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Media Literacy: Understanding the Meaning behind the Messages

> Media education is both essential to the exercising of our democratic rights and a necessary safeguard against the worst excesses of media manipulation for political purposes.
>
> —Len Masterman, *Teaching Media* (1985)

> At the heart of media literacy is the principle of inquiry.
>
> —Elizabeth Thoman, Center for Media Literacy (1999)

> Media literacy has considerable potential as long as it involves an explanation of how the media system actually works, and leads people to want to work toward a better system.
>
> —Robert W. McChesney (1999)

Every day, experts say, we come in contact with between 1,000 and 3,000 media messages, including advertising. From the moment we wake up in the morning until we go to sleep at night, we will have been exposed to media messages on the radio, TV, Internet, cell phones, on clothes we wear, on the roads we drive, even at school. There is almost nowhere we can go anymore to escape advertising.

Advertising continues to invade every possible space: everything from a pregnant woman selling ad space on her stomach to product placements in films . . . if you can dream it, advertisers are probably thinking right now about how they can use it to get our attention.

In essence, we are all target markets for some product or service. When we were in elementary school, the toy advertising market was interested in us; when we were in middle school, the clothing and fad industries were interested in us; and

Almost any newsstand offers a dizzying array of magazines purveying everything from lengthy news analysis to celebrity gossip. (Courtesy of Frank W. Baker)

in high school, we were the target for MP3 players, blue jeans, shoes, video games, cell phones; college . . . the sky is the limit.

Think about the hundreds of different magazines at your local bookstore or newsstand: there are titles for men, women, teens, and children; for hunters, photographers, artists, writers, film enthusiasts, coin collectors, and many, many more. They cover topics such as news, fashion, music, sports, decorating, entertainment, leisure, and business. Each publication is aimed at a specific demographic: people the publishers know are interested. Each magazine has its own niche audience (and enough advertisers who keep it in print).

What do you know about advertising? Perhaps you have learned about some of the common techniques of persuasion:

Technique:	What it says:	Examples:
Bandwagon	Everybody is doing it—why not you?	Everybody is getting the new and improved teeth whitening toothpaste.
Everyday people (aka "plain folks")	People like you shop here; shouldn't you?	Join your neighbor at the new Wal-Mart.
Testimonials	Famous personalities use a product or service; you connect with this person, product, or idea.	Tiger Woods loves to drive a Buick.
Fear	There is some potential risk to you if you don't heed this message.	A car crash is shown in a "buckle your seatbelt" campaign.

You might have even had a school or college assignment in which you were required to create or produce an ad using these persuasive techniques in some form of media technology.

What you were doing involved what we now call "media literacy." To use advertising as the example: if you studied techniques of persuasion, you were most likely involved in analyzing or learning how to deconstruct (take apart) or "read" ads. If you created your own ad, you experimented with creating and producing it.

MEDIA LITERACY = ANALYSIS + PRODUCTION

Analysis

To analyze a media message, one must break it down, or deconstruct it, to study its component parts in order to understand how it was constructed. Newspapers and magazines, for example, rely on words, photographs, and other graphic images. So understanding print media involves analyzing words and images. Television and motion pictures—the moving images—involve visual and aural techniques. The Internet combines the elements of both print and nonprint media.

Many of us have never been trained to analyze an advertisement, television program, movie, or Web page. Media studies, as the subject is called in some colleges and universities, helps students appreciate the importance of media analysis techniques. Understanding these techniques is part of knowing how to "read the media" and how to appreciate the "languages of media." In this text, the reader is provided guidance on how to analyze campaign photos, campaign events, and political advertisements.

Production

Producing media involves hands-on creation of media messages. Producing media might mean writing a news story or blog, creating your own podcast, or simply making your own photograph or video. Experts know that when students are given the opportunity to create media, it allows them to comprehend and appreciate more fully the messages they come in contact with every day. Today, more schools *are* acquiring the tools which allow young people to become media makers themselves. We know that young people not only like to create media, but also like to see their productions shared with their peers. This fact alone explains the explosion in popularity of user-generated Web sites such as YouTube and Flickr, among many others. "Digital storytelling" (using digital tools to tell stories) has also become popular in schools because it links traditional narrative storytelling with the use of visual and media production.

MEDIA LITERACY IN THE UNITED STATES AND CANADA

Because media literacy is relatively new in the United States, many media educators have looked to Canada for guidance, for example, where media education, as it is also called, has been mandated in most of the provinces since the 1970s. Millions

of students in Canada, the United Kingdom, and Australia, to name a few countries, have already received media education through formal instruction in school.

In Canada, media literacy has been defined as follows:

> develop(ing) an informed and critical understanding of the nature of mass media, the techniques used by them, and the impact of these techniques. More specifically, [media literacy education] aims to increase the students' understanding and enjoyment of how the media work, how they produce meaning, how they are organized, and how they construct reality. Media literacy also aims to provide students with the ability to create media products.[1]

In U.S. schools, teaching media literacy has slowly caught on with more and more educators. A 1999 survey found "elements of media literacy" in almost every state's K–12 educational teaching standards, in the curricular standards for English and Language Arts, Social Studies/History, and Health.[2] In fact, media literacy is now regarded as one of the important 21st-century skills young people should learn in order to become attractive to employers in our global society.[3]

STARTING POINT FOR APPLYING MEDIA LITERACY TO MEDIA MESSAGES

In order to understand how media work, you need a framework: a lens through which to study and comprehend the process. One popular framework was produced and promoted by the Center for Media Literacy. Its "core concepts" and "key questions," derived from earlier ideas developed in the United Kingdom, Australia, and Canada, have been adopted and followed throughout North America.

Media Literacy's Core Concepts

1. All media messages are constructed.
2. Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own set of rules.
3. Different people experience the same media message differently.
4. Media have embedded values and points of view.
5. Most media messages are organized to gain profit and/or power.[4]

Let's apply these core concepts to political media messages:

Core concepts:	Application to media and politics:
1. All media messages are constructed.	A media message doesn't just happen: somebody creates it. From the morning newspaper to the evening news to the Web site to the political event or ad, all are constructions. Each medium employs a gatekeeper whose job it is to decide what is used and what is not. Photographers by necessity use a viewfinder to frame images; political campaign advisers control the photographer's position in order to ensure that the best images of the candidate are captured; TV news people shoot and then edit footage of campaign events. News producers select which stories and images are used and which are not.
2. Media messages are constructed using a creative language with its own set of rules.	Radio depends on sound; TV depends on pictures; newspaper depends on print and images; the Internet utilizes many media. Filmmakers oftentimes use visual symbolism. When designing a message, a producer strongly considers the characteristics of the medium—which of its techniques are most effective, all designed to influence those who consume it.
3. Different people experience the same media message differently.	While you may think or feel one way after seeing or/hearing a media message, another person (e.g., of a different age, gender, or ethnicity) probably sees and understands the same message completely differently. This is because we all have various frames of reference, backgrounds, experiences, and education.
4. Media have embedded values and points of view.	Because all media messages are constructed, choices have to be made. These choices inevitably reflect the values, attitudes and points of view of those doing the constructing. Political campaign strategists decide how their candidate will be portrayed by attempting to control as many elements of the presentation as possible. They want you, the viewer, to feel good about their candidate so that you will vote for him or her.
5. Most media messages are organized to gain profit and/or power.	All media—and media messages—are designed to make money: pure and simple. If it doesn't make money, it disappears. Money drives the political process, too, since candidates must raise millions to purchase advertising time on radio and television. By examining who funds campaigns and the media messages they produce, we also begin to understand how the media profits during the campaign for the presidency.

Every medium uses a variety of techniques designed to evoke some kind of unconscious response from us, the viewers. The colors, the music, the layout, the editing, the selection of actors and their clothes and expressions—all should be considered when we examine and deconstruct media messages. Together these are generally known as the "languages of media." When a political advertisement is created, an enormous amount of time, energy (and money) is spent considering how the audience will react to the package as a whole.

MEDIA LITERACY AND CRITICAL THINKING

Media literacy also involves understanding not only how a message was made, but also who made it, for what purpose, using which techniques, to achieve what desired outcomes. Media literacy, then, is concerned, among other things, with encouraging us to ask questions about media messages: a healthy skepticism, asking the right questions and knowing where to get the answers, is an important step to becoming media literate.

So what is media literacy? It is a set of critical thinking and viewing skills one applies to media messages. Media are institutions that employ hundreds of people who are specialists in different tasks. Think about a newspaper for a moment. How

does it get constructed? Every day, reporters are assigned to cover and write stories. Photographers take companion photographs. Editors refine stories, letters, and photos. Someone is responsible for selling ad space. Someone else must design the paper and lay out its pages or screens. Others are in charge of printing and delivering the paper. You get the idea. But do you know who owns your newspaper? How might that affect its coverage of events? How much does the newspaper company charge for advertising? What stories or editorials does the paper leave out, and why? Where can you go to read information that you can't find locally? These are also important questions to ask as a media literate citizen.

Over time, media educators have created a list of critical thinking questions that can be applied to any text, whether it's a photograph, news story, commercial, or political campaign message.

Media Literacy's Key Questions

1. Who created this message?
2. What techniques are used by the creator to attract attention?
3. How might different people understand this message differently than I do?
4. What lifestyles, values, points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?
5. Why was this message sent?[5]

Here are the key questions as applied to political media messages:

Key (critical thinking) questions:	Applications to media and politics:
1. Who created this message?	This question goes to *authorship:* who is responsible for writing, producing, or paying for this message? For example, can you determine from watching an ad who put it together? The message may be for the candidate or a cause, but do you really know *who* created it? In political campaigns, highly skilled consultants are usually the ones behind creating the messages. Increasingly, independent groups also raise millions of dollars to create issue advocacy ads.
2. What techniques are used by the creator to attract attention?	This question gets to the specific *method* used by producers to make a message attractive and believable. For a political event, it might be music or use of banners and colors. For a political advertisement, it is persuasive language (words), images, and sounds.
3. How might different people understand this message differently than I do?	This question is aimed at *audience:* who is reading, listening and/or watching; what do they know or not know about the topic, person, or event? An older person probably interprets a message differently from someone from Generation M. As we will see, many candidates first decide who (in terms of age, gender, political persuasion) they are trying to reach and tailor the message for them. Then they purchase ad time or ad space on those TV shows, radio stations, or Web sites where they know their audience will be watching, listening, reading, or surfing.
4. What lifestyles, values, points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?	This question is aimed at the *content:* since most news stories on television are under two minutes and most political ads are just 30 seconds long, each cannot avoid omitting very important information. So you might ask yourself: What am I not being told or shown, and why? Where can I locate more information that is nonpartisan or unbiased? Remember, advertisers make their products look their best for their commercials—and so do the political media consultants, except that their "product" is their candidate.
5. Why was this message sent?	This question goes to *purpose.* Most media consultants will agree that political messages are designed to persuade you to feel good about their candidate or feel negatively toward the opposing candidate. Is the message designed to get you to think more positively or more negatively about a candidate or cause? Is the message intended to cast doubt on conventional thinking? Might the message instill fear? Does the message try to sway you to take some action—make a phone call, or log onto a Web site, or send a contribution? Obviously the candidate gleans some benefit when his or her message is broadcast to millions of people: we might all hear the same message at the same time. Voters also benefit from the information conveyed in the messages. Since we know that media exist to make money, it is logical to conclude that when politicians buy time on TV, cable, or radio, or ad space on Web sites, it is those media and technology companies that benefit the most.

OTHER QUESTIONS TO CONSIDER

Canadian media educator Chris Worsnop has helped teachers and students alike to learn to question media messages. Using the following chart[6] apply these other questions to political campaign media messages (note that the word *text* below applies to both print and nonprint media messages):

Media image:	Questions to ask:
Industry	Who's in charge? What do they want of me, and why? What else do they want? HOW DO I KNOW?
Product	What kind of text is this? Are conventions followed or broken? How is this message constructed? HOW DO I KNOW?
Audience	Who is this intended for? What assumptions does the text make about the audience? Who am I supposed to be in relation to this text? HOW DO I KNOW?

Values	How real is this text? How/where do I find the meaning? What values are presented? What is the commercial message? What is the ideology of this text? What social/artistic/political messages does the text contain? HOW DO I KNOW?
Predisposition	Do I agree with (assent to) this text's message? Do I disagree with (resist) this text's message? Do I argue/negotiate with the message of this text? HOW DO I KNOW?
Perception	How does the text fit my personal values/beliefs/ideology? How does the text relate to my personal needs/hopes/fears/experiences? HOW DO I KNOW?
Skills	What skills do I need to apply to this text? How do I deconstruct/reconstruct this text? What new skills does this text demand of me? HOW DO I KNOW?
Receiver	What does all this mean in the end? HOW DO I KNOW?

Source: Chris M. Worsnop. Adapted by the author from *Screening Images: Ideas for Media Education,* 2nd ed., Wright Communications, 1999.

The Annenberg Public Policy Center (home of FactCheck.org) offers students these "Tools of the Trade" to consider:[7]

A Process for Avoiding Deception

1. *Keep an open mind.* Most of us have biases, and we can easily fool ourselves if we don't make a conscious effort to keep our minds open to new information. Psychologists have shown over and over again that humans naturally tend to accept any information that supports what they already believe, even if the information isn't very reliable. And humans also naturally tend to reject information that conflicts with those beliefs, even if the information is solid. These predilections are powerful. Unless we make an active effort to listen to all sides, we can become trapped into believing something that isn't so, and won't even know it.
2. *Ask the right questions.* Don't accept claims at face value; test them by asking a few questions. Who is speaking, and where are they getting their information? How can I validate what they're saying? What facts would prove this claim wrong? Does the evidence presented really back up what's being said? If an ad says a product is "better," for instance, what does that mean? Better than what?
3. *Cross-check.* Don't rely on one source or one study, but look to see what others say. When two or three reliable sources independently report the same facts or conclusions, you can be more confident of them. But when two independent sources contradict each other, you know you need to dig more deeply to discover who's right.
4. *Consider the source.* Not all sources are equal. As any *CSI* viewer knows, sometimes physical evidence is a better source than an eyewitness, whose memory can play tricks. And an eyewitness is more credible than somebody telling a story they heard from somebody else. By the same token, an Internet Web site that offers primary source material is more trustworthy than one that publishes information gained second- or third-hand. For example, official vote totals posted by a county clerk or state election board are more authoritative than election returns reported by a political blog or even a newspaper, which can be out of date or mistaken.
5. *Weigh the evidence.* Know the difference between random anecdotes and real scientific data from controlled studies. Know how to avoid common errors of reasoning, such as assuming that one thing causes another simply because the two happen one after the other. Does a rooster's crowing cause the sun to rise? Only a rooster would think so.

> Media literacy empowers people to be both critical thinkers and creative producers of an increasingly wide range of messages using image, language, and sound. It is the skillful application of literacy skills to media and technology messages. As communication technologies transform society, they impact our understanding of ourselves, our communities, and our diverse cultures, making media literacy an essential life-skill for the 21st century.
>
> —The Alliance for a Media Literate America

> Candidates must have razzle-dazzle. Boring is the fatal label. Programs and concepts that cannot be collapsed into a slogan or a thirty second sound bite go largely unheard and unremembered, for what the modern campaign offers in length, it lacks in depth.
>
> —Dick Morris, media consultant to President Bill Clinton

NOTES

1. *Media Literacy Resource Guide* (Ontario Ministry of Education, 1997).
2. Robert Kubey and Frank Baker, "Has Media Education Found a Curricular Foothold?" *Education Week,* October 27, 1999.
3. Partnership for 21st-Century Skills.
4. Center for Media Literacy.
5. Ibid.
6. Chris M. Worsnop. Adapted by the author from *Screening Images: Ideas for Media Education,* 2nd ed., Wright Communications, 1999.
7. Annenberg Public Policy Center, http://www.factchecked.org/ToolsOfTheTrade.aspx.

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Propaganda and Spin: The Power of the Image over the Word

I think the American people will be shocked by such contempt for their intelligence. This isn't Ivory Soap versus Palmolive.

—Presidential candidate Adlai E. Stevenson, reacting to the use of TV ads in campaigns (1952)

It was TV more than anything that turned the tide.

—President-elect John F. Kennedy

Politics will eventually be replaced by imagery. The politician will be only too happy to abdicate in favor of his image, because the image will be much more powerful than he could ever be.

—Marshall McLuhan

Television images penetrate and then shape public consciousness.

—Media scholar Neil Postman

Picture news will always be show business because the brain does not have to translate the information.

—James B. Twitchell, *Carnival Culture* (1992)

CREATING AND CONTROLLING THE IMAGE

"Image is everything." It might surprise you that the speaker is tennis player Andre Agassi. The same phrase has also been uttered for decades by advertisers and political media consultants.

Media Literacy Core Concept:

All media messages are constructed.

Media Literacy Key Questions:

What techniques are used by the creator to attract attention?

What lifestyles, values, points of view are represented in, or omitted from, this message?

If you can control the image that Americans see every day in their morning newspapers, and every night on the evening news, then you manipulate everything they see, read, hear, and understand. Yesterday it was called propaganda; today, it's called "spin."

It's no accident that many of those who call themselves "media consultants," and who work on presidential campaigns, have come directly from the advertising, broadcasting, public relations, and marketing industries. There, they learned the tricks of the trade: a certain color creates the right mood; a specific camera angle makes the subject look strong and powerful; good lighting evokes the right impression. When the right words are combined with the right images and sounds, you have a winning combination—an event or ad that promises to sell. And it can sell dish detergent as well as the latest candidate. It doesn't matter—the techniques of persuasion are identical.

Despite their apparently informal tone, staged events such as this January 2004 conference of women who own small businesses, held at the Commerce Department in Washington, D.C., were carefully managed to exploit Pres. George W. Bush's easy rapport with relatively small, selected audiences. (AP Photo/Ron Edmonds)

According to *Washington Post* White House reporter Mike Allen, the White House under President George W. Bush put a premium on the visual image. Allen says there are people in the White House's communications department whose expertise is lighting, backdrops, and set design.[1]

From the moment TV became prevalent in American homes, it transformed the family and the living room. The television became what some called the "new fireplace," a place for the family to gather around. So-called TV dinners, frozen entrees, were created in the 1960s so that families could eat and watch at the same time.

1952: EISENHOWER VS. STEVENSON

Eisenhower Commercial

"Eisenhower answers America"

"I paid twenty-four dollars for these groceries—look, for this little"

"A few years ago those same groceries cost you ten dollars, now twenty-four, next year thirty—that's what will happen unless we have a change"

Dwight D. Eisenhower was the first American president to draw on modern advertising techniques to "sell" his message. Famed ad man Rosser Reeves created the "Eisenhower Answers America" television "spot" campaign for the 1952 presidential election. *Source:* Edwin Diamond and Stephen Bates, *The Spot: The Rise of Political Advertising on Television,* 3rd ed. (Cambridge, Mass.: MIT Press, 1992) 130–131. (Images courtesy of the Wisconsin Center for Film and Theater Research, Wisconsin Historical Society)

Radio soon drifted into second place as millions of people bought televisions, and programming entered what has become known as the "Golden Age," with well-crafted dramas from some of the finest American writers.

One of the earliest uses of an advertising agency in a presidential race was in 1936, when Hill Blackett (of Blackett-Sample-Hummert) worked as a media adviser for Republican candidate Alfred Landon. The agency helped the candidate to purchase radio time for Landon's speeches.[2]

Ad man Rosser Reeves, who had worked for New York agency Ted Bates & Co., spearheaded Dwight Eisenhower's 1952 campaign for president. Ike had campaigned as the "man from Abilene," and Reeves helped create a commercial that showed Eisenhower as the everyman.

Watch Ike ads: http://www.pbs.org/30secondcandidate/from_idea_to_ad/collection/31.html.

THE DAISY SPOT: BROADCAST ONCE—SEEN MANY TIMES

Ad executive Tony Schwartz, working with the Doyle Dane Bernbach (DDB) ad agency, helped create the famous "Daisy" spot for incumbent President Lyndon B. Johnson's 1964 campaign against Republican challenger Barry Goldwater.

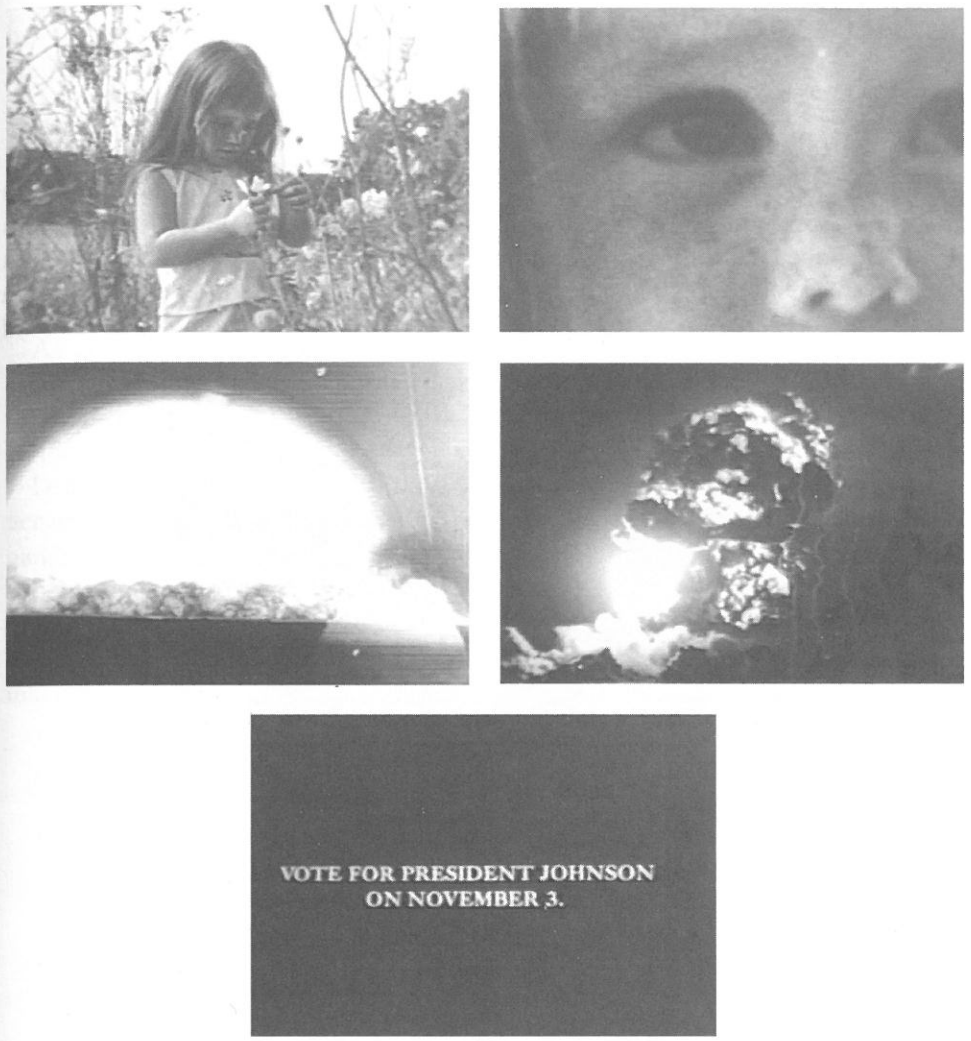
The ad showed a little girl picking the petals off a daisy as she counts down from 10. As she does, the camera slowly zooms into her eye, which dissolves into a nuclear bomb detonation. Johnson's words are heard at the end of the ad.

Ad Transcript

"These are the stakes. To make a world in which all of God's children can live or to go into the dark. We must either love each other . . . or we must die." A voice over announcer closes: "Vote for President Johnson on November 3rd. The stakes are too high to stay home."

Writing in his classic text *The Responsive Chord* (1973), Schwartz noted that the Daisy spot never mentioned Goldwater by name: "Someone unfamiliar with the political climate in 1964 and viewing the spot today will not perceive any allusion at all to Goldwater. Then why did it bring such a reaction in 1964? Well, Senator Goldwater had stated previously that he supported the use of tactical atomic weapons. The commercial evoked a deep feeling in many people that Goldwater might actually use nuclear weapons. This mistrust was not in the Daisy spot. It was in the people who viewed the commercial. The stimuli of the film and sound evoked these feelings and allowed people to express what they inherently believed."[3]

Even though the Daisy ad aired only once, it generated lots of press. The *New York Times* newspaper, as well as the ABC and CBS television networks and *TIME Magazine* all did stories about it. "The hubhub helped reinforce



Stills from the 1964 presidential campaign television spot "Peace, Little Girl," also known as the "Daisy Spot." (Courtesy of the Lyndon Baines Johnson Presidential Library and Museum and the Democratic National Committee)

the trigger-happy association pinned on Goldwater—and to imply that a vote for Johnson was a vote against escalation in Vietnam."[4]

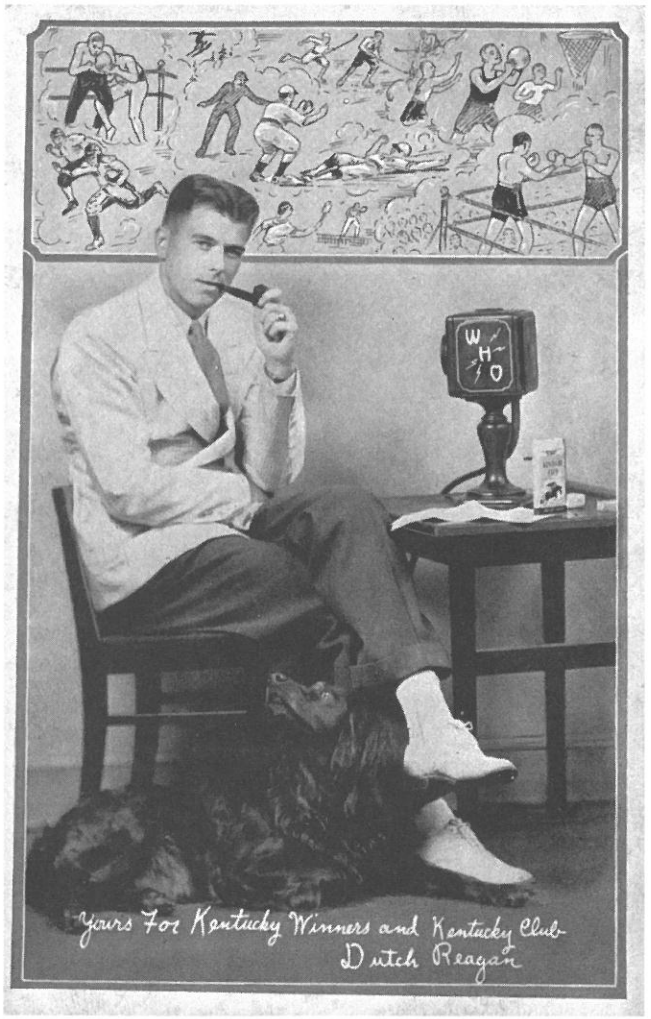
Starting with the Nixon campaign of 1968, candidates and their advisers became extremely adept not only at creating powerful political ads but also in the elaborate staging of media events. Nixon hired H. R. Haldeman, a former ad executive, to help manage TV coverage of his successful 1968 presidential campaign.[5]

One president in particular was a master at using the medium of television to his advantage.

RONALD REAGAN: THE GREAT COMMUNICATOR

> Reagan was a great communicator because he was a great storyteller.
> —Garry Wills, *Reagan's America: Innocents at Home* (1987)

Not many people realize that Ronald Reagan had a lifetime of being both in the public spotlight and in broadcasting long before he was elected president in 1981. He honed his skills while working in radio early in his career; he was a film actor in the 1940s and 1950s; he hosted *GE Theater,* a weekly television drama series (1955–1958). He wrote and narrated a series of radio commentaries. And



Ronald "Dutch" Reagan as a young radio sportscaster at WHO Radio in Des Moines, Iowa, in 1932–1933. Used to answer fan mail, this postcard showed the future president, a nonsmoker, promoting the brands of his show's sponsors. (AP Photo)

he became a popular speaker for Republican causes, giving a nationally televised address in support of Barry Goldwater's failed presidential bid.

From his early identification with Roosevelt and his professional training came the Great Communicator. Reagan's idea of a President was of a leader who could rally the country to a cause with the power of his voice and use public opinion as a catalyst for change. His communicative skill was a principal source of his effectiveness as President, but it rested on stronger foundations than mere mastery of television.

Believability was the key. Reagan was not believable because he was the Great Communicator; he was the Great Communicator because he was believable.[6]

As governor of California, Reagan surrounded himself with highly qualified aides, including Ed Meese, James Baker, and Michael Deaver, a former public relations executive. The "ruling troika," as Reagan biographer Edmund Morris called them, followed Reagan all the way to the White House.

Deaver had a gift for understanding the visual rhetoric of television. It was Deaver who orchestrated and choreographed every public appearance by Ronald Reagan. Deaver knew Reagan's strengths (as both actor and orator) and crafted press events to take advantage of both.

In an interview with Cable News Network reporter Frank Sesno, Deaver explained how the setting for a White House press conference was represented to make the chief executive look strong and powerful:

> DEAVER: You didn't have to do anything with Reagan. I mean, he looked presidential. I always thought of my job (a) as lighting him well and (b) filling up the space around him so that the visual that the public saw in every way we could would tell the story of that particular action, whatever it was.
>
> SESNO (on camera): This photo over here, this red carpet, it's not an accident.
>
> DEAVER: No. That was the background that we used for the press conferences, and there was a reason for it. But you see, the whole visual there is formality and power, high ceilings, pillars, crystal chandeliers, red carpet. It's a place of importance. It's obviously the White House, and important things happen there. That's what it says.[7]

CBS White House correspondent Lesley Stahl summed up what made Reagan a great communicator: "Being an actor was part of his secret. No president was ever that at ease before the cameras, and cowboys are always at ease. He came across on television as natural, easy in his laugh and his walk. Without once raising his voice, Ronald Reagan sold the country on his dreams and illusions, and he sold himself as a strong leader. The CBS pollster Kathy Frankovic told me that much of Reagan's popularity derived from his aura of consistency. This was something he worked at communicating. Even when he didn't stick to his guns, he said he did! Reagan raised taxes over and over, but each time he would insist he was a tax cutter and persuaded everyone he was. Now, that's communicating!"[8] Yet Stahl herself experienced the White House's media manipulation.

How One News Report Backfired

In October 1984, in the midst of Reagan's reelection campaign, Stahl and her producer produced a lengthy report for the *CBS Evening News with Dan Rather*

Pres. Ronald Reagan, the "Great Communicator," brought to politics a professional understanding of how to control his image in the media, based on his years of experience in radio, television, and film. (Courtesy of the Ronald Reagan Presidential Library)

about how the White House used television and images of Ronald Reagan to deflect much of the criticism of the president, who, in fact, had been known for cutting many social programs. The report said:

How does Ronald Reagan use television? Brilliantly. He's been criticized as the rich man's president, but the TV pictures say it isn't so.

The images showed Reagan picnicking with ordinary folks; later he was surrounded by black kids, farmers, and then flag-waving supporters. The report continued:

At 73, Mr. Reagan could have an age problem, but the TV pictures say it isn't so.

Now the images showed Reagan pumping iron, tossing a football. The report went on:

The orchestration of television coverage absorbs the White House. Their goal? To emphasize the president's greatest asset, which his aides say is his personality. They provide pictures of him looking like a leader . . . confident, with his Marlboro Man walk . . . a good family man.

Then, Stahl admits, the report turned critical:

Mr. Reagan tries to counter the memory of an unpopular issue with a carefully chosen backdrop that actually contradicts the president's policy. Look at the handicapped Olympics, or the opening ceremony of an old-age home. No hint that he tried to cut the budgets for the disabled or for federally subsidized housing for the elderly.

Once again, the CBS News report showed Reagan at campaign events with throngs of fans waving American flags.

Since the report was obviously critical of the president, Stahl worried publicly that the White House would punish her by limiting her access to the chief executive. Sure enough, just after the piece aired on the network, the White House called the CBS Newsroom. Dick Darman, one of the White House's communications officials, spoke to Stahl: "What a great story! We loved it." To which Stahl replied: "Why are you so happy? Didn't you hear what I said?" Darman told her: "No one heard what you said . . . you guys in televisionland haven't figured it out . . . when the pictures are powerful and emotional, they override if not completely drown out the sound."[9]

Please Follow the Chalk Marks, Mr. President: Scripting Reagan

Donald Regan served as President Reagan's Treasury Secretary from 1981 until 1985. In his book *For The Record,* Regan explained the depth of image creation during his boss's term:

Every moment of every public appearance was scheduled, every word was scripted, every place where Reagan was expected to stand was chalked with toe marks. The president was always being prepared for a performance, and this had the inevitable effect of preserving him from confrontation and the genuine interplay of opinion, question, and argument that form the basis of decision.[10]

Today, the White House has a Communications Office, comprised of ex-broadcast news producers and photographers. Who better to help you get the best image of the president than those who used to work in the news business? Today, White House communications experts routinely confer with network TV news, making sure their cameras have the best view of the chief executive.

THE DEMOCRATS DO IT, TOO

It's not just the Republicans who understand image manipulation. Josh King was the White House Director of Production for Presidential Events during President Bill Clinton's administration. Some have dubbed King "the father of the modern backdrop," because of his ability to alter the setting and background of news images.[11]

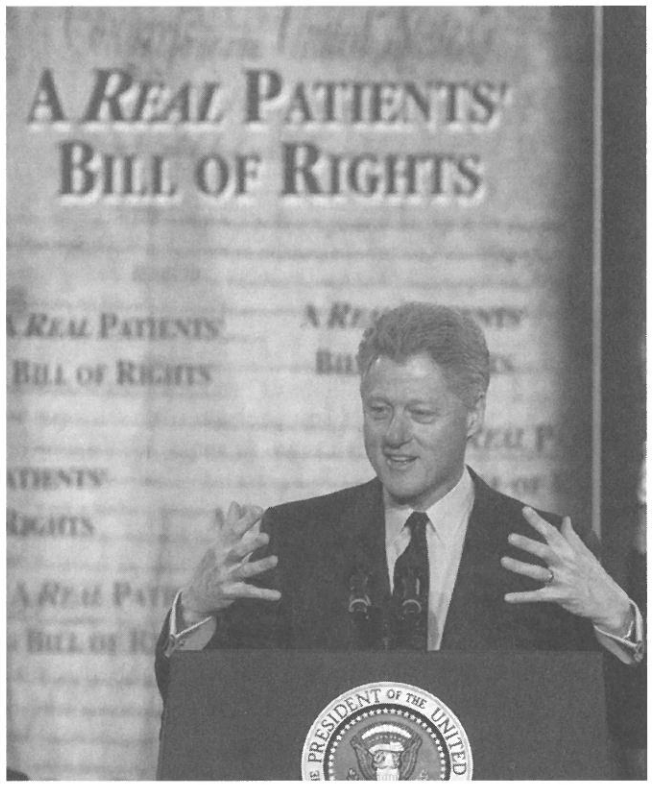
King says his primary interests are "the optics and the theatrics." In other words, how he can control how the president is photographed (by the news media), how events are staged, and what audiences see (in person and via television). "The (Clinton) White House analyzed the picture structure of television stories: almost every TV story began with a wide shot to set the scene (Clinton comes to

Chicago), a medium shot to show who Clinton was with on-stage (Mayor Daley is standing next to him on the podium), a cut-away shot to show the audience (people applauding, laughing, cheering), and then the tight shot of Clinton's face during the speech (the president actually speaks the words). The White House analysis showed that the tight shot lasted the longest, since the viewers had to hear what Clinton was saying. So it was the most important shot."[12]

King figured out that he could always place some visual, usually a banner, to the left or right of the president's head. And so the modern TV news image began to be manipulated with banners such as "Stronger American Families" and "Stronger American Communities." Watch any news coverage today of the chief executive out on the road at some speaking engagement, and you will see it.

As the photo of President Clinton promoting his programs on the road demonstrates, a specially designed backdrop was strategically placed behind him, ensuring that news photographers, all positioned in the identical location, would include the visual in their camera frames.

Former Clinton aide Dick Morris, writing in his *The New Prince,* underlines the importance of a focused message that the politician can use to "translate the



At an event in Philadelphia in April 1999, Pres. Bill Clinton speaks on behalf of health care reform, framed by a large banner proclaiming a "real" Patient's Bill of Rights. By the Clinton years, both catchy program names and the use of graphic backdrops had become commonplace. (AP Photo/ Rusty Kennedy)

public's grief into the system's issues." The next step is "media play" for the message. "It is the one-paragraph sound-bite on which the story lives or dies." Visuals are also key. "In handling television, bear in mind that the medium cannot help itself. It needs pretty pictures," he writes. "Backdrops matter. The candidate should stand in front of an assemblage of American flags or a bevy of uniformed police with medals."[13] Sex can't hurt either. In the fall of 1990, as President George H. W. Bush exhorted a televised rally in Minnesota to support the looming Gulf War, a row of cheerleaders kicked their legs in the background.

DIGITAL ALTERATION OF IMAGES

With today's digital photo alteration tools, it is easier for photographers to alter images. There are plenty of stories about this throughout photojournalism. Even the national news photographer's association has established a code of ethics about when it is and is not proper for a photographer to change an image.

More troubling is the practice of altering images or sound in political advertising.

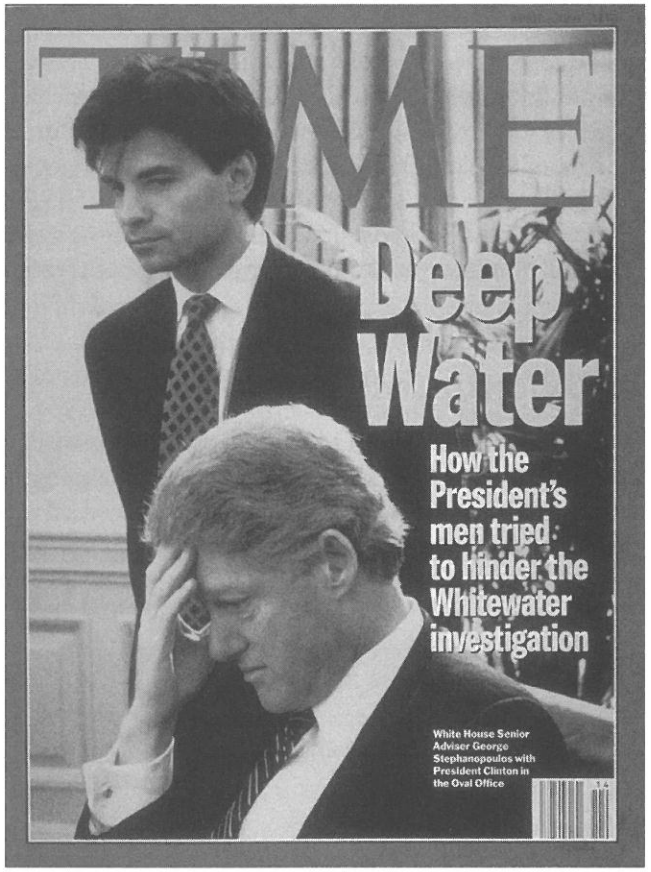
A favorite photo trick is digitally sewing a celebrity's head onto another's body. In August 2007, the Republican Party of Kentucky printed a campaign brochure with a fake photo of the Democratic candidate for governor, Steve Beshear, looking sleazy in a casino. The image was labeled "not an actual photo" and was designed to mock the candidate's stance on gambling. But the picture also demonstrates two clear signs of a stitched photo: an unnatural tilt of the head and an awkward seam where the head meets the collarbone.[14]

An analysis of spots from 1952 to 1992 found 15 percent had "some ethically questionable use of technology." A later study found even more manipulations:

- news conferences that were never held
- debates that never took place
- use of audio or video tricks to stereotype or ridicule an opponent[15]

Sometimes, when an image is altered (or cropped) and published, it can be misleading. *TIME Magazine* found itself in this situation during the Clinton administration.

The media critics of the *Columbia Journalism Review* criticized *TIME:* "Filling up the space behind its April 4 cover line, 'DEEP WATER: How the President's Men Tried to Hinder the Whitewater Investigation,' was a photo purporting to capture the White House in the throes of Whitewater despair—Clinton clutching head in hands, [aide George] Stephanopoulos staring stonily into the abyss. In fact, as an angry administration soon made clear, the photo had nothing whatsoever to do with Whitewater and was, in fact, a relic from the past, having been taken last November at a meeting in which the president and aides were wrestling with problems in scheduling the president's time. The warped defense of *TIME* spokesman Robert Pondiscio, as quoted in the *Washington Post:* 'I don't think the readers of *TIME* expect the cover photo is going to be a representation of that event.' "[16]



Cover of the April 4, 1994, *TIME Magazine*. (White House Photo/*TIME Magazine*)

More Questions to Consider

- What role does TV play in communicating politicians' messages?
- How do campaigns control news coverage of events?
- How does the White House control news images and coverage?
- What do you need to know in order to better understand media spin?
- Where might you go to find more information about edited news events?

NOTES

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5. Ben Fritz et al. *All the President's Spin: George W. Bush, the Media, and the Truth* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004).
6. Lou Cannon, *Reagan* (New York: Putnam, 1982).
7. http://transcripts.cnn.com/TRANSCRIPTS/0102/18/cgs.00.html.
8. "The Great Communicator," in *Ronald Reagan Remembered: CBS News,* ed. Ian Jackman (New York: Simon & Schuster, 2004), 57–58.
9. Lesley Stahl, *Reporting Live* (New York: Simon & Schuster, 1999), 209–11. Michael Deaver reportedly told the CBS reporter "Lesley, when you're showing four-and-a-half minutes of great pictures of Ronald Reagan, no one listens to what you say" (*All The President's Spin,* 14).
10. Donald T. Regan, *For the Record* (San Diego: Harcourt Brace Jovanovich, 1988), 248, as quoted in http://hypertextbook.com/eworld/present.shtml.
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12. Roger Simon, *Show Time: The American Political Circus and the Race for The White House* (New York: Times Books, 1998), xv–xvii.
13. Dick Morris, *The New Prince: Machiavelli Updated for the Twenty-First Century* (Los Angeles: Renaissance Books, 1999), 124.
14. "Digital Detectives Discern Photoshop Fakery," *Christian Science Monitor,* August 28, 2007, http://www.csmonitor.com/2007/0829/p13s02-stct.html?page=2.
15. Dennis W. Johnson, *No Place for Amateurs: How Political Consultants Are Reshaping American Democracy* (New York: Routledge, 2001), 136.
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