

Voting for a new kind of campaign coverage

By JOHN MARTIN
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Most Americans rely on television as their primary source of news and information — especially when it comes to news about presidential campaigns.

In past years, however, the quality and fairness of network political coverage has been criticized by viewers, candidates and political commentators of almost every persuasion.

Darrell West is an associate professor of political science at Brown University and director of the Public Opinion Laboratory at Brown's A. Alfred Taubman Center for Public Policy. He has written about public opinion and policy making.

Although not in the camp that argues that television is too powerful, West does believe network coverage is inadequate and that it's time network decision makers rethink the way they cover presidential campaigns.

Q: There is a huge competitive incentive for news organizations to break the story that sinks a candidate. Geraldine Ferraro and Gary Hart, to name a few, think it has reached bloodlust proportions. Hasn't getting the goods on a politician become the ultimate "coverage," while reporting candidates' positions on foreign and domestic issues often is minimized?

A: Unfortunately we are in a position where there are more Pulitzers awarded for breaking lifestyle stories than there are for investigative stories on the substance of major policy issues. Character is certainly important. People point to Johnson and Nixon as leaders who had serious character deficiencies, and had we known about them before they became president the country would have been better off. That's a compelling argument.

The problem today is that we have moved into the speculative arena. For example, Joseph Biden stole lines from another politician. Now that's a pretty common crime. What the media did was turn that into a character defect — How could we trust someone to be president if he plagiarized three lines from another politician's speech? The dilemma today surrounds the generalizations reporters draw from events that take place. It's a more speculative undertaking on the part of the media, and also there's a possibility that the media will someday get the story wrong.

Q: On the other hand, isn't it clear that television remains the most important offensive weapon in the candidate's arsenal?

A: Surveys suggest that 70 percent of Americans cite television as their primary source of news about politics and campaigns.

But the hold of the three networks is breaking down because of the rise of cable — CNN, C-SPAN. Also, there's a changing

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caucuses there were three or four thousand reporters covering that event because of satellite technology. They can go anywhere and do the things the three networks used to do exclusively.

Q: All three Providence stations sent their own reporters to Iowa.

A: The Brown radio station sent three reporters to Iowa!

Q: What about the television exposure the candidates pay for — the political commercials? Why haven't political spots seemed to play as critical a role in presidential elections as they do in statewide and local races?

A: The spots have been important. Dukakis scored big points right before Super Tuesday with this famous flip-flopping ad attacking Richard Gephardt for changing his position on the issues. It is widely cited as an ad that had the effect of raising public doubts about Gephardt, who did not do well on Super Tuesday. What's happening with advertising is that it is becoming increasingly negative. Negative advertising is not new. But what's happening now is that it's occurring earlier. Politicians are running negative ads in June and July.

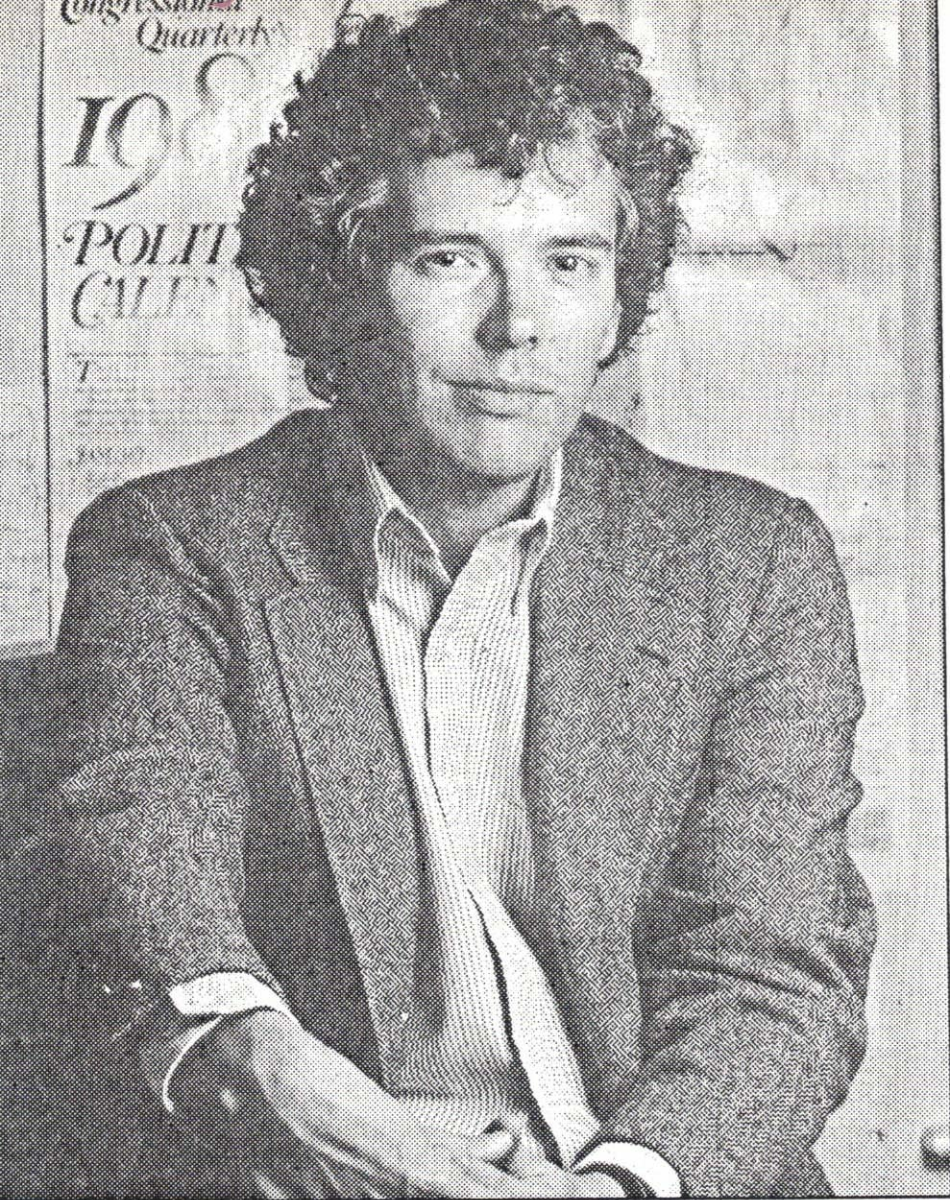
Q: Let's talk about the Dukakis ads that portray Bush media strategists trying to come up with a way to fudge the vice president's record and smear Dukakis. Do you think the ads register in the minds of voters?

A: The goal is to take advantage of cynicism directed toward politicians. Many Americans view elections as packaged affairs and the candidates as puppets manipulated by their media people. The problem with these ads is that they could be applied equally to Dukakis. They're good ads, but it's not clear Dukakis can gain from them because it's unknown how many people see Dukakis differently from Bush in that regard.

Q: Do you believe either presidential candidate this year has an advantage over the other when it comes to the way he comes across on television?

A: Neither is very flashy. Neither is like Ronald Reagan in their ability to project human qualities. It is a given you have to look good to succeed, but there are lots of leaders around who aren't particularly gifted when it comes to television.

A: Robert Dole had a problem, in that he is a fiery individual with a strong temper. Television is a problem for him. He blew up at Bush on television and it really hurt him. Paul Simon came across as something of a



— Journal-Bulletin Photo by GLENN OSMUNDSON

Some people in the industry argue that if (TV networks) raise the level of their coverage they will lose their audience. I'm not convinced that would be the case," says Darrell West, associate professor of political science at Brown University and director of the Public Opinion Laboratory at Brown's A. Alfred Taubman Center for Public Policy.

Q: How would you rate network news when it comes to public opinion polling?

A: We've had more polls this year than in any election I can remember, and consequently we're probably at a point where we're being over-pollled. People have been so volatile that polling is now volatile.

Also, there also have been inconsistencies. There have been, at any given time, polls showing Bush up by four or five points and others showing him up 10 or 12. A single day can make a difference in results. People are more jaded. Although we're always interested in the results of the latest poll, we don't take them as seriously as we used to.

Q: Do televised debates and the subse-

going on because it's the only time we get to see the candidates side by side. The problem today is that we're not seeing debates. What we're really seeing is joint press conferences where each person is given a question and they're given two minutes in which to answer.

Q: The candidates seem to prefer those restrictions because they allow better control of the agenda. This seems to be a case where candidates hold the power and television can't override them.

A: Candidates placed a lot of restrictions on the format of this year's debates. Michael Dukakis actually wanted more free-wheeling debates. George Bush turned him down. During the nominating process, the Demo-

Q: It's generally accepted that television's influence on presidential elections is enormous. But should we assume that the way we elected the president was better before television?

A: Certainly today television has become the bad boy of American politics, and people blame it for everything they don't like about the process. But, clearly, a lot of what goes on is a problem of the process, independent of the media. And it's a problem of the candidates. The media don't cover the issues, but people say the candidates don't talk about the issues either. We've reached a situation where television has become the power broker of the process and is being blamed, wrongly or rightly.

Q: Who were the bad boys before television?

A: The bad boys in the "good old days" were the party bosses — the Richard Daleys of the world. People who felt excluded from the process blamed the party bosses. They were the critical power brokers then. Today, they're gone. The media are the new gatekeepers and, again, the object of controversy.

Q: Viewers must see through a lot of the gamesmanship by both the candidates and the networks. Is there any sign that cynicism among the electorate could damage the political system?

A: There is cynicism towards political leaders, going back to Nixon and Vietnam. A second cynicism is directed toward the media. It used to be that the media were the good guys because they were breaking the inside stories against the establishment and telling us about Vietnam and Watergate. Increasingly, people are concerned about the media going too far, getting into questions they don't have a right to investigate. It creates a potential long-term threat to the media as an institution.

Q: Let's say you were in charge of CBS News and covered an election the way you think it should be covered. NBC and ABC, meanwhile, continue their coverage in the direction network reporting seems to be headed. Where does CBS end up in the ratings?

A: Some people in the industry argue that if they raise the level of their coverage they will lose their audience. I'm not convinced that would be the case. In the current era of media decentralization, the networks need to distinguish themselves to hold onto their audiences. I think there is an audience out there tired of the way this election is being covered and would be sympathetic to more substantive discussion and a different style of coverage.

It doesn't mean there would have to be revolutionary changes. I see the networks constantly bringing on representatives of each candidate to serve as analysts. They have a partisan ax to grind, commenting from a particular point of view. Bringing unaligned people in would add a great deal,