartzman, “The equal time theory only works in a balanced world where money doesn’t buy access to speech” (personal communication, June 7, 2011).

When further considering the equal opportunity provision and candidate-authorized ads, campaign-finance regulations impose limitations in terms of the amount of money any one individual may contribute directly to a candidate.<sup>8</sup> In this way candidates are protected from being disadvantaged by a few wealthy contributors to their opposition. Affluent candidates, however, have a tremendous advantage because they can self-fund their campaigns (FCC, personal communication, May 31, 2011). Nonetheless, the equal opportunity provision was an attempt to keep the playing field fairly level. As noted in chapter 1, however, as the share of political ad spending has shifted from candidates to parties to independent expenditure groups, regulations intended to maintain some degree of balance in the political process have become distorted by the growing influence of money.

The final provision offered to candidate-sponsored ads is the lowest unit charge (LUC) for station air time. Within 45 days of primaries and 60 days of general elections, candidates must be charged the lowest unit rate for spots sold by a station during a given daypart or class of time.<sup>9</sup> In most instances, this rate is theoretically much lower than what is even made available to some of the station's most reliable advertisers (FCC, personal communication, May 31, 2011). However, political scientist Michael Hagen indicated that the lowest unit rate requirement is not being enforced for broadcasters despite all the money they are making (personal communication, October 19, 2009).<sup>10</sup> Indeed, McGehee called the LUC requirement "kind of useless" because of the way broadcasters sell their airtime. While they do offer LUC, she explained, campaign ads relying upon this requirement are "going to run at some ungodly hour...if you really care about the demographic that your advertisement is hitting, often you're going to have to pay premium price to get that specific time slot" (personal communication, June 2, 2011). Former McCain media consultant Chris Mottola concurred, explaining that charges are based upon what the market will bear at a particular point in time. "If someone's going to pay \$25,000 for a Lakers spot, I'm not going to be able to buy it for Meg Whitman at \$8,000. They may let me buy it for \$22,000, but they're not going to take money out of their pocket" (personal communication, July 20, 2011). Others have reported that the demand for TV ad time was so extreme in states with close races in 2010 that stations were able to charge premium prices for time slots with low ratings (Potter et al., 2011). As Mottola observed, then, broadcasters not only benefit from the direct revenue of political advertising, but also indirectly from the station's ability to raise the rates of all the other advertisers as air time becomes more scarce (personal communication, July 20, 2011).

### *Party-produced Political Ads*

Political advertising regulations for party-aligned ads (such as those produced by the Republican National Committee or the Democratic National Committee) are dependent upon the source of their financing.<sup>11</sup> A certain amount of party money can be spent in a coordinated “hard-money” fashion with candidates. Ads coordinated with candidates are entitled to the lowest rate unit charge and cannot be censored. However national party ads created using “soft money” or independent expenditures are not entitled to protection from censorship nor entitled to any of the other benefits of candidate-authorized ads (FCC, personal communication, May 31, 2011).

### *Interest Group/Independent Expenditure Ads*

Political ads produced by what are varyingly referred to as interest groups, third-party groups or independent expenditure groups have little in the way of protections. In the world of third-party advertisers, observed McGehee, “...in some ways, they have it tougher.” She explained, “There are no rights to the airwaves. They don’t have any lowest unit rate provisions. There’s no equal opportunity” (personal communication, June 2, 2011). In effect, broadcasters can reject interest group ads. They can even selectively reject interest group ads accepting only ones that align with particular political ideologies. Most broadcasters, however, do not want to do that because the country is ideologically split on a roughly even basis. Since political advertising affords broadcasters the opportunity to pad the bottom line, they generally do not want to alienate half their audience. The exception might be channels seeking to microtarget to select mindsets such as on FOX or certain cable stations (FCC, personal communication, May 31, 2011).

The advantage that interest group ads present to broadcasters, argued McGehee, is that “they usually have a lot of money” (personal communication, June 2, 2011). Political interest groups have even more money since the *Citizens United* ruling. As reported in chapter 1, the Supreme Court ruling in *Citizens United* effectively allows corporations and unions unlimited spending on political advertising (*Citizens United v. Federal Election Commission*, 2010). It was predicated on the balance between allowing these third parties – corporations, unions, etc. – the ability to spend unlimited amounts of money based upon the disclosure that would have to be made so that the public could learn by whom they were being persuaded. However, the Internal Revenue Service (IRS) has two specific provisions in its 501 chains which do not require these political entities to disclose who funds their groups.<sup>12</sup> As a result, what has emerged are groups with euphemistic names purporting to be Americans for a Better This or Americans for a Better That. Unfortunately, these names are completely meaningless to the public as to who the real sponsors are (FCC, personal communication, May 31, 2011). At the same time, because of their financial strength these groups are increasingly influencing political narratives with their ads (Levinthal, 2010).

Even within the industry, not everyone is a fan of independent expenditure groups. “As a consultant,” said Mottola, “I would be very happy to eliminate all soft money even though I make a nice living from soft money.” Most consultants, he claimed, would prefer to work directly with a candidate rather than with soft money. This is because the rules and regulations are much more concise, and working for an individual enables arguments to be more clarified. “The worst thing in a campaign,” explained Mottola, “is when a third-party group does a spot and it’s off our message.” He recounted the story of how the Ohio Republican Party produced a spot for McCain that illegally used a rock star’s song. “Some kid in a back room in the party did



a web video and put it up on the Ohio Republican Party's website," he explained. "That third-party soft money thing and people acting independently of the campaign caused the McCain campaign two days of bullshit that was stupid." They were taken off-message and had to waste time in court dealing with licensing issues (personal communication, July 20, 2011).

### Commercial Interest Influence

The role of money in influencing the political process was a recurring theme among those interviewed. Even before the *Citizens United* ruling, PolitiFact's Bill Adair felt corporate interests already had an influence. "In many ways," he explained,

the corporations have found ways to speak up in politics already, so, if anything, *Citizens United* is just sort of letting them do it more directly. They've formed these shadowy 527s and PACs that have been operating for years. So I'm not sure it's any different than what we've had before, but it's gonna be unbridled. (personal communication, May 31, 2010)

Schwartzman indicated he thought that money plays much too big a role in elections. "I think that the Supreme Court has greatly damaged the process by opening up corporate speech by making it possible for there to be less disclosure and undermining people's rights to know by whom they're being persuaded" he argued. While he conceded that it is important to have many voices in the political process so as to allow voters to hear all sides of an issue, Schwartzman contended that the "Supreme Court jurisprudence has allowed people with money to drown out people without money" (personal communication, June 7, 2011).

From political scientist Daniel Chomsky's perspective, examining the money trail left by corporate donors illuminates how moneyed interests affect the political process. He cited Ferguson's (1995) investment theory of politics which indicates that "blocs of major investors define the core of political parties and are responsible for most of the signals the party sends to the electorate" (p. 22). Rather than the voter, explained Chomsky, "the people who matter are

investors – people with money or...resources or...inside knowledge...And so what goes on with political advertising...is, it's a mechanism by which these corporate contributions are used to affect election outcomes" (personal communication, September 30, 2009). In a post-*Citizens United* world, then, voters could theoretically be inundated with ads from a (fictitious) group such as Americans for a Better Life that is entirely funded by the pharmaceutical industry. If the ads were about healthcare issues, it is debatable whether voters would react to the ads in the same way if they knew they were underwritten by the pharmaceutical industry (FCC, personal communication, May 31, 2011).

The broadcast industry, itself, is an important interest group affecting political advertising. During the 2008 election season, television took in \$2.2 billion in political ad spending (Atkinson, 2008). As argued in chapter 6, the broadcast industry benefits greatly from political advertising. Political scientist Robin Kolodny observed that the influence of broadcasters is evidenced by "how hard the National Association of Broadcasters has opposed the idea of giving free or heavily subsidized airtime to political candidates" (personal communication, November 16, 2009). Indeed, during the 2008 election cycle, the NAB was the top political donor within the broadcasting industry contributing over \$1 million (Center for Responsive Politics, 2009a). McGehee agreed that broadcasters have been very effective in lobbying members of Congress "who of course want to be in good with their local broadcaster because they can make or break their political careers." She contended that most members of Congress in unguarded moments would readily admit to that. "The last thing they want to do," said McGehee, "is anger their local broadcaster" (personal communication, June 2, 2011). Thus, any sort of legislation infringing upon broadcasters' abilities to financially benefit from political advertising will be met with strong resistance.

During the 2008 election in particular, some argued the commercial interests primarily driving the presidential campaign were the financial institutions (Noam Chomsky, personal communication, November 6, 2009). While direct contributions from corporations were still banned in 2008, employees and stockholders were able to contribute to political action committees or make individual contributions thereby indirectly benefitting a campaign on behalf of a corporation. Since the financial industry preferred Obama to McCain, argued Chomsky, “they kind of carried him over the end through the swing states.” Moreover, despite the popular press’ attention to 2008 being the election of the small donor, “the core funding was from financial institutions,” said Chomsky (personal communication, November 6, 2009). His views resonate with those of other scholars, including Bonilla-Silva (2010), who wrote, “Obama received 46% of his money from corporate America and a lot through the magic of bundling” (p. 224). Hagen also conceded that “there’s still some disagreement about the extent to which the Obama campaign really did rely on small donors” (personal communication, October 19, 2009).

Another concern with corporate and outside interest group spending is the potential for creating an uneven playing field. For political practitioner Rosemary Wuenschel, an imbalance in money enables a candidate to not only outspend his or her opponent in terms of quantity of advertising, but quality as well. Better funded candidates can hire more effective communication teams (personal communication, November 15, 2009). Hagen concurred that inequities are troublesome, particularly “the opportunity for one candidate to outspend the other candidate by an enormous amount” (personal communication, October 19, 2009). Political scientist Kevin Arceneaux’s research efforts specifically addressed this issue (see Huber & Arceneaux, 2007). “What we found,” he explained, “is that in general, if you have an imbalance in advertising...like Obama in ’08 or Bush in ’04 or Bush in 2000 or Clinton in ’96...those ads are going to be more

effective, moving voters to support those candidates” (personal communication, October 20, 2009). Presumably, then, a balance in advertising preserves a campaign’s ability to communicate to voters on a level playing field.

Arceneaux also observed that financial balance between opponents has some bearing on the accuracy of campaign claims as well. “If [your] opponent can hit back hard, then you want to make claims that can withstand criticism,” he explained. “But if your opponent’s weak, if you have the bigger stick and the megaphone, you can just sort of drown them out” (personal communication, October 20, 2009). Indeed, balance of campaign finances is becoming an increasingly critical issue in a post-*Citizens United* world. It becomes particularly problematic, explained political consultant Jon Vogel, “when you have one side yelling with a hundred million dollars and one side with no ability to refute it because that’s when you can get away with a lot more of stretching an argument” (personal communication, June 14, 2011). This, then, is arguably where the news media have a critical watchdog role to play in order to expose to the public those who may push ad claims beyond the bounds of accuracy.

#### Broadcaster Accountability Issues

Based upon the rules and regulations governing broadcasters, then, and despite the increasing role of commercial and other outside interests, independent expenditure ads can theoretically be more rigorously regulated for inaccurate information than can candidate ads. Yet, as revealed in chapter 3, more than four out of five claims evaluated from interest group ads were inaccurate. Given this finding, just how careful are broadcasters at scrutinizing ads?<sup>13</sup> According to Mottola, broadcasters require a lot more substantiation for interest group ads than candidate ads. “If you send a candidate spot to a station that says ‘Candidate Jones is a child molester,’ [the station] will say, ‘Well, can you prove that?’ And we’ll send them an article,”

explained Mottola. “If you’re a third-party group and you say ‘Candidate Jones is a child molester,’ [the station] will want not only the article but the affidavits and 400 pages of backup” (personal communication, July 20, 2011).

Indeed, since broadcasters can charge as much money as they desire for interest group ads, they are inclined to want to run these types of ads. Yet, to mitigate themselves from accusations of actual malice, broadcasters want to feel comfortable that they can refute any concerns. So they will request sufficient back up to ensure that enough rocks have been overturned and enough questions have been asked that they can make a pretty good case that they were not being reckless (FCC, personal communication, May 31, 2011).

Political interest group operatives know broadcasters have this verification responsibility and have referenced it to suggest that political ads must therefore be accurate. Carl Forti, Political Director of American Crossroads – a 527 organization – has said, “TV stations have no obligation to run the ads if they believe they’re false. And TV stations ran all our ads. We didn’t have any ads pulled. So therefore, I think that all of our ads are factually accurate” (Cash Attack, 2010). In response to Forti’s claim, McGehee said, “That’s just incorrect.” Outside groups are basically making a bet, she argued. The more attention a questionable ad gets, the better it is for the outside groups. “Broadcasters,” she explained,

unless they really find it offends community sensibility, they’re going to say “Hey, it’s a political question that’s up for debate and we’re not going to refuse that ad.” It’s much easier for them, obviously, if it involves something like dead babies or people being killed or something like that on the air to make that case. But when it’s kind of a “She voted to hurt children,” “No, she didn’t vote that way,” the stations really aren’t going to get into it, particularly if the people buying the ad have the money. (personal communication, June 2, 2011)

Schwartzman concurred, "...the only thing a broadcaster is going to pull down is something that is unambiguously libelous coming from an outside party" (personal communication, June 7, 2011). Thus, tendentious or misleading political ads will continue to be aired.

What there is to fall back on, argued Schwartzman, is "the fundamental integrity of the broadcaster." And that integrity is supposed to be grounded within the licensee's obligation to serve the public interest (personal communication, June 7, 2011). Indeed, an ad called "Medical Records" by the Brave New PAC was pulled by a couple of stations during the 2008 election. Notes within Appleman's (2008) database indicated, "According to news reports MSNBC ran the ad briefly [according to CMAG it aired four times], then pulled it after criticism, and CNN refused to run it." Yet this ad was never evaluated by either FactCheck or PolitiFact. There were, however, 13 third-party ads that were evaluated by these organizations as having claims that were false, yet they aired over 6,000 times. Thus, it is not clear upon what criteria broadcasters base decisions of whether to run ads with false claims. With minimal or often no mainstream news media attention to the veracity of ad claims, it may be that the one web posting by FactCheck or PolitiFact about a false ad claim does not render broadcasters' continued airing of these ads to be at the level of reckless disregard. For if they are not aware of these evaluations, they cannot be held accountable for taking action. This may perhaps be another explanation for why more newsrooms do not conduct watchdog adwatches. If a station's news department discovers factual inaccuracies, the station has a public obligation to stop running the ad. Therefore, instead of cutting off lucrative streams of revenue, stations choose to ignore issues of political ad veracity.

To be sure, the Communications Act requires licensed broadcasters to serve the public interest. According to Schwartzman, "Knowingly carrying something that's false is arguably a

violation of the public interest.” The problem is, argued Schwartzman, there is no effective remedy provided by the Communications Act. He explained,

Broadcast licenses come up for renewal once every eight years. And at that time, a broadcaster’s performance is measured over an eight-year period. And a license renewal cannot be denied because of an isolated incident...So let’s pick an extreme example. Let’s say that the license was last renewed a year ago, and let’s say that a broadcaster chooses to knowingly carry something that’s unquestionably false and carries the ad for a month before the election. Seven years go by. The candidate can then file a license renewal challenge saying, “Seven years ago for a month [the station] carried ads that they knew were false.” Is that going to get the license taken away? No. Will the FCC do anything in the middle of a license term? No.

The extent of what can happen, said Schwartzman, is that the FCC can advise the broadcaster that a pattern of such behavior will cause trouble at license renewal time (personal communication, June 7, 2011). What it essentially comes down to, again, is the core integrity of the broadcaster to act in the best interests of the public.

One step in the right direction toward holding broadcasters more accountable, argued Schwartzman, would be to reduce the length of time between license renewals from the current eight years down to every three years (personal communication, June 7, 2011). In the Telecommunications Act of 1996, Congress expanded the length of time for broadcasters’ license renewal from three years to eight years to “provide security and stability to incumbent licensees” (Waldman, 2011, p. 285). This was after the deregulatory efforts of 1984 when ascertainment, commercial time limits, programming guidelines, and program logging requirements were eliminated. The program logging requirement was replaced by a quarterly issues/programs list requirement in which broadcasters simply had to list a few programs and/or issues which purportedly fulfill their public interest programming obligations. The Telecommunications Act loosened this stipulation even more by not requiring broadcasters to actually supply documented evidence of their programming but only certify that their quarterly

issues/programs lists exist and are in order. The FCC indicated that while broadcasters are still required to “provide programming that responds to issues of concern to the community,” it is the demands of market forces that would best assure programming needs are met (Waldman, 2011, p. 284). The minimal attention by broadcasters to false and misleading political ad information, however, suggests otherwise.

### Conclusion

In response to RQ10 and RQ11, then, the influences on political advertising by commercial interests and independent expenditure groups have been many, particularly since the *Citizens United* ruling. Going forward, spending and influence from independent expenditure groups is expected to be significantly higher than in 2008. More interest group spending on political advertising also means an increased chance of derailing candidate messages.

Furthermore, the potential for outside groups to create an imbalance in political advertising with unprecedented levels of spending may arguably lead to greater inaccuracy issues as groups with greater funding can stretch the truth against candidates who may be unable to respond.

Moreover, moneyed interests may be able to not only drown out opposing groups with less money, but potentially overwhelm even the messages of candidates themselves. And finally, *Citizens United* has also resulted in transparency issues surrounding the disclosure of whom is funding some of the PACs. In this way, voters can be less sure of by whom they are being persuaded if they do not know who is funding the ads.

While more voices participating in the political process are arguably beneficial, in the current climate apparently powerful interest groups figuratively command a megaphone, and thus are capable of out-shouting all others, including the candidates themselves. As outside groups gain in their ability to direct campaign narratives through political advertising, we are just



a few steps away from approaching the fear articulated in 1927 by Rep. Johnson where a single selfish group will be permitted to dominate broadcasting airwaves (Rendall, 2005). And as reasoned in chapter 6, rather than benefiting voters, the greatest beneficiary of political advertising has been the broadcast industry itself. At the same time, the broadcast industry lobbies politicians against any sort of legislation that would curtail political advertising revenues.

Today political advertising is at a seeming crossroads where the increased prevalence of interest group ad spending actually affords broadcasters a greater ability to maintain the integrity of political ad content. While candidate ads and party-sponsored ads coordinated with candidates cannot be censored even with the presence of false or misleading information, independent expenditure ads can be monitored by broadcasters for content. In fact, broadcasters have an obligation to the public to ensure that the content of the ads they air is accurate. Nonetheless, as demonstrated in chapter 5 and by other scholars (Fowler & Ridout, 2009; Iyengar et al., 2004), little to no media attention has been devoted to political ad accuracy, particularly in broadcast news media. These findings parallel those of Picard (2008) who has noted that media companies prefer to not cover stories that draw attention to public policy proposals or legislation that is not in their best interests. In a similar fashion, the dearth of watchdog ad reporting enables broadcast stations to continue airing ads that may be false while preserving their ability to claim ignorance about the content when faced with regulatory compliance issues. In other words, if broadcasters ignore the accuracy of ads, they mitigate the possibility of “knowingly” airing false or misleading information and are therefore less likely to be held accountable. In this way the financial interests of the media companies can supersede the obligations they have to serve the public interests of their communities.

Preserving the accuracy and integrity of material broadcast over the public airwaves is still possible. In return for the license authorizing a station to use the broadcast spectrum, licensees are supposed to be serving the public interest. Throughout the deregulatory era of the last 30 years, however, the FCC has moved away from its one-time philosophy of regulating content. Moreover, less oversight has been offered in distinguishing the boundaries of what constitutes service toward the public interest. Instead, a free-market philosophy has prevailed whereby broadcasters which do not provide the public with desired services will theoretically be punished. But as noted in chapter 6, when left to market forces, public goods tend to be underprovided as these types of services are difficult to monetize (Hamilton, 2011). Instead, commercial interests are overriding public obligations, particularly at the local level as detailed in chapter 6. To reverse this decline in public interest programming and oversight, re-enforcing the requirements to obtain or retain broadcasting licenses by shortening the renewal period and demanding evidence of programming that serves the public interest is necessary.

In addition to stronger licensing requirements, the accuracy and integrity of broadcasting can also be preserved by fully and transparently disclosing the true identity of the individual(s) sponsoring political advertisements. Media Access Project has petitioned the FCC for rulemaking to amend the Communications Act to require this type of meaningful disclosure. Two changes to existing rules have been proposed. The first would require that the identity of an ad's sponsor be disclosed based upon whomever is *paying* for the ad rather than whomever is dictating the content of the ad. In cases of "front groups" or institutional sponsors, those contributing 25% or more of the ad's financing (up to a maximum of four donors) would be disclosed on-air. The station would be required to maintain in its public file a list of all sponsors contributing at least 10% of an ad's funding. To assist with assessment of compliance with this

rule, the second change would require stations to obtain sworn statements from political advertisers as to the sources of their funding (Schwartzman, 2011).

Finally, in the absence of meaningful regulatory oversight, it is important for the public to advocate for the preservation of radio spectrum in their own interest and to hold broadcasters accountable for their performance. Just as it was noted in chapter 5 that adwatchers were engaging with the public in monitoring questionable ad claims, crowdsourcing in the spirit of Dewey's dialogic communication is being attempted in the realm of broadcaster accountability as well. For instance, *The New York Times* has sought the public's help in identifying political ad donors by assisting in accessing the public files of broadcasters. Since the FCC does not require public files to be digitized, stations only have to maintain hardcopies on site and make them available for any member of the public who comes to review them on premises. These files contain not only information about the station's programming but information about advertisers including who is purchasing the ads and for how much money. Similar efforts have been underway elsewhere. The nonprofit news organization ProPublica has allied with university students in obtaining public files from local Chicago television stations and making the information available online ("Seeking," 2012). Moreover, Free Press has enlisted the help of journalism students and is offering training sessions on how to access and what to look for in broadcaster public files (Josh Stearns, personal communication, March 26, 2012). Finally, FlackCheck.org is encouraging and mobilizing the public to contact their local television stations and ask them to reject misleading third party ads ("Take Action," 2012). These efforts will not only allow the public to be involved in holding broadcasters accountable, but any data they collect will also facilitate additional scrutiny by scholars, watchdog reporters, and public advocacy organizations.

As demonstrated in this chapter and the ones preceding it, as much scrutiny as is possible will be necessary to guard against groups which intend to play fast with the truth, to mislead, to quote lines out of context, to distort, to...well to put it crudely, to lie through their teeth.

Applying such rigorous scrutiny will no doubt go a long way toward holding political advertisers accountable and toward keeping them honest. Better still, it would help to correct for the blind spot in political advertising, bringing into plain sight the evasiveness of broadcasters in serving the interests of the public.

## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>The large proportion of ads never evaluated was due varyingly to a lack of resources to evaluate every ad, ads containing claims that were factually unverifiable, and/or ads containing claims that had been previously fact-checked in a different ad. See chapter 3 for more details.

<sup>2</sup>*New York Times Co. v. Sullivan*, 376 U.S. 254 (1964). This case was based upon a complaint by an elected City Commissioner, L. B. Sullivan, of Montgomery, Alabama. Sullivan claimed to have been libeled by statements in a full page political ad carried in *The New York Times* on March 29, 1960. While most allegations were deemed accurate, several were not true (Zelezny, 2011).

<sup>3</sup>All of the broadcast provisions and regulations addressed in this chapter also effectively apply to both cable and satellite stations (FCC, personal communication, May 26, 2011). See, for example, Communications Act of 1934, 47 C.F.R. § 76.206; 47 C.F.R. § 25.701(c); 47 C.F.R. § 25.701(b)(3); 47 C.F.R. § 76.205; or 47 C.F.R. § 25.701(b)(4).

<sup>4</sup>See Communications Act of 1934, 47 U.S.C. §315(a).

<sup>5</sup>Schwartzman observed that the FCC later put out a policy statement or letter clarifying that if something is indecent or obscene, the indecency and obscenity provisions trump the no censorship provisions of the Communications Act and would thus permit a broadcaster to refuse to carry a political ad that is indecent or obscene (personal communication, June 7, 2011).

<sup>6</sup>See 47 C.F.R. § 25.701(b)(3) and 47 U.S.C. § 335(a).

<sup>7</sup>See 47 U.S.C. § 315(b); 47 C.F.R. § 73.1941.

<sup>8</sup>See Federal Election Campaign Act of 1971, 2 U.S.C. § 431 et seq.

<sup>9</sup>See Communications Act of 1934, 47 U.S.C. § 315(b); 47 C.F.R. § 73.1942.

<sup>10</sup>Elsewhere, Hagen has previously been more optimistic about LUC writing that it “does indeed give candidates a break on the price of advertising in our sample, allowing them to purchase more communications power per dollar than their party and interest group counterparts” (Hagen & Kolodny, 2008, p. 12).

<sup>11</sup>See Bipartisan Campaign Reform Act of 2002, Pub.L. 107-155, 116 Stat. 81.

<sup>12</sup>See I.R.C. 501(c)(4), <http://www.irs.gov/charities/nonprofits/article/0,,id=96178,00.html>

<sup>13</sup>It should be reiterated here that multiple broadcast/cable organizations were contacted for this study. None responded to requests for an interview.

## CHAPTER 8

## CAVEAT SPECTATOR

“I hereby implore all of us who are interested in the word ‘fact’ continuing to mean something, all of us left, right and center, I implore all of us to stop playing the bull puckery lottery. If you want to assert the truth or falseness of something that somebody else did in politics, a citation from PolitiFact cannot help you with that. If they could be stripped of the word ‘fact,’ they should be.”

-Rachel Maddow, MSNBC, January 26, 2012

For a democracy to function properly, voters ought to be accurately informed. But what was once a concern only for male property owners has today become a necessity for nearly all citizens aged 18 and older. While much attention has been given to the seeming disinterest and uninformed state of voters (Bartels, 1996; Berelson, 1952; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Dewey, 1927; Lippmann, 1922; McChesney, 2008; Mindich, 2005, Zaller, 1999), it has only been recently that a framework of misinformation has emerged (Alvarez, 1997; Bullock, 2006; Delli Carpini & Keeter, 1996; Kuklinski et al., 2000; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010). At the same time, research on the effects of the mass media on political elections has moved away from the minimal effects model (Campbell et al., 1964; Katz & Lazarsfeld, 1955; Klapper, 1966; Lazarsfeld et al., 1948) and has increasingly been substantiated with empirical support of mediated campaign effects (Bartels, 2008; Brader, 2006; Carsey, 2000; Huber & Arceneaux, 2007; Johnston et al., 2004; Kenski et al., 2010; Shaw, 1999a; Vavreck, 2009). Evidence in the preceding chapters of this study contributes to and extends this body of knowledge by offering what is thought to be the first systematic look at the prevalence of inaccuracies in televised political advertising. Furthermore, evidence and arguments have been offered about how and why the news media provide coverage of political advertising in the manner that they do.

### Prevalence of Inaccuracies

As noted in chapter 1, it was Key (1966) who famously observed that voters were not fools particularly when considering the clarity and substance of information provided to them. Scholars have provided evidence that political advertising has actually been effective at *misinforming* voters (Jamieson & Jackson, 2008; West, 2010; Winneg et al., 2005). To date, however, no studies have accounted for just how prevalent inaccuracies are in political advertising. The present study accomplishes this task. It was revealed in chapter 3 that out of all of the paid political ads that ran on television during the 2008 general election, just under 30% contained at least one inaccuracy. This figure, however, is likely a gross under representation of the prevalence of inaccuracies in political ads from 2008 because most of the ads (70%) were never evaluated. Among ads assessed, however, more than three out of four of the evaluated claims had some degree of inaccuracy. Furthermore, ads containing at least one inaccuracy aired twice as often on television as the ads that were never evaluated. To the degree inaccurate ads air on television more frequently, then, there is cause for concern particularly given the broadcasters' mandate to serve the public interest.

This study also extends the work of Geer (2006) who offered an organized review of negativity in political advertising. Rather than finding support for the hypothesis that negative attack ads are more accurate than advocacy ads, the evidence in chapter 3 challenges Geer's defense of negativity. Among the ads evaluated by the fact-checkers, inaccuracies were significantly more likely to be present in attack rather than either advocacy or contrast ads. While Geer may have demonstrated that negative ads offer more substantive evidence, simply because evidence is presented does not mean the evidence is accurate. In the more provocative ads of 2008 designed to gain attention, inaccuracies were rife. Moreover, rather than the

mainstream news media fixation on political ad negativity, the evidence offered in the preceding chapters suggests attention is more warranted concerning the accuracy of the claims within the ads regardless of the ad's tone.

Beyond merely registering the prevalence of inaccuracies, this study accounts for the sponsors most likely to offer incorrect information in their ads. In 2008, the two groups most likely to provide inaccuracies within the evaluated ads were political interest supporters and the McCain campaign. More than four out of five interest group ad claims checked by fact-checkers were not accurate. It was also revealed that nearly half of political interest group ad spending came in the last weeks prior to the election. Furthermore, as an increasing number of ads were released with each day approaching the election, the fact-checkers evaluated fewer and fewer of these ads. Given that interest group spending is predicted to play an unprecedented role in presidential campaign advertising in 2012, attempts by fact-checkers to review the onslaught of ads during the final weeks will be challenging.

A first step toward a theory of strategic misinformation has also been offered by demonstrating that it is possible to predict the conditions under which an ad is likely to draw an inaccurate rating. Holding all other variables constant, attack ads had the highest odds of being rated inaccurate with contrast ads also having a high likelihood. These predictions also confirmed that as the campaign progressed, the odds of an ad being rated inaccurate declined which was a function of ads not being evaluated. Furthermore, it was revealed that a loss of momentum or a decline in public perceptions of candidate characteristics increased the odds of a candidate attack ad drawing an evaluation of inaccurate.



## News Coverage of Political Advertising

In addition to issues surrounding the prevalence of inaccuracies in the ads themselves, this research also attempted to clarify and extend what is understood about how the news media cover political advertising and why it is done in this manner. The results reveal the paucity of fact-checking political ad claims that existed during the 2008 presidential election by mainstream news media. Consistent with the political science literature (Fowler & Ridout, 2009; Iyengar et al., 2004), a plurality of news media outlets from this sample of news programs and newspapers are characterized foremost by their focus on campaign strategy rather than fact-checking ad claims. This finding also aligns with recent research indicating that the frequency of adwatching fell by 50% between 2004 and 2008 (Graves & Glaisyer, 2012).

Of the over two dozen news organizations in this sample, however, one cluster emerged as AdWatchers: those committed to using political ads to scrutinize the accuracy of what candidates and their surrogates were claiming. Distinguishing themselves along with the two Web-based fact-checking organizations, FactCheck.org and PolitiFact.com, were two Ohio newspapers - the *Cincinnati Enquirer* and *The Plain Dealer*. The adwatching of these two newspapers notwithstanding, it is argued that the general dearth of sustained news media adwatching and the resulting emergence of both FactCheck and PolitiFact can be conceived of as a convergence of the philosophies of Lippmann and Dewey with regards to the functioning of the press. FactCheck and PolitiFact have emerged as a version of Lippmann's intelligence bureaus while their direct engagement with the public via the Internet serves as a form of Dewey's dialogic communication.

While print news organizations appeared to have had more opportunity to offer adwatch reporting compared with television news media, all but those in the AdWatchers cluster offered

so much additional coverage beyond fact-checking that the predominating focus was on campaign strategy. Thus, despite attempts by news organizations beyond the AdWatchers cluster to pursue fact-checking during the 2008 presidential campaign, other often strategic coverage of the political ads diluted these efforts.

The press predominately offers game schema reporting because it attracts the viewers and readers necessary for a commercially-supported media system (Iyengar et al., 2004; Patterson, 1994). At the same time, however, the news media claim they do not want campaigns dictating their agenda which has increasingly been borne out in the practice of less descriptive reporting and more interpretive reporting (Patterson, 1994; Vavreck, 2009). Then again, the news media have been simultaneously showcasing political press ads to further elucidate their focus on campaign strategy. In this way, ads have seemingly become a proxy for the candidates' own words. The paradox, then, is that despite an inclination by the press for controversy, there is a general avoidance of accounting for the many inaccuracies lurking within political ads. As a result, questions remain regarding the ability of the commercial press to provide citizens with the type of political reporting necessary to make informed voting choices.

#### Influence of Media Economics on Adwatching

Advertising has been referred to as the metaphoric glue holding together many media industries (Campbell et al., 2012). It is this supportive property of advertising that was considered in examining the U.S. mass media industry and how it interacts with the practice of political advertising. A crucial way political advertising has been shaped by the U.S. media structure is through the profit-driven economic business model. While advertising helped extract 19th century newspapers from partisan control (Petrova, 2011), one master has arguably been replaced by another. Today's advertising-supported media are now beholden to their

commercial sponsors. Where it was once the interests of the political parties that were served by the partisan press, contemporary commercialized media appear to now primarily serve the interests of their advertisers.

As the advertisers supporting the media – television in particular - are increasingly becoming political interests, it is argued that the television medium may find itself in the place newspapers were over a century ago. In this regard, news media are generally reluctant to criticize the interests that fund their paychecks and that may threaten their access to important sources. Thus, the realities of adwatching include a so called “chilling effect” on watchdog reporting as a result of these media economics. Furthermore, as it has been revealed that the news media provide free, uncritical coverage of press ads thereby amplifying political ad messages, this practice actually makes the work of the dedicated adwatchers that much more difficult. Not only must adwatchers evaluate paid ads that air on television, they must also monitor the news media to observe which ads get amplified for free. In the end, serving the interests of the public does not factor heavily (if at all) into the behavior of news media as dictated by media economics.

As argued by Hamilton (2011), products or services offering benefits in the way of public goods tend to be underprovided by the market because the benefits to society cannot be readily monetized. His economic explanation is consistent with why watchdog adwatching is minimal. The costs of accountability journalism are high in that experienced journalists are needed to do the time-consuming and detail-oriented task of fact-checking. Furthermore, while adwatching arguably provides a much needed public service, its very nature is problematic to the commercially-driven guise of objectivity thus threatening to turn off partisan audience members and ultimately threatening potential profit margins.

## Regulatory Constraints and Political Advertising

Today political advertising is at a seeming crossroads where the increased prevalence of interest group ad spending actually affords broadcasters a greater ability to maintain the integrity of political ad content. While candidate ads and party-sponsored ads coordinated with candidates cannot be censored even with the presence of false or misleading information, independent expenditure ads can be monitored by broadcasters for content. However, as suggested in chapter 7, only the most extreme, unambiguously libelous ads coming from an independent expenditure group are the ones which will be challenged and potentially pulled by television stations. Tendentious, misleading or deceptive political ads are expected to continue proliferating. Since it was revealed that, among the evaluated ads in 2008, interest groups were one of the groups most likely to provide incorrect information, one can only imagine the prevalence of inaccuracies that will circulate through the airwaves during the 2012 election in the aftermath of the *Citizens United* ruling. If the behavior of the news media in 2008 is replicated, the majority of the advertising inaccuracies will go unchallenged.

While it is argued that the dearth of watchdog ad reporting is a function of media economics, minimal adwatching also enables broadcast stations to continue airing ads that may be false while preserving their ability to claim ignorance about the content when faced with regulatory compliance issues. In other words, if broadcasters ignore the accuracy of ads, they mitigate the possibility of “knowingly” airing false or misleading information and are therefore less likely to be held accountable. It is in this way that the financial interests of the media companies once again supersede the obligations they have to serve the public interests of their communities.

## Reclaiming Integrity

The rise of the Internet as a new medium has changed not only how people access entertainment and communicate with one another but also how our electoral politics is conducted. The Internet and social media have arguably benefitted democracy by expanding the field of who can participate in political discourse. At the same time, the ability for anyone to participate in dialog has complicated the capacity to distinguish accurate information from distortions. Unknown bloggers can post unverified information that gets picked up on Twitter feeds and even by mainstream media outlets, misinforming millions. For example, in April 2012, an unsubstantiated claim on a little known blog called the Palmetto Public Record suggested that the Governor of South Carolina was to be indicted on tax fraud charges. Journalists, including ones from *The New York Times*, *The Washington Post* and CBS News, reposted the unverified information onto their Twitter accounts. South Carolina's largest newspaper ran an article on its front page the next day. As it turns out, the Internal Revenue Service declared that there was no tax investigation (Peters, 2012a). It is here where mainstream news outlets can differentiate themselves as providers of accurate information. As one political correspondent who chose not to pass along the unverified information said, he stayed away from the information because he had never heard of the Web site that reported it (Peters, 2012a).

Specific to political advertising, mainstream media outlets – particularly those on television and radio – have an obligation to serve the public interest. Passing along political ads containing inaccurate information arguably does a disservice to democracy. While television stations cannot turn away advertisements from candidates running for federal office, they are not obligated to run ads funded by independent expenditure groups. Practically speaking, though, it is unrealistic to expect for-profit stations to turn away the lucrative streams of revenue that

emanate from political advertising. There is no direct revenue, however, from airing provocative political ads during the course of a newscast. It is, perhaps, the indirect benefit of airing controversial ads in order to drive up ratings which compels certain news stations to run press ads without scrutiny. Regardless, the paucity of substantive adwatching revealed in this study lies in stark contrast to the windfall profits being enjoyed by stations benefitting from political advertising.

The emergence of FactCheck and PolitiFact in the media landscape provides a choice of resources for mainstream news outlets to have access to fact-checking information if they cannot or choose not to produce this information internally. And as evidenced in chapter 3, in nearly 9 out of 10 cases, these two organizations essentially agreed on claim evaluations. Penetration, however, appears low. Across an approximate four year period between 2008 and 2011, PolitiFact was mentioned in just over 30% of radio and television newscasts. FactCheck was cited in only 17% of news segments (Graves & Glaisyer, 2012).<sup>1</sup> These figures are for fact-checking in general. References to fact-checking in the context of political advertisements are surely much lower. Furthermore, the figures only measure references – some were just in passing, some were even hostile. For instance, as indicated in the epigraph to this chapter, across two days in January 2012, Rachel Maddow denigrated the services of PolitiFact because she disagreed with two of their ratings.<sup>2</sup> Thus, not only do news stations generally avoid the fact-checking services that could facilitate their ability to inform viewers, some of them actively attempt to damage them.<sup>3</sup>

### Implications and Recommendations

Drawing attention to the blind spots inherent in political advertising has demonstrated that despite the pervasiveness of incorrect information in political advertisements, the efforts of

the news media at informing voters of these inaccuracies are minimal at best. Furthermore, in exchange for free use of the broadcast radio spectrum, many broadcasters are profiting handsomely from political advertising while neglecting the political interests of the public. The implications of these findings span multiple stakeholders:

#### *Citizens*

1. While it was noted that the general public is distrustful of political advertising to begin with, these findings indicate citizens need to be even more wary of the information contained especially in attack ads, and especially if the ad is from a candidate who is losing momentum. Desperation appears to breed inaccuracy.
2. Because the broadcast radio spectrum is a publically-owned natural resource, the general public must do its part in holding broadcasters accountable for the independent expenditure ads they choose to air. Flackcheck.org offers the public access to the names of local television station managers, their email addresses, and an example of a letter that can be sent directly to a station to notify them of disapproval or encouragement regarding how stations are handling outside interest group ads. Citizens can also file form 2000A (Deceptive or Unlawful Advertising or Marketing Complaint) with the FCC noting a particular station's airing of inaccurate independent expenditure political ads.
3. If citizens believe the quantity of watchdog adwatching is inadequate as suggested by this study, they need to contact their preferred broadcast and print press providers to request more of this type of journalism.

#### *Fact-checkers*

1. As 70% of the paid political ads in 2008 were never evaluated by either FactCheck or PolitiFact, it is recommended that adwatchers prioritize their resources to first evaluate

ads receiving significant paid media support as well as those “press ads” receiving significant free airtime. Collaborations may be necessary to determine which ads are receiving substantial amplification via the news media. As evidenced in chapter 3, FactCheck and PolitiFact were successful at this endeavor as the ads they evaluated in 2008 did air significantly more than the ads that were not evaluated. Efforts can be further prioritized by recognizing that attack ads had the greatest odds, in 2008, of containing inaccuracies among the ads that were evaluated. Furthermore, fact-checkers should consider the desperation factor. Inaccurate claim ratings were more likely when candidates were experiencing a loss of momentum as measured by declining public opinion measures.

2. A recurring theme from the informants in this study was that fact-checking is time consuming. Moreover, given that nearly half of interest group ad spending in 2008 was during the last few weeks of the campaign, these findings suggest that maximum staffing, coffee and Red Bull should be made available during this crucial time period just before the election. While these suggestions may seem to trivialize what needs to be done, the self-identified fact-checkers can only do so much in isolation. The practical reality of adequately addressing the problem of political misinformation necessitates action across many stakeholders.
3. The usability of data needs to be facilitated for not only citizens, but journalists, policy makers and scholars as well. While it is acknowledged that political ads are not all released with official names, to the extent that it is possible, evaluations should be categorized by ad name in a searchable database easily available to all. When collecting the data in this study, PolitiFact did not always tag articles in its database with ad names



which made it more difficult to match ads with claims. Furthermore, FactCheck did not always review ads that recycled claims that were previously evaluated. If a voter did not see the original ad's evaluation, he or she may be less likely to discern the veracity of questionable claims in the new ad. In a perfect world, the goal is to make the ad verification process as easy as possible for anyone who needs it.

### *Journalists*

1. Considering the low penetration of fact-checking in general (Graves & Glaisyer, 2012) and adwatching specifically, more news media attention to ad accuracy rather than ad negativity is necessary, particularly given that ads evaluated as inaccurate aired significantly more often than the ads which were not evaluated by the independent fact-checkers.
2. While opinions abound as to the normative role of the press, FactCheck and PolitiFact have distinguished themselves as fulfilling ideals of both Lippmann and Dewey. These fact-checking organizations have arguably become the elite intelligence bureaus that are now directly engaging the public via the Internet in dialogic communication. Moreover, despite the sometimes unpleasant competition between these contemporary fact-checking organizations and traditional journalists, evidenced by Maddow (2012), they can effectively co-exist. The independent fact-checking organizations can actually benefit reporters by being an intermediary between the source of a claim and a journalist. In this way a reporter's access to potentially valuable sources will not be compromised, perhaps minimizing one potentially corrupting factor in journalism while still holding sources accountable. Furthermore, traditional journalists can keep the independent fact-checkers honest by monitoring their evaluations and challenging them when necessary.

*Policy Makers*

1. Considering the evidence suggesting commercial demands have replaced the obligations broadcasters have in serving the public, policy makers should seek to determine the best ways to clarify and strengthen broadcaster requirements for fulfilling their public interest imperatives. This may include stronger broadcast licensing requirements and fully and transparently disclosing who is funding the political ads aired by interest groups.<sup>4</sup> Wheatley (2011), a former NBC News executive, has suggested “windfall tithing” whereby stations take 10% of the revenues generated from political ads and apply that money to improving political coverage provided by the station. While the effort has repeatedly failed in years’ past, taking political advertising revenue completely out of the political equation by mandating that broadcasters must provide free airtime to political candidates is still another option (Karr, 2012).
2. Some policy makers have taken matters regarding political advertising into their own hands. For instance, Massachusetts Senator Scott Brown and his opponent Elizabeth Warren have agreed to a plan intended to stop outside groups from running attack ads during their current (2012) election race. Both have signed letters to outside groups and television stations requesting them to stop running independent expenditure ads. Outside group ads supporting or attacking either candidate that do air require that the benefitting candidate make a donation to their opponent’s charity of choice (Goodnough & Bidgood, 2012). Whether this agreement can effectively be enforced and will have the intended effects remains to be seen. Yet, it demonstrates that some policy makers and potential policy makers who are discontent with the current political advertising environment are willing to take action.

### Remaining Questions

While many findings and implications have been addressed in this study, some important questions remain unanswered.

1. *Why were so many ads never evaluated during the 2008 presidential election?* A limitation of this study was not knowing how to categorize the 70% of ads not evaluated by either fact-checking organization. It would be helpful to learn the percentage of the 2008 ads which were reviewed but not evaluated because the claims in the ad were factually unverifiable, which claims were previously addressed by a fact-check of a similar ad, and which ads were never evaluated simply because the time or resources were lacking to do so. Close collaboration with fact-checkers will likely be necessary to answer these questions going forward.
2. *Is the amount of political advertising inaccuracies increasing or decreasing?* Graves and Glaisyer (2012) have noted the emergence and growth of what they categorize as the independent, elite fact-checking organizations (FactCheck, PolitiFact, and *The Washington Post's* "Fact Checker") as well as the partisan fact-checkers and media critics. While they offer evidence that fact-checking has grown beyond political advertisements, their data also suggest a decrease in dedicated adwatching. Because this study only measured political ad inaccuracies from a single election, no estimates can be made about how the increase in general fact-checking and decrease in adwatching specifically has impacted the number of inaccuracies in political advertising across time. Future research should attempt to expand this line of research to forthcoming elections. While retrospective misinformation research is possible, it would necessitate fact-

checking ad claims from past elections using the methods of the contemporary fact-checking organizations – a likely complex and time-consuming endeavor.

3. *Does news media coverage influence political ad inaccuracies?* The first steps toward a theory of strategic misinformation suggest that public perceptions of candidate characteristics have an influence on the accuracy of candidate attack ads. Existing theories of media effects, however, suggest that media may play an intervening role by setting the agenda for what the public thinks about when considering each candidate or by priming citizens to find certain evaluative criteria more accessible than others (Iyengar & Kinder, 1987; Lippmann, 1922; McCombs & Shaw, 1972; Scheufele, 2000). Future research should try to distinguish the role of media coverage from public perceptions and how each contributes to the likelihood of inaccuracies in candidate as well as outside interest group ads.
4. *Does adwatching help?* While this study strongly contends that much more needs to be done in holding political actors accountable for ad claims, is there any evidence that the measures being taken so far have any beneficial effect on the electoral process? In their observations on the fact-checking universe in 2012, Graves and Glaisyer (2012) suggest that success can be defined in terms of influencing voter's beliefs, influencing the practice of journalism, and influencing the content of political discourse. As detailed in chapter one, early research on adwatching revealed a failure to enhance the political literacy of voters. However, adwatching was reported to have improved campaign conduct (Cappella & Jamieson, 1994). Of course, these results are highly dependent upon the type of adwatching conducted, and much has changed over the last 20 years across both the adwatching and media landscapes. It is now known that certain

adwatching formats can have a backfire effect, reinforcing claims they are meant to refute (Just et al., 1996; Nyhan & Reifler, 2012; Pfau & Loudon, 1994). Furthermore, the fragmentation of the media and increase in partisanship has made the propagation of an inaccuracy difficult to correct once it has taken root (Graves & Glaisyer, 2012; Nyhan & Reifler, 2012). In their meta-analysis, Graves and Glaisyer conclude that “the fact-checking landscape is both too new and too varied to justify firm conclusions about its effectiveness in the longer run” (p. 18).

5. *How do television stations address inaccurate political ads particularly from independent interest groups?* The evidence offered in this study has been largely critical of how television stations are addressing the political advertising inaccuracies they perpetuate while raking in profits from these ads. It is possible that stations have actually been doing a commendable job in filtering out a significant quantity of false and misleading political ads by outside groups, and what remains pales by comparison. Given a lack of evidence supporting this theory as well as the unresponsiveness of several media companies in answering questions related to the issue, this scenario appears unlikely. Nonetheless, more information about how broadcasters address inaccurate political ads – particularly from independent expenditure groups – would be useful. For instance, how many stations rely upon the evaluations of the independent fact-checking organizations versus their own internal verification processes when deciding whether to run or pull an outside interest group ad? If a station’s news division were to air a regular adwatching segment, would that create increased liability for the station in that they would have a greater responsibility to filter out ads their news department may have evaluated as inaccurate?

6. *Is there any relationship between the type of political ad coverage by television news programs, the type of ads receiving attention, and the political ad revenues of a station?*

In their research on how political ads are amplified by the news media, Ridout and Smith (2008) found coverage to be driven by ad tone with attack and contrast ads receiving the most coverage and advocacy ads the least. They focused exclusively on newspaper coverage, however. Given that this study revealed ample political ad coverage by televised news media, is there any relationship between the type of political ad coverage (critical adwatching versus campaign strategy highlights) and which ads receive attention? For instance, are partisan media outlets offering more ad strategy coverage of their preferred candidates and watchdog ad coverage of their opposition? Does the type of political ad coverage differ between local stations which receive significant political ad revenue and those that do not?

Despite the long list of unanswered questions, there is room for optimism. Researchers are making progress in understanding how and why political misperceptions persist and how to thwart them (Bullock, 2006; Graves & Glaisyer, 2012; Jamieson & Gottfried, 2010; Nyhan & Reifler, 2010; Thorson, 2011). Fact-checking journalism is on the rise (Graves & Glaisyer, 2012; Jamieson & Jackson, 2008). At minimum, solace can be taken from the perspective shared by Jamieson and Jackson (2008). Although political inaccuracies continue, without the efforts expended thus far, the situation might be much worse.

#### Study Limitations

As with any research effort, limitations exist with regards to the study parameters and generalizability of findings. First, this study offers a systematic review of the prevalence of political advertising inaccuracies to the degree that the incorrect information occurred in English-

language ads that actually aired at least once on television during the general election. Many inaccuracies surely aired before the general election, in non-English ads and in media other than television. Furthermore, as indicated by Ridout and Smith (2008) and evidenced in the present study, many political ads are amplified for free by the news media. Thus, not only is the prevalence of inaccuracies dependent upon the number of ads which were specifically evaluated by the fact-checking organizations, it is also medium, language and timing specific.

Another significant set of limitations is defined by the comprehensiveness and accuracy of the databases used as resources for this study. As noted repeatedly, many of the results are based only upon the set of ads which were checked for accuracy by the fact-checkers. Little can be said about the ads which did not draw any evaluation. The evaluations of the accuracy of political ad claims is also limited by the searchability of the fact-checkers' databases. It cannot be known if any evaluated ads were missed because they were mislabeled or not labeled. Furthermore, the completeness of this systematic review of paid ads which actually aired on television during the 2008 election is dependent upon the accuracy of the data provided by CMAG. The interpretation of the news media coverage of political advertising upon which much of this analysis depends also is driven by the comprehensiveness of the newspaper articles and news transcripts assembled by the Access World News, Lexis-Nexis, and ProQuest databases.

These results are also limited by the reliance on data from a single election. They are, in essence, a census of the documented political inaccuracies in televised advertising during the 2008 presidential election. While a limitation, as the first systematic review of political advertising inaccuracies, it was a necessary drawback. Many were skeptical about the plausibility of measuring political advertising inaccuracies (Bok, 1978; Fish, 1989; Geer, 2006).

Thus, establishing a manageable first attempt at doing so needed to rely upon evaluations from independent sources. 2008 was the first election in which two of the national, non-partisan fact-checking organizations were in operation.

While the empirical findings and viewpoints of many individuals are offered in this paper, ultimately the evidence and arguments presented in this study are from the perspective of the author alone. Efforts were made to review the accuracy and interpretations of quotes from informants. Any remaining errors are the sole responsibility of the author.

If nothing else is taken from these findings, two parting words are offered: caveat spectator. Let the viewers beware because the political ads most likely to air are the ones with inaccuracies. Chances are the ads will go unscrutinized by the mainstream news media while television stations profit from their proliferation. And we viewers, we citizens – and our nation – suffer the consequences.



## Endnotes

<sup>1</sup>Measured television and radio news programs included those for which transcripts were provided by Lexis-Nexis (Graves & Glaisyer, 2012).

<sup>2</sup>As it turns out, PolitiFact actually changed one of the ratings criticized by Maddow “after hearing lots of feedback from readers” (Adair, 2012a) and because of pushback from liberal media (Adair, 2012b).

<sup>3</sup>Fox News was cited as offering hostile references to one of the *partisan* fact-checking organizations. Partisan fact-checking organizations (such as Media Matters for America on the Left and NewsBusters on the Right) lie in contrast to FactCheck and PolitiFact which are not only both self-reported non-partisan organizations, but they were also empirically supported as such by evidence from Graves and Glaisyer (2012).

<sup>4</sup>While it is acknowledged that there are those who argue that “anonymous political speech is as American as Publius...” and that “[t]he inherent worth of the speech in terms of its capacity for informing the public does not depend upon the identity of its source...” (Marston & Yoo, 2011, p. C6), the dispute about the merits of transparent political interest group ads will have to remain unresolved for now.

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## APPENDIX A

### CODING INSTRUMENT

The purpose of this document is to provide guidelines for coding the television ads from the 2008 presidential campaign. Coders will be provided with an Excel spreadsheet that contains the ad names, transcripts and links to view the actual ads.

#### 1) To calculate number of ad claims:

A claim is defined as any statement made in the ad regardless of whether its facticity can be established. For example, “We can restore America’s leadership in the world” would be considered a claim even though establishing its veracity is not possible.

- General rhetorical questions should not be coded as ad claims unless the question conveys a substantive point to the viewer. For instance, “Have you seen John McCain’s TV ad?” should not be considered a claim. The exception to this rule would be a question implicitly conveying a substantive point, such as “How can McCain fix the economy if he doesn’t think it’s broken?” If in doubt, ask yourself what the substantive point is if a question is asked.
- Neither requests nor commands should be coded as ad claims. For example, “Tell John McCain, ‘Not this time’” should not be coded as a claim. Neither should, “Don’t believe Obama when he says he’ll help you.”
- Pleasantries such as “thank you” should not be coded as a claim.

Sentences can contain multiple claims. For example, “Obama was endorsed by Warren Buffett and Colin Powell” should be counted as two claims since one can be true without the other necessarily being so. Similarly, “Companies are shipping jobs to India, China, and Mexico...” would be counted as three claims since any one of them could potentially be untrue.

- However, there are circumstances when claims joined by “and” are only counted as one claim. For example, “Obama was raised by his single mom and his grandparents.” This should be counted as one claim because the first part of the sentence is not entirely true – he was raised by *both* his mom and his grandparents. Think about whether there is an implicit “both” in a sentence that requires both parts of the sentence surrounding the grammatical conjunction.
- Conditional statements should be coded as one claim. For example, “If you don’t want higher taxes, then you don’t want an Obama White House” would be one claim. The claim code description would be along the lines of “An Obama White House means higher taxes.”

Sentences can also repeat the same claims, but they should still be coded as separate claims. For example, “It’s McCain who’s been erratic and has careened from stance to stance...” should be coded as two claims even though being erratic and careening from stance to stance are synonymous. “Senator Obama and Senator Biden talk about experience and integrity” would be coded as four claims since there are two issues being attributed to two different people.

- However if the on screen text is noted in the transcript and it is the same as the audio, they should be counted as one claim, not two (since they are making the same claim and not in a repetitive manner).

If a transcript contains descriptions of on-screen text, these claims should be coded too. However if the text says the same thing as the audio track, do not double code. For example, “He's running the sleaziest ads ever (Text on screen: "one of the sleaziest ads...ever seen" Time 9-10-08)” would only be coded as one claim.

Do not code the “paid for by” disclaimer which is usually at the end of an ad but sometimes can be at the beginning instead. If someone other than the candidate identifies his/herself, do not code the introduction as a separate claim. For example, “I’m Michelle Amazeen. I’ve been a Temple student for the past four years” should be coded as one claim. The relevant code will say something like “Michelle Amazeen has been a Temple student for the past four years.” Introduction of forthcoming statements may not be considered a claim either, as in: “Coding, by Michelle Amazeen,” or “These are Obama’s own words...”

Record the number of claims in the designated column. To help you keep track of the number of claims, put a number in consecutive order after each claim within the column containing the transcript. Thus, according to this guideline, the previous example would look like this: “Obama was endorsed by Warren Buffett<sup>1</sup> and Colin Powell<sup>2</sup>.” The goal is for all of us to agree on the number of claims in each ad.

## 2) To code each ad claim:

Please refer to the Coding Scheme. A different sheet has been created for each of the following four categories: Values/themes, Candidate Traits, Opponent Traits, and Policy Issues. Input a claim code in the designated column on the coding sheet for each claim.

### Values/Themes

Codes 10,000 and higher refer to general statements of **values or themes**. These types of claims tend to explain what is happening generally. To facilitate coding, codes have been grouped together (as much as possible) within the following categories:

- change/new direction
- status quo/more of the same
- taxes



- economic problems
- education
- jobs/unemployment
- housing market
- energy issues
- security/defense
- healthcare
- government
- campaigning
- election/voting
- miscellaneous

### **Traits**

Codes 100 – 299, and 500-699 refer to **traits** of the *candidate*. Codes 300 – 499, and 700-999 refer to **traits** of the *opponent*. Traits represent/reflect what a candidate is or is like, often conveying implicit assumptions about a candidate’s character.

### **Policy Issues**

Codes 1000-9999 refer to policy **issue** codes for ads. Policy issues often represent what a candidate does, has done or plans to do. Language will often be in terms of supporting or opposing plans or legislation. To facilitate coding, the Policy/Issue sheet has been separated into the following categories:

- economic policies
- healthcare issues
- education
- government management
- social issues (abortion, Social Security, etc.)
- energy/environmental issues
- defense issues
- campaign issues/stories exemplifying policy implications
- source citations

Pay close attention to the wording of claim codes as several can be similar to one another with only a word or two being different. For example, a “\$1,000 middle-class tax cut” is not necessarily the same as a “\$1,000 tax cut to help families.” Sometimes the only difference between claims is that one is directly attributable to a particular source whereas when it is repeated elsewhere, there is no source attribution.

- 3) Is the primary purpose of the ad to promote a specific candidate, to attack a candidate or to contrast the candidates? An ad should not be characterized as a contrast ad if the only comparison is based upon a positive tag-line by the sponsor at the end of the ad.

1=Promotional/Advocacy ad (SKIP TO Q.5)

2=Strictly Attack ad (CONTINUE)

3=Contrast/comparison ad (CONTINUE)

- 4) (FOR COMPARATIVE AND ATTACK ADS ONLY) How would you characterize the type of criticism?

1=Strictly policy/issue-based criticism,

2=Predominantly policy/issue-based criticism

3=Balance between policy/issue and character trait/personal attack,

4=Predominantly character-based attack, or

5=Strictly character trait/personal attack (i.e., mudslinging).

- 5) Does the ad cite supporting sources to bolster various claims (either in narration or text on screen)?

0=No sources cited for factual claims

1=Cites sources for factual claims (can include candidate's own website)

FCEval = FactCheck Evaluation. 1=Yes, 0=No

PFEval = PolitiFact Evaluation. 1=Yes, 0=No

Claim Codes: Contact author for claim coding scheme (rev4) spreadsheet

FCClaim Codes: 1=Misrepresentation, 2=False, 3=Distortion/Misleading, 4=Incomplete Information, 5=True, 6=Personal judgment call for audience

PFClaim Codes: 1=True, 2=Mostly True, 3=Half True, 4=Barely True (Mostly False), 5=False, 6=Pants on Fire

APPENDIX B  
INTERCODER RELIABILITY TESTING

Fifty ads were randomly selected and checked for reliability between coders. Because both nominal and interval level data were evaluated, intercoder reliability was measured using Krippendorff's alpha. This reliability estimate is adaptable to any level of measurement and number of judges and is regarded as a stringently conservative measure of agreement between coders that is not due to chance (Hayes & Krippendorff, 2007; Lombard, Snyder-Duch & Bracken, 2002). The Krippendorff's alpha reliability rating for each measure is listed below.

Number of Ad claims = .946	claim 11 = .757
claim 1 = .959	claim 12 = .743
claim 2 = .876	claim 13 = .840
claim 3 = .897	claim 14 = .694
claim 4 = .790	claim 15 = 1.00
claim 5 = .874	claim 16 = 1.00
claim 6 = .828	claim 17 = 1.00
claim 7 = .789	claim 18 = 1.00
claim 8 = .823	Ad Tone = .818
claim 9 = .732	Ad Criticism Type = .860
claim 10 = .800	Supporting source citation = .612

All measures were above the minimum reliability standard of .60. Adequate reliability was established between the two coders and coding efforts can therefore be considered sound.

## APPENDIX C

## NAES 2008 QUESTIONS

**Candidate Favorability:** For the following person, please tell me if your opinion is favorable or unfavorable using a scale from zero to 10. Zero means very unfavorable, and 10 means very favorable. Five means you do not feel favorable or unfavorable toward that person. Of course you can use any number between zero and 10.

On a scale of zero to 10, how would you rate [candidate name]?

**Leadership:** Please tell me how well the phrase "strong leader" applies to [candidate name]. Please use a scale from zero to 10, where zero means it does not apply at all, and 10 means it applies extremely well. Of course you can use any number in between.

**Trustworthiness:** Please tell me how well the phrase "trustworthy" applies to [candidate name]. Please use a scale from zero to 10, where zero means it does not apply at all, and 10 means it applies extremely well. Of course you can use any number in between.

**Experience:** Please tell me how well the phrase "has the experience needed to be president" applies to [candidate name]. Please use a scale from zero to 10, where zero means it does not apply at all, and 10 means it applies extremely well. Of course you can use any number in between.

**Judgment:** Please tell me how well the phrase "has the judgment needed to be president" applies to [candidate name]. Please use a scale from zero to 10, where zero means it does not apply at all, and 10 means it applies extremely well. Of course you can use any number in between.

**Readiness to be President** (only for VP candidates): On a scale of zero to 10, where zero means it does not apply at all, and 10 means it applies extremely well, please tell me how well the phrase "ready to be president" applies to [candidate name].

APPENDIX D  
POLITICAL ADVERTISING INDUSTRY  
INTERVIEWER GUIDE

1. If you were at a cocktail party and met someone from another country (or another planet) who's not familiar with U.S. politics, how would you explain what you do (in just a few sentences)? What do you enjoy the most/least?
2. According to democratic theory, an informed citizenry is necessary for effective self-governance. Do you think citizens benefit from our current political advertising environment? If not, who would you say benefits from the current structure of the political advertising industry? In other words, whose needs are being served by the current structure of this industry (broadcasters? Political consultants?...)? Who are the losers in the current structure?
3. What would you say about political advertising is most useful to citizens? least useful?
4. Do you feel any reforms are necessary in the political advertising industry? If so, what?
5. How ought these reforms be achieved?
6. How should political advertising be financed?
7. Let's talk about the role of accuracy in the recent political advertising campaigns. How accurate do you feel is the information provided by campaigns in general? Upon what are you basing this response? How problematic do you feel is misinformation in political advertising?
8. Is it your sense that the amount of misinformation (specifically in political ads) has been increasing, decreasing or about the same over the last decade?
9. Are you familiar with the factchecking organizations such as FactCheck.org and PolitiFact.com? What is your opinion of them? Do you discriminate between them? What is your sense of what they do compare with what the mainstream press does?
10. Do you believe it's possible to offer a non-partisan evaluation of a political ad (claim)?
11. When you are creating an ad, do you ever think about the believability or credibility of the claims that are being made? Have you ever changed an ad because of negative feedback from a factchecking organization or the press?
12. You're probably aware that interest group ads are supposedly held to a different level of scrutiny than are candidate produced ads. Carl Forti of American Crossroads has stated, "TV stations have no obligation to run the ads if they believe they're false. And TV

stations ran all our ads. We didn't have any ads pulled. So therefore, I think that all of our ads are factually accurate." What do you think of this statement? What if it were attributed to Ilyse Hogue of MoveOn.org? Do you think TV stations do an adequate job of turning down inaccurate political ads?

13. I have a working paper about communication trends that will be affecting the future of political advertising (different than the political-science oriented trends that Kenski, Hardy & Jamieson offered in their book about the Obama campaign...). I argue that since the 1988 presidential election, we have been witnessing an increase in self-regulatory efforts such as adwatching and parody news orgs like The Onion and The Daily Show. What do you think? What do you think is the future of self-regulatory efforts and organizations like FactCheck and PolitiFact? Are there other regulatory efforts that need to be done that currently are not?
14. Do you think accuracy issues in political advertising have any relation to the way the industry is structured? There is little if any disincentive to be false or misleading in one's ad claims...in fact, there's actually an incentive to be controversial so the ad may get free air time in mainstream press coverage. Can you talk about this strategy (press ads, ad amplification)? How do you know where the line is between being provocative and being misleading?
15. As chair of the Alliance for Better Campaigns, the following quote has been attributed to Walter Cronkite: "The broadcasters don't own the airwaves, the public does. We lend the industry billions of dollars worth of our airwaves, free of charge, in return for a pledge to serve the public interest. Profiteering on democracy shouldn't be part of the deal." What is your reaction to this quote?
16. What responsibilities do political advertisers have to correct misinformation after being presented with evidence to the contrary?
17. Are there any other issues that you feel need to be addressed in the political advertising industry to better serve the interests of U.S. citizens?
18. Can you recommend anyone else that I should be interviewing?

## APPENDIX E

## LIST OF STUDY INFORMANTS

- Bill Adair is the Editor of PolitiFact and the Washington Bureau Chief for the *Tampa Bay Times*. He has worked in Washington since 1997 and has covered Congress, the White House, the Supreme Court, national politics and aviation safety. Interview conducted via telephone on May 31, 2010.
- Dr. Kevin Arceneaux, a professor of political science at Temple University in Philadelphia, Pennsylvania, studies the effects of political messages – including advertising - on the formation of political attitudes, voting decisions, and behavior. Interview conducted in Philadelphia on October 20, 2009.
- Dr. Daniel Chomsky, a professor of political science at Temple University, is a critical political economist with a focus on how media ownership influences the information content of media output. Interview conducted in Philadelphia on September 30, 2009.
- Dr. Noam Chomsky, at Massachusetts Institute of Technology in Boston, Massachusetts, is a linguist and political activist and has, among other things, written on the power structure of the U.S. mass media. Interview conducted in Boston on November 6, 2009.
- Scott Fairchild was the chief of staff and campaign director for U.S. House Representative Patrick Murphy in both 2006 and 2008. He was also campaign director of Rahm Emmanuel’s successful run for mayor of Chicago in 2011. Interview conducted in Bristol, Pennsylvania on October 24, 2009.
- Tom Feran has been a writer and editor at *The Plain Dealer* in Cleveland, Ohio since 1982. He was one of the adwatch reporters working on “Eye on Ohio” during the 2008 presidential

election in collaboration with *The Cincinnati Enquirer*, *The Columbus Dispatch*, and *Dayton Daily News*. Interview conducted via telephone on June 14, 2011.

- Dr. Michael Hagen is a professor of political science at Temple University. His research focuses on the conduct and consequences of political campaigns and elections in Pennsylvania and the United States. Interview conducted in Philadelphia on October 19, 2009.
- Brooks Jackson is the Director of FactCheck.org, an organization that checks the veracity of claims in political ads and a journalist who covered Washington and national politics for nearly 40 years, reporting in turn for The Associated Press, *The Wall Street Journal* and CNN. Interview conducted in Washington, D.C. on November 11, 2009.
- Dr. Robin Kolodny is a professor of political science at Temple University. She studies political parties in Congress, in elections, and in comparative perspective and has written about the costs of political advertising. Interview conducted in Philadelphia on November 16, 2009.
- Meredith McGehee serves as Policy Director at the Campaign Legal Center where she directs the legislative and media policy efforts. She is also the former President of the Alliance for Better Campaigns, a public interest group that sought to put meaning back into broadcasters' statutory obligation to serve the public interest. Interview conducted via telephone on June 2, 2011.
- Chris Mottola is a Republican strategist who worked on Senator John McCain's 2008 campaign for the White House. He has also written, produced and directed TV spots for former Republican President George W. Bush and former Pennsylvania Republican Senator Arlen Specter. Interview conducted in Philadelphia on July 20, 2011.



- Jim Mulhall is managing director at SKDKnickerbocker and has two decades of experience in politics, governing and strategic communication. As a political consultant he has worked with numerous senatorial, gubernatorial, and congressional candidates including the 2008 campaign for U.S. Rep. Bill Foster (D-IL) and the 2006 campaign for U.S. Rep. Patrick Murphy (D-PA). Interview conducted via telephone on June 1, 2011.
- Patrick J. Murphy was the Congressman representing Pennsylvania's 8th district in the U.S. House of Representatives first elected in 2006 and again in 2008. He lost his bid for re-election in 2010. He is running in the 2012 election for State Attorney General in Pennsylvania. Interview conducted in Bristol, Pennsylvania on October 24, 2009.
- Dr. Brendan Nyhan is a professor of political science in the Department of Government at Dartmouth College. From 2001-2004, he was co-editor of Spinsanity, a Web-based, non-partisan watchdog of political spin. His research focuses on the consequences of increased partisanship in the contemporary era - in particular, the growing number of controversies and beliefs that are not supported by convincing factual evidence but still play an important role in shaping behaviors and outcomes. Interview conducted via telephone on May 18, 2011.
- Timothy Rittenhouse Persico was the finance director for U. S. Rep. Patrick Murphy. He also worked on Murphy's unsuccessful 2012 campaign for Pennsylvania State Attorney General. Interview conducted in Bristol, Pennsylvania on October 24, 2009.
- Andrew Jay Schwartzman is Senior Vice President and Policy Director of Media Access Project. He is recognized as one of the leading media attorneys and has appeared on behalf of MAP before Congress, the FCC and the courts on issues such as cable TV regulation, minority and female ownership and employment in the mass media, "equal time" laws and cable "open access." Interview conducted via telephone on June 7, 2011.

- Jon Vogel is a managing partner at Murphy Vogel Askew Reilly. He has been a senior advisor to three Chairmen of the Democratic Congressional Campaign Committee (DCCC): Rahm Emanuel, Chris Van Hollen, and Steve Israel. As a former Executive Director, Political Director and Independent Expenditure Director at the DCCC, Jon has extensive experience managing national campaigns and multi-layered communication projects including directing the DCCC's \$85 million Independent Expenditure Program that played in 67 districts. Interview conducted via telephone on June 14, 2011.
- Rosemary Wuenschel is the chief of staff for Pennsylvania House Representative Steve Santarsiero who has represented the 31st district since 2008. Interview conducted in Newtown, Pennsylvania on November 15, 2009.