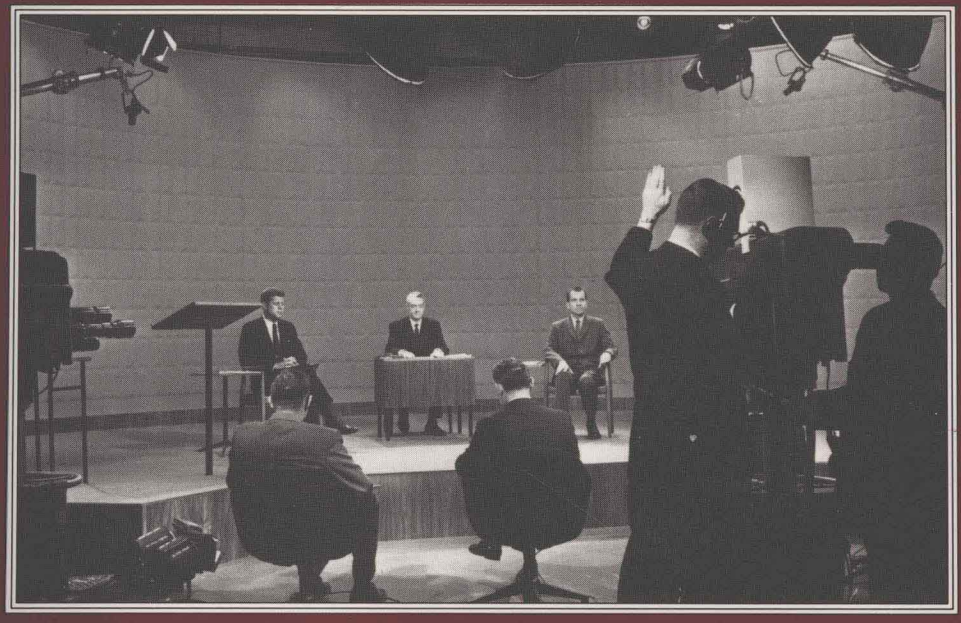
Praeger Series in Political Communication

Televised Presidential Debates



Advocacy in Contemporary America

Susan A. Hellweg, Michael Pfau,
and Steven R. Brydon

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To our parents in appreciation of their love and support:

Mary Jane Hellweg and Robert D. Hellweg

Russel W. Pfau and Vivian E. Pfau

Jacqueline Brydon Beal and Robert W. Brydon

About the Series

Those of us from the discipline of communication studies have long believed that communication is prior to all other fields of inquiry. In several other forums I have argued that the essence of politics is "talk" or human interaction.[1] Such interaction may be formal or informal, verbal or nonverbal, public or private, but always persuasive, forcing us consciously or subconsciously to interpret, to evaluate, and to act. Communication is the vehicle for human action.

From this perspective, it is not surprising that Aristotle recognized the natural kinship of politics and communication in his writings *Politics* and *Rhetoric*. In the former, he establishes that humans are "political beings [who] alone of the animals [are] furnished with the faculty of language."[2] And in the latter, he begins his systematic analysis of discourse by proclaiming that "rhetorical study, in its strict sense, is concerned with the modes of persuasion."[3] Thus, it was recognized more than two thousand years ago that politics and communication go hand in hand because they are essential parts of human nature.

Back in 1981, Dan Nimmo and Keith Sanders proclaimed that political communication was an emerging field.[4] Although its origin dates back centuries, a "self-consciously cross-disciplinary" focus began in the late 1950s. Thousands of books and articles later, colleges and universities offer a variety of graduate and undergraduate coursework in the area in such diverse departments as communication, mass communication, journalism, political science, and sociology.[5] In Nimmo and Sander's early assessment, the key areas of inquiry included rhetorical analysis,

propaganda analysis, attitude change studies, voting studies, government and the news media, functional and systems analyses, technological changes, media technologies, campaign techniques, and research techniques.[6] In a survey of the state of the field in 1983 by the same authors and Lynda Kaid, they found additional, more specific areas of concerns such as the presidency, political polls, public opinion, debates, and advertising to name a few.[7] Since the first study, they also noted a shift away from the rather strict behavioral approach.

Today, Dan Nimmo and David Swanson assert that "political communication has developed some identity as a more or less distinct domain of scholarly work."[8] The scope and concerns of the area have further expanded to include critical theories and cultural studies. While there is no precise definition, method, or disciplinary home of the area of inquiry, its primary domain is the role, processes, and effects of communication within the context of politics broadly defined.

In 1985, the editors of *Political Communication Yearbook: 1984* noted that "more things are happening in the study, teaching, and practice of political communication than can be captured within the space limitations of the relatively few publications available."[9] In addition, they argued that the backgrounds of "those involved in the field [are] so varied and plurist in outlook and approach, . . . it [is] a mistake to adhere slavishly to any set format in shaping the content."[10] And more recently, Swanson and Nimmo call for "ways of overcoming the unhappy consequences of fragmentation within a framework that respects, encourages, and benefits from diverse scholarly commitments, agendas, and approaches."[11]

In agreement with these assessments of the area and with gentle encouragement, in 1988 Praeger established the Praeger Series in Political Communication. The series is open to all qualitative and quantitative methodologies as well as contemporary and historical studies. The key to characterizing the studies in the series is the focus on communication variables or activities within a political context or dimension. Scholars from the disciplines of communication, history, political science, and sociology have participated in the series.

I am, without shame or modesty, a fan of the series. The joy of serving as its editor is in participating in the dialogue of the field of political communication and in reading the contributors' works. I invite you to join me.

Robert E. Denton, Jr.

NOTES

1. See Robert E. Denton, Jr., *The symbolic dimensions of the American presidency* (Prospect Heights, IL: Waveland Press, 1982); Robert E. Denton, Jr., and Gary Woodward, *Political Communication in America* (New York: Praeger, 1985, 2nd edition, 1990); Robert E. Denton, Jr., and Dan Hahn, *Presidential communication* (New York: Praeger, 1986); and Robert E. Denton, Jr., *The primetime presidency of Ronald Reagan* (New York: Praeger, 1988).

2, Aristotle, *The politics of Aristotle*, trans. Ernest Barker (New York: Oxford University Press, 1970), p. 5.

3. Aristotle, *Rhetoric*, trans. Rhys Roberts (New York: The Modern Library, 1954), p. 22.

4. Dan Nimmo and Keith Sanders, "Introduction: The Emergence of Political Communication as a Field," in Dan Nimmo and Keith Sanders, eds. *Handbook of political communication*, (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1981), pp. 11–36.

5. Ibid., p. 15.

6. Ibid., pp. 17–27.

7. Keith Sanders, Lynda Kaid, and Dan Nimmo, eds. *Political communication yearbook: 1984* (Carbondale, IL: Southern Illinois University, 1985), pp. 283–308.

8. Dan Nimmo and David Swanson, "The Field of Political Communication: Beyond the Voter Persuasion Paradigm," in David Swanson and Dan Nimmo, eds., *New directions in political communication*, (Beverly Hills, CA: Sage, 1990), p. 8.

9. Sanders, Kaid, and Nimmo, p. xiv.

10. Ibid., p. xiv.

11. Nimmo and Swanson, p. 11.

Series Foreword

Upon the birth of the technology, television was heralded as the ultimate instrument of democracy. It was, as no other medium, destined to unite us, educate us, and, as a result, improve the quality of actions and decisions of the polity. As the primary source of timely public information, television provides the greatest potential for understanding ourselves, our society, and even the world.

As early as 1964, Marshall McLuhan predicted that television would break down national barriers and transform the world into a global village. By the 1980s, some claim television would become the vehicle of direct democracy (Naisbitt, 1982, pp. 159–61; Toffler, 1980, pp. 416–32). Today, as notions of freedom and liberty spread throughout Eastern Europe and the Pacific Rim, television serves as the instrument of unification and definition.

We tend to forget that television also serves as an instrument of power and control (Innis, 1964, 1972), Quite simply, to control television content is to control public perceptions and attitudes. In America, television has become the primary medium and tool of both political campaigning and governing, culminating in the presidency of Ronald Reagan (Denton, 1988). Can television serve democracy?[1]

Without undertaking a philosophical discussion of democracy, one can identify several critical characteristics of a democratic form of government and consider television's impact in light of those features of democracy. The notion of *accountability*, for example, is essential to the notion of democracy. Because citizens delegate authority to those who

hold office, politicians are answerable to the public for all actions and deeds. Elections are just one method of accountability. In America, news journalism serves as another check on political power and authority.

Television increases the accountability of politicians when it enhances public awareness and decision making. But the medium of television has been co-opted by politicians as an instrument of advocacy. Politicians surround themselves with media professionals who advise ways of nurturing the proper image, persona, or personality. It is very easy for politicians to manipulate media access and control. Thus, television is more beneficial for politicians as a medium of self-promotion.

Information is critical for citizens to make informed judgments and evaluations of elected officials. Television news is the prime source of information for the public (Kaid and Davidson, 1986, p. 185). Incomplete or inaccurate information can lead to bad public decisions. More important is the impact of the medium on the presentation of political information. Television, as a medium, especially tends to reduce abstract or ideological principles to human, personal components. Political issues and actions are linked to individuals. We have choices not among policies but between actors. As the public becomes even more reliant on television as a source of political information and the medium increasingly simplifies the information, the ability to recognize, perform, and appreciate complex social issues will also decline.

A free marketplace of ideas is vital to a thriving democracy. Diversity of thought and respect for dissent are hallmarks of the values of freedom and justice. When multiple viewpoints are heard and expressed, the common good prevails over private interest. With the advent of cable, the number of media outlets continue to increase but the diversity of programming does not, especially hard news and public affairs programming.

Remember that in America the mass media are, first of all, businesses. They require audiences to make money and turn a profit. Ratings are of great concern to news personalities and news programming is very expensive. The product of journalism is not ideas, but news (Entman, 1989, p. 11). Politicians and journalists have separate and distinct motives, neither of which contributes to the genuine exchange of philosophies or ideas. In fact, news journalists and politicians need each other. The result is an act of symbolic engagement. According to Christopher Arterton, it is like watching a tennis match without the benefit of actually playing the game (1984, p. 25). As spectators to the spectacle, we have lost access, control, and involvement in the process of democracy which leads us to the final element of consideration.

Democracy is a process of what Dennis Thompson (1987, 3) calls "collective deliberation" on disputes of issues and fundamental values. It is the national and public debate that determines the collective wisdom and will of the people. Ironically, however, as the speed of communication and information increases, political delegation and representation become less satisfying. Citizens become directly involved in the day-to-day affairs of state by watching television news. The stress of citizen involvement has moved from action to reaction, from initiator to responder.

This new form of politics has resulted in the living room becoming the voting booth (McLuhan, 1964, p. 22). The privatization of politics has made us passive observers rather than active participants in the political process. We may watch debates but seldom engage in them. As citizens, we no longer deliberate and debate. At best, through television we have established a plebiscitary democracy where mass public opinion is sovereign. Collective wisdom, however, is not the same as collective opinion. The speeding up of counting votes and opinions does not address the quality of those votes and opinions.

Within this broad context, Susan Hellweg, Michael Pfau, and Steven Brydon investigate the impact of television on presidential debates. For the authors, presidential debates have become uniquely television events. To argue that television simply transmits the debates into the privacy of our homes is naive. Television dictates the structure, format, and presentation of presidential debates; these dictates play an important role in how candidates exercise influence in the debates and how the public perceives and responds to them. To understand contemporary political debates, therefore, one must understand how television communicates and exercises influence in the creation and presentation of debates.

Hellweg, Pfau, and Brydon provide a valuable addition to the study of presidential debates. They integrate contemporary television media theory and research with existing and new research on presidential debates. They go beyond description to theory building and explanation. By tracing how presidential debates have evolved as a function of the participation of the broadcast industry, the authors examine how debates are structured to meet the demands of the medium, how candidate messages are tailored to the medium, how candidate messages are visually defined through the medium, and the consequential impact of mediated presidential debates. Thus, while several books have been written on presidential debates, this is the first to provide an integrated approach combining theory and research in television influence with current research on political debates.

Rather than some vibrant democratic exercise, presidential debates have become joint television appearances or joint press conferences with little true candidate engagement. The authors recognize that the future of presidential debates lies with the idiosyncracies of individual campaigns. Thus, the question becomes how presidential debates can best inform the electorate and serve democracy.

Is "teledemocracy" the twenty-first century's equavalency of fifth century B.C. Athenian democracy, or do we risk "telefacism?" The answer, of course, is somewhere between those extremes. Without being too deterministic, one can argue that television has changed the fundamental nature, structure, and function of American politics. The medium influences who runs, who is elected, the nature of democracy, as well as presidential leadership and the institution itself.

Perhaps we need, as Martin Levin (1980) argues, to return to a "politics of institutions, not men." This means a greater role and recognition of the other branches of government. Policy making is a collective affair rather than a competitive endeavor.

We need to also have a greater understanding of the role, function, and power of the media in our society. As social and scientific technology rapidly increases, we must carefully plan for their usage within the context of democratic values. Walter Cronkite suggested in a 1989 speech at the University of South Dakota,

> We could benefit by a journalism course for consumers. If we would teach people how to read a newspaper, how to listen to radio and watch television . . . we could create an understanding of media, of the individual strengths and weaknesses of each medium. We could lead them away from a dependence on television, back to good newspapers, magazines, and books.

Finally, civic responsibility and initiative should once again become a keystone of social life which surely transcends the nature and use of any medium. Instead of viewing *politics* as talk, maybe we should view politics as *people engaged in talk*. It must be person to person.

Jeffrey Abramson and his colleagues advocate a "communitarian conception of democracy" which would reverse the "centralization of politics and political communication" that has been the case with television (1988, pp. 24–26). The goal is to use television and all the new media for the "common good" of the citizens. The key difference is interaction, community participation in debate at the local level. It is what they call the "electronic commonwealth" where the goals of the media are to inform and to empower the people.

In the end, perhaps the answer is reflected in the wisdom of Al Smith: "The only cure for the evils of democracy is more democracy."

Robert E. Denton, Jr.

NOTE

1. This argument is based on Robert E. Denton, Jr., "Primetime Politics: The Ethics of Teledemocracy," in *Ethical dimensions of political communication*, Robert E. Denton, Jr., ed. (New York: Praeger, 1991), 91–114.

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Preface

Televised debates between the nominees of the two major parties have become standard fare in contemporary presidential election campaigns. In recent campaigns for president, debates are considered a major communication event. Kathleen Jamieson and David Birdsell (1988, pp. 5–6) observe: "'Debate' has become a buzzword for 'serious politics'. . . . When debates are announced, movement in the polls slows; in anticipation, the electorate suspends its willingness to be swayed by ads and news."

Yet, televised debates among presidential candidates are not simply communication events; they are *uniquely television events*. They are broadcast to a mass audience, most of whom view them in the privacy of their own homes. Televised political debates have moved to what Susan Drucker terms "electronic public space," and because the nature of debate changes with the context, this shift has produced "a new form of debate" (1989, pp. 7, 20).

Ironically, television, the communication medium for modern debates, has been largely overlooked. Instead, media professionals and academics have continued the longstanding tradition, which dates to classical Greek and Roman oratory and was institutionalized in the American democratic tradition, of stressing the content of debates. The emphasis is placed squarely on what the candidates *say* in debates. Hence, in assessing candidate effectiveness in debates, media analysts in their commentary, and debate scholars in their more considered analyses, tend to focus on the specific arguments raised, the quality of reasoning and documentation

for claims, whether participants answered the questions asked by the panelists, the amount of clash with the opponents' claims, and, of course, gaffes. Even the scoring of debates is drawn from the academic debate model, emphasizing reasoning, evidence, analysis, and refutation, in addition to delivery.

It is our position that the verbal content of presidential debates is important, and we deal with it in this volume. But we also maintain that television has altered the very nature of presidential debates in a profound fashion. Yet, as academics and interested citizens, we have not adjusted to this "new form of debate" to which Drucker refers. As Sidney Kraus (1988, pp. 7, 20) observes, "Despite the growing influence of television . . . [we have] failed to seriously investigate the role of the media in electoral politics."

We argue that the demands of television have dictated the structure and formats of contemporary debates and that the visual content of presidential debates plays an important role in the way that candidates exercise influence in televised debates. Television manifests a unique symbol system, which fundamentally shapes what is communicated to receivers, apart from the content, and has changed the very nature of presidential debate discourse. Contemporary television is not simply the direct transmission of some live event to the privacy of our own homes. Nor is it radio with pictures. Television is "a medium with its own stylistic requirements and communicative facilities" (Jamieson, 1984, p. 21). As a result, what works in a live presentation will not necessarily work on television. Television communicates in the intimate confines of a viewer's home, which demands a "cooler, more conversational" approach (Jamieson, 1988, p. 44). Also, what works on radio will not necessarily work on television. "Radio forces the listener to visualize. Television intrudes into the home of the viewer with its own images" (Nesbit, 1988, pp. 165–66). As a result, one study indicates that television exercises influence in a manner more similar to interpersonal communication than to radio, print, or traditional public address communication (Pfau, 1990).

This book employs a television perspective to investigate the sponsorship, formats, nature, and impacts of presidential debates, integrating contemporary theory and research about the television medium and influence with extant research on debates. The book will examine how presidential debates have evolved as a function of the active participation of the broadcast industry, how debates are structured to fit the demands of the television medium, how candidates' verbal messages have to be tailored to the medium, how candidates' visual messages are defined through the medium, and the persuasive effects of mediated debates.

We approach this book as scholars interested in the broad area of communication, sharing a common fascination with the specialty of political campaign communication, particularly with televised presidential debates. We acknowledge those scholars whose writings contributed to our understanding of presidential debates and the manner that television has shaped contemporary debates, especially Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Sidney Kraus, and Robert Tiemens. We add, however, that any shortcomings of this volume are ours and not theirs.

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