Grazing the Field: Voter uses of the media in election campaigns

Mr Lee Cox and Assoc Prof Stephen Stockwell School of Arts Griffith University

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Abstract

In contemporary democracies, it has been argued by many theorists that the role of the media as the fourth estate has diminished by the trend towards softer news. Covering politics has become unpopular with audiences, therefore, the media corporations do not want to sacrifice viewers and circulation by concentrating on hard news issues like politics. As a consequence, voters are now forced to gather their information from a variety of sources, as the 'one trusted source' is no longer trusted. Political campaigners are able to use this trend to a variety of information sources to deliver messages which are uncorrupted by the media.

When the voting public want to gather information about election campaigns, they turn to the mass media. Given that nearly all Australian homes, 99 percent, have at least one television, this is hardly surprising (Neilsen, 2004).

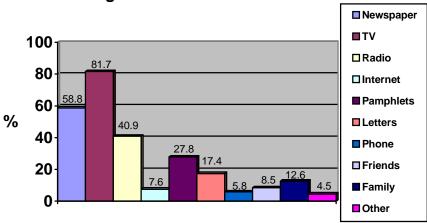


Fig 1: Sources of Election Information

NB: Adds to 265.6 as people use multiple sources

A random sample of 668 voters was taken at the 2001 federal election, in three seats; Moreton, Dickson and Richmond. The methodology used was exit polling. While exit polling is relatively unused in Australia, it offers some advantages over the traditional mail surveys like the Australian Election Study. The results are immediate and not dependent on response times of participants. The data is likely to be less corrupted by the passing of time and less likely to be affected by bad recall or bandwagon effect. The news networks in the United States have used exit polls for many years but only as a way of trying to predict the outcome of the election. As a research methodology, exit polls are badly neglected. This paper will examine the ways voters access their information on election campaigns and highlight how it is possible for campaigners to tailor messages for specifically targeted groups, avoiding the mass media to deliver unfiltered information.

TELEVISION

Television provides political parties and candidates with broad exposure to voters in an excepted and expected way. With 81.7 percent of the sample group for this study using television as the main source of election information, it becomes apparent that parties must still concentrate a lot of resources, and money, into this area. The Australian Election Study (AES) showed the number of electors using television to be at 91 percent (Bean, Gow and McAllister, 2001), while interestingly Graber (2001) identified only 56 percent of Americans using television as their main source of political news. Yet this extensive use of television by voters is also part of the reason studies into political campaigns have been concentrated on television as a persuasion tool. The overwhelming number of voters who have access to and watch television is, as demonstrated in this and other research, seductive for researchers. Yet Figure 1 demonstrates the emerging trend for electors to use multiple outlets to gather political information.

Television does not convert voters (Malchow, 2003; Milner, 2001). According to former Queensland state secretary of the ALP, Cameron Milner, committed party voters expect to see television advertising by their chosen party at the time of an election (Milner, 2001). This is the reinforcing role of television advertising in the decision making process. It allows voters to reaffirm their support for one party or another by making a comparison between the

policies and personalities available. For most committed party voters, this is enough (Milner, 2001). It legitimises their long held beliefs and allows them to vote with confidence. Yet according to industry literature, television advertising is no longer effective in converting the voting intention of undecideds. It is not highly targeted which means messages are likely to miss their intended audience. This is the nature of broadcast advertising, indeed any mass advertising, a mass coverage with small returns. In the commercial world, these returns are made worthwhile by high profit margins on products that require relatively few purchasers in comparison to how many have seen the advertising (McNair, 1999). In elections, you need as many purchasers of your 'product' as possible on election day. It is of no value if the day after the election voters realise they should have voted for you but purchased another brand. By that time, you have lost. Television strongly reinforces pre-existing voting behaviour but does little to convert swinging voters to any particular party.

There are also considerations regarding the rules governing political advertising on television that are of concern to political operatives and communicators in Australia. All advertising must be approved by the FreeTV Australia, formerly the Commercial Television Association (CTVA) and before that the Federation of Australian Commercial Television Stations (FACTS), and this places a considerable time delay, usually 48 hours (FreeTV Aust, 2004), on the ability of parties to respond to attack advertisements and campaign mishaps. For some, it hinders even the ability to launch some aspects of their campaigns, as there are rules governing whether or not a claim made in an advertisement is indeed truthful (Milner, 2001). This, as well as the rising cost of production and buying airtime, and the lack of ability to target voters beyond only broad generalisations, combines to make television advertising less attractive than it was in the past in the Australian electoral scene. Political parties use advertising as a way of subverting the role of the mediated press and reaching directly into the homes and minds of voters (McNair, 1999), particularly in the past when it was a largely unregulated medium. It then becomes imperative for campaigners to reach their targets in different ways to ensure the delivery of an uncorrupted message.

Even within the committed television viewing public, there is a fracturing of viewing habits being caused by the growth in the pay-TV marketplace (Johnson, 2001). The reach of pay-TV in Australia is 22 percent according to Paul Budde Communications (2003), growing from five percent in 1997 (Neilsen, 2004) and the introduction of new subscriber services such as Fox Digital will continue to make in-roads with audiences. This continued erosion of the traditional television viewing market in Australia will prompt new techniques and habits in media buying for campaigners. "There is a relatively small group of leading edge voters who hold the power to decide...upcoming elections" (Shimmel, 2003: 410) so it becomes a matter of some urgency to define and identify those voters and reach them no matter what type of television it is they watch. Advertising on subscriber services is more cost effective making it an attractive proposition for campaigns limited in funding (Mentzer, 2003).

NEWSPAPERS

Nearly 60 percent of the sample group for this study also used newspapers to gain information about the election. This reflects the trend among voters to garner information from a variety of sources rather than one. While television may be the preserve of large budget, slick spot advertising for parties, newspapers are certainly the flip side to that coin. While television news services can only deliver short stories on elections and candidates, newspapers have a much broader scope when it comes to investigation and publication of election news.

There are many regional centres that have their own television stations but content is largely controlled from the major metropolitan areas. These regional networks can be used to target voters in a specific area but "[p]olitical news is barely covered on local television" (Johnson,

2001: 26). Even in a regional market, for example the Gold Coast, television will be competing with several newspapers for advertising and editorial content. This gives the campaigner a number of avenues to explore when it comes to determining the best way to target swinging or soft voters. As discussed previously, television is too hit and miss in the current climate of "political fragmentation" (Shimmel, 2003: 409). Newspapers are more targeted. Local newspapers hit local targets. State newspapers hit state targets and national papers hit national targets. With the correct buying strategy, it is possible to make strong hits with those voters you need to reach, inform and persuade (Faucheux, 2003). Different sections of newspapers and supplements make it a much easier task to address particular demographic targets. If, for example, you wanted to target a message to the voter block closely identifying with issues concerning higher education, then the Higher Education lift out of *The Australian* will hit that target more reliably than material placed in the general editorial pages of the major metropolitan daily newspaper.

This can be particularly effective in a race being conducted in a major metropolitan area with multiple seats as the major television networks will be saturated with advertising. The best place for a candidate to fight their individual battles is in the newspapers that will reach their target audience. If you are running for a seat on the northside of Brisbane, it is a waste of money broadcasting your message to the voters in different seats on the southside. Local newspapers will be a more effective strategy to reach the voters you want in specific geographic locations as well as within particular demographic groups, say mothers who live in Petrie.

Critics of newspaper advertising often "have difficulty justifying the use of the newspaper ads on a cost and vote effective basis" (Guzzetta, 2002: 142). There is also the risk of "duplicating the direct mail campaign" (Guzzetta, 2002: 142). There is no denying the expensive nature of newspaper advertising but in specific cases it may form a useful layer of the overall campaign. As Faucheux says "[n]ewspaper ads can provide details and documentation, in easy-to-read, believable black-and-white text" (2003: 428). For targeting and delivering a message to discrete sections of the voter body, newspapers need to be included as part of the campaign strategy. Figure 1 demonstrates the fractured nature of information gathering within the electorate showing the need for a multiple media strategy to be utilised.

Paid advertising in newspapers may also have a benefit when it comes to earned media or editorial content. Guzzetta suggests, "whenever the ads are used it is a means to encourage favourable news coverage from the editor or owner of the newspaper" (2002: 142). While discussions of media bias could indeed be the basis for a thesis, placing advertising in newspapers, while hopefully not influencing reporting, may just get the local paper to your event ahead of another candidate. Controlling the agenda is a crucial role of any media strategy (Faucheux, 2002). Controlling what is reported about the party or candidate is also critical to the success of a campaign. While buying advertising may get a local paper to send a journalist to cover your event, there are no guarantees on what they will report. Grenzke and Watts found that candidates claim "the free press emphasised the negative aspects of candidates, fed on conflict and contributed to the public's disillusionment with candidates and politics" (2002: 321). The much lamented reporting of elections as horse races is central to this perception. Because the media concentrated on the candidates, the candidates in Grenzke and Watts' study felt "the media did not present the complexity of their issues, their background and their personalities to the public" leading to "the high level of cynicism and lack of voter participation" (2002: 323). This is an indictment on the media and has influenced the moves by campaigners to by-pass them during elections.

The move towards more structured campaigns using a range of tactics to contact voters has been fuelled in great part by the media itself as it uses advancements in technology to spread its own networks to even more consumers. "The profound changes in mass communications during the past two decades have greatly affected politics and campaigning" (Johnson, 2001: 23) and this is clearly seen if we compare the sources of information studied by Lazarsfeld et al and the sources of information used by the sample group in this seminal research (1968). Lazarsfeld was concerned greatly with the impact of the mass media in the formation of consent in wartime USA. This study, conducted during World War 2, examined the mass communication methods available at the time, namely newspapers and radio. There was no television, no cable television, no Internet, no sophisticated telemarketing companies and no computerised databases helping parties target voters. In short, Lazarsfeld's work was conducted in a time far different and technologically primitive than the current electoral climate. There was little need for campaigners to develop sophisticated techniques to reach their targets as there were few means open to them. This also meant a highly cohesive marketplace for them to pitch to, unlike the previously identified fractured media and political markets of today. To ensure the central message political operatives of Lazarsfeld's time wanted delivered reached the opinion leaders, a simple radio spot or reported stump speech was easily organised and digested by the intended target. There were no other options in message delivery to large audiences. "News, once confined to short, predictable segments during the day and evening, now stretches forever, with twenty-four hour news stations giving all the news, all the time" (Johnson, 2001: 23) so hitting the target becomes a matter of intense labour and increasingly complex technology. The Campaigns & Elections Political Pages 2004/5 Annual Directory of Political Consultants, Products and Services details 865 companies and consultants dedicated to message development and delivery, from yard signs and direct mail to telemarketing and computer assisted telephone interviewing (CATI) for focus groups (The American Association Of Political Consultants has 738 members)(Mark, 2004). Yet for all this advancement in the technologies available to the industry, campaigners are still trying to influence relatively small numbers of voters and they are hard to find among the myriad of media outlets, computer connections and direct mail appeals. For this reason, it is crucial for campaigners to produce multiple messages for use in multiple mediums. This in turn produces multiple effects on the targets of these communications and multiple effects on their decision-making processes.

Those Lazarsfeld called opinion leaders are still influential in today's cluttered media environment. Shimmel refers to them as "leading edge voters" who "political candidates must appeal to" (2003: 410). These are people who trusted and respected members of their communities and workplaces. According to Shimmel,

This core voter group can be described as age 25 to 44. In the highest income bracket with the best education, they hold professional/managerial positions and are financially secure. They tend to contribute to a variety of charities, excluding religious organisations, in this order: public television, social services, education, health-related causes, public radio, environmental causes and private foundations (2003:410).

RADIO

With such detailed description available, campaigners are able to make educated judgements as to the best ways to target this influential segment of the voter audience. Figure 1 clearly indicates opinion leaders as being of some influence in today's electoral scene. Family and friends were a major source of election information for 20.1 percent of the sample in this study. This influence is particularly strong in young voters, 4.9 percent with voters aged 18-25, and voters with strongly committed family voting patterns. However, opinion leaders

need a forum which will expose them to a greater number of listeners than their immediate family and the people who gather at the water cooler in the office. The increasing growth of talkback radio has provided just such a forum for these motivated voters and opinion leaders.

"Talk radio has become an important agent for politics communications" (Johnson, 2001: 24), particularly with those disaffected voters who feel they have been left behind. John Howard, in his successful 1996 campaign, referred to these voters as the silent majority. "Talk radio has hit a popular chord and is especially effective with conservative audiences" (Johnson, 2001: 24) and Howard has been willing to make regular appearances on 2UE with John Laws and 2GB with Alan Jones while at the same time limiting his availability on ABC talkback programs. As long serving Press Gallery journalist Wallace Brown says, "no Prime Minister worked the media, especially talk-back radio, more" (Brown, 2002: 222). With such hotbed issues as asylum seekers, border protection and terrorism in the 2001 election, "talk radio has become the great feeding trough of citizens' anger, distrust and ridicule" (Johnson, 2001: 24). Political parties organise callers to talkback radio programs with tightly scripted responses and speeches to ensure proper and accurate message delivery. By controlling the medium, parties are trying to control the message. "Talkback radio permits direct interaction with voters in ways 'not mediated or filtered by journalistic intervention" (Ward, 2002: 23).

While television may be the most visible and accessed media form in an election, radio will continue to remain an important part of the campaigner's toolbox. "Many campaigns cannot afford to pay the high price of television and so turn to cheaper forms of communication, such as radio advertising" (Johnson, 2001:140). In comparison to both newspaper and television advertising, "radio, with its low cost and ease of use, is virtually universal in Australian households" (Phillips, 2000). As Milner says "for the price of a full page ad in *The Courier* Mail (a broadsheet newspaper), I can run 10 television ads in primetime or I can run 100 radio ads" (Milner, 2001). For even the most financially challenged campaigns, a radio advertising strategy can be considered. As well as the financial benefits of such a strategy, there are no concerns with the time lag in having advertisements approved as with television. The lack of fact checking and examinations of claims made in radio advertisements allows the radio advertisements to "have a harder edge" (Milner, 2001). The process of advertisement rating for television, as mentioned earlier, can take up to 48 hours and as the saying goes, a day is a long time in politics. Every hour can make a difference in the delivery of your message to the areas campaigners need to target. During the Queensland state election of February 2001, the ALP set up a virtual advertising agency which was reactive to negative claims made by the opposition parties. By calling in a group of specialists and by using radio, they could respond to front-page newspaper stories by afternoon drive time on the radio as people headed home from work. Milner claims radio is an undervalued medium in the current electoral landscape in Australia but the use of talkback by John Howard has seen that change as Howard "has been credited with making radio a cornerstone of his media strategy" (Phillips, 2000: 24).

OTHER CONTACT METHODS

Voters are not overly faithful to one particular form of campaign information delivery system, as shown in Figure 1, but in fact prefer to garner the information regarding the campaign from a variety of sources. Just under 50 percent of the sample, 48.8 percent, used other information sources instead of or as well as the mass media. This trend towards the use of multiple sources of information gathering by voters has seen campaign directors and professionals move to a multiple message delivery system as they try to connect with voters to deliver the campaign message. By employing a variety of differing communication tactics there is a greater chance that voters will actually engage with at least some of the campaign materials. These in turn produce a variety of reactions to the campaign material by those voters who engage with the campaign materials. This is the targeted outcome. Rather than rely on a hit

and miss strategy like broadcast, campaigners are continuing to develop a multiple contact approach which creates multiple responses to the campaign messages. For this reason it is necessary to apply a methodology to campaign research which can track the multiple messages and message delivery systems utilised by campaigners. Laboratory style experiments are not reflective of the fast paced existence of voters in the contemporary world and these laboratory based methodologies have given researchers false leads to follow and dominated research methodologies to the detriment of the field of political communication.

During elections in Australia events such as the so-called Great Debate or Debates, that inevitably accompany any campaign, are controlled by the media to a large extent, but not in the areas that would help them fulfil their role as a legitimate fourth estate. The parties have a large say in the format of the debate, the time and location, but the moderator supposedly controls the content of the debate. It is also true that parties attempt to control the agenda of elections and all media coverage and this makes the debates, as a generalisation, rather sterile affairs. Both sides vet questions and issues so no nasty surprises await the participants on the night. The televised debates with their live audience of swinging voters, all armed with the now infamous 'worm' opinion meters, are not a forum for debate at all. They have become showcases of wardrobe, stylists and public speaking. Television networks have fallen into the trap set by campaigners. In their rush to secure the exclusive rights to hold the debate, networks have allowed too much control to rest with the participants and their handlers. The debates, allegedly a forum for greater public understanding of positions on important issues, are nothing more than showcases for crafted messages, another strand of contemporary campaigning.

CONCLUSION

The development of contemporary campaigns owes a large debt to the media. The Whitlam victory could not have been achieved without the rise of television in Australia and the ability of the Labor Party at that time to utilise television to hit specific disaffected voters. Television was not as dominant at that time and was a useful tool. Today, however, the voter market is a much more fluid entity. Fracturing of media usage with the introduction of a variety of new technologies and the refinement of older ones makes voters harder targets to hit with simple broadcast campaigns.

As shown in Figure 1, audiences are gathering their information during election campaigns from a wide variety of sources not just one. Voters are not particularly faithful to one form of media or another and are quite willing to find details from various sources. This has seen a growth in the ways in which political parties contact and deliver information to voters as they attempt to convert voters to their cause. The growth of technology has seen voters drift from the older channels of communication towards new and emerging technologies. Mobile phones are no longer just phones but sophisticated communication tools capable of receiving television broadcasts, text messages, podcasts and streaming video. As young voters rush to embrace these technologies, political parties are attempting to follow the trends.

Direct voter contact is now the norm of political campaigns and not the exception. While in the past it may have appeared that mailbox pamphlets were little but annoying junk mail, these kinds of political communication have been developed to deliver specific messages to specific targets. The development of these techniques has relegated broadcast advertising to a vital but less important role than previous campaign techniques. Broadcast is important in shoring up the support of committed voters but does not convert voters from previous voting patterns. In order to convert voters, the direct approach is best.

These direct voter contact techniques have redefined the field of political communication and allowed for the development of non-media reliant campaigns. These techniques pose a challenge to the media during election campaigns as the media will soon become ancillary to the needs of parties. Just as political parties have found ways to modify their campaigning techniques to account for contemporary media usage patterns, the media must also evolve to take account of the new regime of campaigns. Parties are not content to sit idly by and leave the job of message delivery to the media but the media should not allow political parties to avoid the scrutiny of the fourth estate. Just as political campaigns have evolved, the media must do the same if it is to lay any legitimate claim to the fourth estate.

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