

SOUND BITE DEMOCRACY

by Daniel C. Hallin

The tyranny of the sound bite has been universally denounced as a leading cause of the low state of America's political discourse. "If you couldn't say it in less than 10 seconds," former governor Michael Dukakis declared after the 1988 presidential campaign, "it wasn't heard because it wasn't aired." Somewhat chastened, the nation's television networks now are suggesting that they will be more generous in covering the 1992 campaign, and some candidates have already been allowed as much as a minute on the evening news. However, a far more radical change would be needed to return even to the kind of coverage that prevailed in 1968.

During the Nixon-Humphrey contest that year, nearly one-quarter of all sound bites were a minute or longer, and occasionally a major political figure would speak for more than two minutes. Segments of that length do not guarantee eloquent argument, but they do at least allow viewers to grasp the sense of an argument, to glimpse the logic and character of a candidate. By 1988, however, only *four percent of all sound bites were as long as 20 seconds*. The average was a mere 8.9 seconds, barely long enough to spit out, "Read my lips: No new taxes."

The shrinking sound bite is actually the tip of a very large iceberg: It reflects a fundamental change in the structure of news

stories and the role of the journalist in putting them together. Today, TV news is much more "mediated" by journalists than it was during the 1960s and early '70s. Anchors and reporters who once played a relatively passive role, frequently doing little more than setting the scene for the candidate or other newsmaker whose speech would dominate the report, now more actively "package" the news. This new style of reporting is not so much a product of journalistic *hubris* as the result of several converging forces—technological, political, and economic—that have altered the imperatives of TV news.

To appreciate the magnitude of this extraordinary change, it helps to look at specific examples. On October 8, 1968, Walter Cronkite anchored a CBS story on the campaigns of Richard Nixon and Hubert Humphrey that had five sound bites averaging 60 seconds. Twenty years later, on October 4, Peter Jennings presided over ABC's coverage of the contest between George Bush and Michael Dukakis that featured 10 sound bites averaging 8.5 seconds.

Today's television journalist displays a much different attitude toward the words of candidates and other newsmakers from that of his predecessor. Now such words, rather than simply being reproduced and transmitted to the audience, are treated as raw material to be taken apart, combined with other sounds and images, and woven into a new narrative. Greater use is made of

outside material, such as “expert” opinion intended to put the candidates’ statements and actions into perspective, and “visuals,” including both film and graphics. Unlike their predecessors, today’s TV journalists generally impose on all of these elements the unity of a clear story line. The 1988 ABC report on the Dukakis campaign has a single organizing theme that runs from beginning to end: Dukakis’s three-part “game plan.” By contrast, on the Cronkite broadcast Bill Plante offers some interpretation of Nixon’s strategy, but his report does not have a consistent unifying theme. It simply ends with Nixon speaking. The modern “wrap-up” is another contemporary convention that has put the journalist at center stage, allowing him to package the story in a way that earlier reports normally were not. As a result of these changes, sound bites filled only 5.7 percent of election coverage during Campaign ’88, down from 17.6 percent 20 years earlier.

The transformation of television’s campaign coverage is part of a broader change in television journalism. One reason for that change is the technical evolution of the medium, not only in the narrow technological sense—graphics generators, electronic editing units, and satellites—but in the evolution of television “know-how” and an emerging television aesthetic. It simply took television people—often, until recent times, trained in radio or print—a long time to develop a sense of how to communicate through this new medium. Much of the television news of the 1960s and early ’70s, a period lionized today as the golden age of the medium, seems in hindsight not only technically primitive compared to today’s but less competent—dull, disorganized, and difficult to follow.

Yet technological explanations for political and cultural changes rarely stand by



The Gettysburg Address rendered in the standard of the 1988 campaign: an 8.9-second sound bite.

themselves. They do not explain, for example, why sound bites shrank much more radically for certain types of people than for others. In 1968 the average sound bite for candidates and other “elites” was 48.9 seconds; for ordinary voters it was 13.6 seconds. By 1988 the elites were allowed only 8.9 seconds, voters 4.2 seconds. Film editors in 1968 knew *how* to produce short sound bites, but they did not consider them appropriate or necessary when covering major political figures.

A second reason for these changes has to do with the political upheavals of Vietnam and Watergate, as well as the evolution of election campaigning, which pushed all of American journalism in the direction of more active, critical reporting. Of course it was not only journalism that changed. After hearing some of my conclusions about sound bites and packaging in 1990, NBC’s John Chancellor responded by saying, “Well, the politicians started it.” And there is much truth to this. In 1968 the Nixon campaign hired Roger Ailes, formerly a producer of the *Mike Douglas Show*, to create a series of one-hour television shows in which Nixon would be questioned by “ordinary” citizens. These shows

were built around “production values” of a sort that television journalists had barely begun to consider. According to the memos reproduced in Joe McGinniss’s *The Selling of the President, 1968*, Ailes even carefully measured the length of Nixon’s answers to questions and coached him to shape and shorten them to the medium’s needs.

Responding to alarms about the threat of media manipulation by political image-makers, journalists soon began taking a more adversarial stance toward the candidates, dissecting their statements and describing their image-making strategies. This has made campaign reporting more analytical—and also more negative. Suddenly campaign aides were called “handlers,” and by 1988 TV journalists were broadcasting stories of unprecedented toughness, such as this one by Bruce Morton on September 13, 1988:

“Biff! Bang! Powie! It’s not a bird; it’s not a plane; it’s presidential candidate Michael Dukakis in an M1 tank as staff and reporters whoop it up. In the trade of politics it’s called a visual If your candidate is seen in the polls as weak on defense, put him in a tank.”

Still, the turn toward analytical and sometimes more adversarial reporting did not dictate the more staccato pace of news reporting. The third factor behind the change was a major shift in the economics of the broadcasting industry. Until the 1970s, the networks viewed news as a prestige “loss leader.” CBS and NBC had expanded their evening news broadcasts from 15 to 30 minutes in 1963 not to make money but to make a show of serious public service in response to criticism by Congress, the Federal Communications Com-

mission, and the public, particularly since the quiz show scandals of 1959. By the early 1970s, however, individual station owners were discovering that local news shows could make a great deal of money; indeed, by the end of the decade, it was common for a station to derive 60 percent of its profit from local news. As competition intensified, stations hired consultants to recommend ways of holding viewers’ attention, and the advice often pointed in the direction of more tightly structured and fast-paced news presentations.

Similar competitive pressures began to build at the network level after 1977, when ABC began its successful drive to make its news division equal to those of CBS and NBC. The rise of cable and independent stations in the 1980s crowded the field still more, and the Reagan administration’s substantial deregulation of broadcasting reduced the political impetus to insulate the news divisions from ratings criteria. The barriers between network news and the rest of commercial television began to fall. Network TV journalists have since felt increasing pressure to incorporate the same kind of “production values” as local newscasters and the rest of television.

It should be said that TV news is now much better in many ways than it was two decades ago. It is, first of all, often more interesting to watch. It is also more serious journalism. Media critics pressed the networks to be less passive, to tell the public more about the candidates’ image-making strategies, and the networks have responded. This is surely an advance. Some of today’s more analytical stories also involve a kind of coverage of serious issues that was uncommon years ago, including

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“truth squad” stories that examine candidates’ claims about their records and those of their opponents.

While all of this is to the good, there is still a great deal about recent trends in campaign coverage that should unsettle citizens and journalists. It is disturbing that the public rarely has a chance to hear a candidate—or anyone else—speak for more than about 20 seconds. Showing humans speaking is something television can do very effectively. To be sure, some of the long sound bites in early television news were unenlightening. It is hard to see what viewers gained in 1968 by hearing Richard Nixon ramble on for 43 seconds about his Aunt Olive. But often it was extremely interesting to hear a politician, or occasionally a community leader or ordinary voter, utter an entire paragraph. One gained an understanding of the person’s character and beliefs that a 10-second sound bite simply cannot provide. One also had the opportunity to judge matters for oneself, something that the modern “wrap-up” denies.

It seems likely, moreover, that whoever may have “started it,” the modern form of TV news encourages exactly the kind of campaigning—based on one-liners and symbolic “visuals”—that journalists love to hate. What greater irony is there than a TV journalist complaining about the candidates’ one-liners in a report that makes its points with 8.9-second sound bites? The reality is that one-liners and symbolic visuals are what TV producers put on the air; it is not surprising that the candidates’ “handlers” gravitate toward them.

The rise of mediated TV news has bred a preoccupation with campaign technique and a kind of “inside dopester” perspective that puts the image-making and horse-race metaphors at the center of politics and

pushes real discourse to the margins. It has also allowed political insiders to dominate discussion on the airwaves. (Ordinary voters, featured in more than 20 percent of sound bites in 1972 and ’76, claimed only three–four percent in 1984 and ’88.) Voters now appear in the news essentially to illustrate poll results and almost never to contribute ideas or arguments to campaign coverage. Here again the position of TV news is ironic. Just as TV folk decry “photo-opportunity” and “sound-bite” campaigning even while building the news around them, so they decry the vision of the campaign consultant, with its emphasis on technique over substance, while adopting that culture as their own. There are times, indeed, when it is hard to tell the journalists from the political technicians, as when Dan Rather, in live coverage following the first Bush–Dukakis debate in 1988, asked a series of pollsters and campaign aides questions such as, “You’re making a George Bush commercial and you’re looking for a sound bite What’s his best shot?”

All of this gives television coverage of political campaigns, as sociologist Todd Gitlin has pointed out, a kind of knowing, postmodern cynicism that debunks the image and the image-maker and yet in the end seems to accept them as the only reality citizens have left. There is no reason to wax nostalgic over the politics or the passive television journalism of 1968. But television then did give viewers the notion that the presidential campaign was at its core important, that it was essentially a public debate about the future of the nation. Sophisticated and technically brilliant as it may be, modern television news no longer conveys that sense of seriousness about campaign politics and its place in American democracy.