

ANNALES SCIENTIA POLITICA

Vol. 4, No. 2, 2015

DANČIŠINOVÁ, L.: Political Campaign in the Age of Omnipotent Mass Media. *Annales Scientia Politica*, Vol. 4, No. 2 (2015), pp. 80 – 86.

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The Mass Media, Political Communication, Campaign, Candidates, U. S. Presidential Debates, Memorandum of Understanding

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POLITICAL CAMPAIGN IN THE AGE OF OMNIPOTENT MASS MEDIA

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At present, the mass media have a profound influence on political communication. The relationship between the mass media and politics is complicated and can be seen as a fight to win the better position. That is why politicians have been constantly trying to set the rules of their media presentation. In the case of United States presidential debates, the candidates have managed to take control over the production of official televised debates. The Memoranda of Understanding signed and pre-negotiated by two major U. S. political parties before televised presidential debates represent examples of political manipulation of the media. In this study, we analyse the Memorandum of 1992 in order to answer some of the criticisms in order to understand the process of political distortion of reality.

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Introduction

We live in a world where a single idea can be heard or read by millions of people at the

same time. This is possible especially thanks to the mass media and Internet. This can be also applied to political communication as it can, thanks to the rapid development of mass communication industry, carry important messages throughout the world. A political discussion is important for democracy, but it is disputable which form it should or should not acquire. As an example, we will look at U. S. presidential debates¹, which are highly criticized for being pre-negotiated in every possible detail. It gives them the status of theatrical appearances rather than real debates. No doubt, television has given politicians a mighty weapon in political campaigning, yet, it has not always been for the sake of democracy. In this study, we would like to discuss several questionable points concerning political communication in the media in order to illustrate the ways in which politicians try to manipulate the media in order to get the better position in campaign. We will analyse the conditions written down in a document called the Memorandum

¹ Every four years, during the election race for the post of the President of the United States, official televised debates are held between two major parties' candidates (the Democratic candidate and the Republican candidate) (Kraus, 2000).

dum of Understanding (1992), which was negotiated by two major political parties of the United States in order to take control of televised presidential debates.

1 The Influence of the Mass Media on Politics

Jiráček and Köppllová (2003, pp. 20 - 53) define the media as social institutions, which provide one-way communication within society - from a source towards an undefined audience. Moreover, the mass media influence its cultural environment. According to the functionalistic approach, the mass media have the following functions: providing information, socialization, reproduction of existing cultural models, entertainment, and agitation (Jiráček, Köppllová, 2003, pp. 40 - 41). In this context, McLuhan (1987, pp. 40 - 41) sees the role of the media in society as "the extensions of man," through which a man understands and explains the world. Postman (1985) goes even further and claims that "the medium is the metaphor" to describe the process of information transfer in three different types of cultures, namely oral, literate, and televisual. According to him, the rational argument cannot be transferred through television because "its form excludes the content" (Postman, 1985, p. 5). It means that TV is not capable of transmitting higher level of ideas and prefers visual images to the actual verbal message of the politicians. Based on these assumptions, we can claim that the way in which the media present the candidates and politics as such is rather shallow and do not offer any real substance. Similarly, according to Lowi et al. (2002, p. 387), the media as the most powerful force in the "marketplace of ideas" have a huge impact on public opinion and attitudes as they are not just disengaged messengers but have developed ways of shaping a public opinion by specific reporting of political events, from which this opinion can be formed (Lowi et al., 2002, p. 387). As Graber claims, television is seen as a great tool for conveying audiovisual information, such as people's impressions, because it is suitable for transmitting emotional appeal, while it is not so powerful when abstract ideas should be presented (Graber, 1997, pp. 189 - 190).

Jiráček and Köppllová (2003) offer a definition of the modern mass-media and state that the mass media represent a specialized industry aimed at producing products which satisfy, and simultaneously create, the need for various sorts of information and entertainment. Consequently, the mass media can be seen as a social institution having a significant influence on forming and enforcement of social relations, and as such, the media are then attributed a substantial influence on the form of current political processes in existing democracies. They represent public as well as political life in a special way of production called medialogic, which result in personalization, dramatization and depoliticization of politics (Jiráček, Köppllová, 2003, p. 186). It means a focus on a person, representation of politics as a series of conflicts, and finally replacement of valuable discussions for shallow entertaining spectacles (McNair, 2000, p. 6). However, it has to be also pointed out, as Parenti (1986, p. 213) writes, that "news production is not purely an autonomous process ... many distortions are of a more political nature and reveal a pattern of bias that favours the dominant class ideology". Thus, it is clear that it is not just the mass media which influence the news; it is also the dominant political ideology which intervenes.

2 Political Communication and the Mass Media

Graber (1993, p. 305) defines political communication as "the construction, sending, receiving, and processing of messages that are likely to have a significant impact on politics." It is obvious then that such a communication fulfils an important function within political processes. The relationship between political and media communication can be understood in the context of communication within the public sphere. Political communication is based on the fact that the exchange of information must have some effect on the functioning of a political system (Graber, 1993, p. 7). In this context, Jiráček and Říčová (2000, p. 14) claims that political communication can be seen as all the processes of symbolic interaction within the society at the macro political level. However, politics is not given by the media but it is formed in interaction with it (Jiráček, Říčová,

2000, p. 17). Similarly, McQuail (1992, p. 87) claims that the role of the mass media in the political decision-making exists within a broader context of the relation between the media and society – it depends on the functions which are ascribed to the media by the given society. Dominant political images can create a world of its own – the more news is reported, the more credibility it gets, and subsequently becomes official. It seems then that inability to control the news is almost equal to political failure (Bennett, 1996, pp. 80 – 82). One of the possible ways to control the situation is to anticipate moments of spontaneity and prevent them. Bennett (1996, pp. 91 – 103) illustrates it with existing practice of certain public officials to agree to be interviewed only on condition that they set the rules which are agreed to by the journalists. However, when the press does not cooperate, its intimidation is the next best strategy used by politicians to control the news. Thus, the press and the politicians live in a state of mutual dependence – they need each other, yet, they often stand in opposition. Unfortunately, as Bennett (1996, p. 109) points out, the result of such a long term political control of the news is a limited range of problems, solutions, and ideas presented to the viewers. Similarly, Habermas (1989) claims that in the early capitalism, as a result of economic independence, private ownership and critical reflection in literature, an autonomous sphere of political discussion appeared. It created a consensus based on reason, and citizens and the press became watchdogs of the government. It gradually changed in the second half of the nineteenth century, when the public sphere came under control of the state and organized economic interests. Consequently, a new model of corporative power relations was created, in which the economic interests put restraints on the public sphere. The media ceased to be the power of rationality and started to manipulate opinions of people. Thus, the politics started to be viewed as entertainment, which made the public just passive consumers (Habermas, 1989). Today as well as before, journalism, together with the mass media, creates the feeling that it can solve all important social problems. However, the media did not become communication means themselves but rather as a reaction to specific social needs in a given period

(Jiráková, Köpplová, 2003, pp. 39 – 58). What follows then is that the media should not be considered objective, but they should be viewed as mirroring the current social and cultural needs and preferences. Jackson and Crotty (2001, p. 220) describe recent relationship of U. S. politics and the mass media as being interchangeable: “Politics equate to TV in contemporary campaigns. The media is American politics today”. This is an interesting point of view, which can tell us a lot about the current state of political communication in the mass media in the United States. We also agree with the fact that the media are used by politicians today more than any other means of communication. To illustrate this fact, we can look at the U. S. presidential debates broadcast on TV before every presidential election.

3 U. S. Presidential Debates

U. S. presidential debates have become a high point of presidential election campaigns and every four years, the debates are the most anticipated televised political events (Friedenberg, 1990, p. 190). The question is whether the attention paid to them is deserved or not. As Kraus (2000, p. 77) claims, if a politician is able to control political events he or she is taking part in, the higher is the chance that the politician wins the race. Thus, it is quite understandable that the presidential candidates have, ever since the famous Kennedy-Nixon debates of 1960, tried to find ways how to control the production of U. S. televised debates. Since 1988, documents called Memoranda of Understanding have been negotiated and signed by the Democratic and Republican Parties before every presidential debates concerning all the details of the televised debates (Farah, 2004).

To illustrate the pre-debate negotiations, we chose to analyse the Memorandum of Understanding of 1992, because it was the only time when a third party candidate has been invited to debate (Farah, 2004, p. 53). The U. S. political life from the beginning of the 20th century has been dominated by the two major parties: the Republicans and the Democrats. Nevertheless, there have always been other parties – known as Third Parties (Malamud, 2004, p. 36). Inclusion of Third Parties’ candidates can be seen as a positive step. In 1992, there were three tele-

vised presidential debates sponsored by the Commission on Presidential Debates, which is often criticised for agreeing with pre-debate negotiations by the Democrats and Republicans (Farah, 2004). George Bush was a Republican candidate and also incumbent fighting for re-election, and Governor Bill Clinton was a Democratic candidate. Ross Perot, a Texan millionaire was a Third party - independent - candidate (Malamud, 2004, p. 6). Despite Perot being invited to the debates, he was excluded from the pre-debate negotiations, so he couldn't influence the debate format (Farah, 2004, p. 6).

The Memorandum of Understanding of 1992 (Memorandum of Understanding, 1992) is divided into thirteen points concerning various aspects of up-coming debates:

1. Number (of debates),
2. Dates,
3. Sponsorship,
4. Third candidate,
5. Location,
6. Time,
7. Format,
8. Staging and production,
9. Ticket distribution and seating arrangement,
10. Dressing rooms/holding rooms,
11. Miscellaneous,
12. Announcement of agreement,
13. Amendments (Memorandum of Understanding, 1992).

The document stipulates that there will be three presidential debates lasting ninety minutes, and the candidates cannot take part in any additional ones. The sponsor can be changed by the two campaigns if it does not agree with the given agreement. A third-party candidate is also required to accept "the terms of this agreement" (Memorandum of Understanding, 1992, p. 2). The Memorandum can be made public only if it is agreed by the campaigns. As to the format, there will be three forms of debate: panel format, moderator only format, and moderator and audience participation format. All debates will have different moderators who will be responsible for enforcing time limits, balancing the questions, and adhering to particular formats. Panellists and moderators have to be approved by the major parties' campaigns. As to the actual question-

ing, each debate format has strict time limits for questions, responses, and rebuttals. Panel format involves a panel of three persons, agreed on by the campaigns, asking the questions with "no direct candidate-to-candidate questioning" (Memorandum of Understanding, 1992). Time limits for the scheme of question - response - rebuttal are as follows: up to fifteen seconds - two minutes - one minute. It means that a panellist asks a question which is not longer than 15 seconds and the first candidate have 2 minutes for the answer. Then, the two remaining candidates comment on his answer or on the question, each having 1 minute. The order of questioning is decided before every debate by a draw. Each candidate will also have 2 minutes for his closing statement.

As it can be seen, all the details of each format were covered in the Memorandum of Understanding of 1992. Farah (2004, pp. 83 - 88) points out that there are at least three major drawbacks of the panel format, namely the artificiality of questions posed only by the journalists, no direct inter-candidate cross-questioning, and the restrictive limits on answers. According to Farah (2004, p. 87), short responses mean rehearsed answers, which, together with no candidate-to-candidate verbal contact, exclude a real discussion. While we can agree with importance of having enough time for answers, and direct cross-questioning for having a real discussion, several facts and circumstances have to be taken into consideration. It is understandable that if there is ninety minutes' space for discussion, certain time limits have to be imposed. According to Dominick (1990, p. 20), the mass media "need a great deal of money to operate ... exist to make a profit ... are highly competitive". It means that the discussion has to be artificially cut off in order to meet the requirements of dynamicity and necessity of advertising space. As to cross-questioning, candidates have time for rebuttals during which they can react to their opponents' speech. We can agree that in the era, when candidates are predominantly judged by their verbal skills, their campaign managers would never agree with informal and uncontrolled discussion. Otherwise, they would not draft the Memoranda before the debates.

However, the second 1992 debate aspired to be less rigid and more informal, introducing

the format called a town hall format² for the first time in the history of televised presidential debates (Farah, 2004, p. 81). The credit should be given to Bill Clinton who actually came up with the idea as he claimed in the second debate: "I started doing these formats a year ago in New Hampshire and I found that we had huge crowds because all I did was let people ask questions and I tried to give very specific answers" (The Commission on Presidential Debates, 2015). As Farah (Farah, 2004, p. 82) claims, Clinton was considered to be a skilful communicator with ordinary people, therefore he wanted this format to be included. Truly, it made him seem absolutely committed to the purpose of debates and open to all questions. Town hall format includes potential voters sitting in the audience and asking questions about anything they want, which enables the public to raise issues everyday Americans want to talk about. Therefore it is very popular with the viewers (Farah, 2004, p. 81). In 1992 town hall format debate, the members of the audience were selected by an independent research firm, so that the participants were demographically representative and uncommitted (Memorandum of Understanding, 1992). Another positive fact about this format, as detailed in the Memorandum (1992), is that follow-up questions were also allowed.

On the other hand, the third format – a moderator only format – is still criticized. Selection of a moderator is considered to be very important as he or she runs the debate and can, to a certain degree, influence the debate by formulating questions, or even by a positive smiling at a particular candidate (Dominick, 1990, p. 547). Since 1992, it has been mostly Jim Lehrer, host of PBS's *NewsHour*³, who moderated the debates (Dominick, 1990, p. 296). He is considered to be objective, but also rather stiff and unchallenging, hardly ever using follow-up or unpleasant questions (Farah, 2004, p. 85). It is not difficult to understand why the cam-

paigns prefer Jim Lehrer. It is obviously one of the strategies to make the debates more secure for the candidates. The Memorandum says that the process of selection of moderators is "confidential between the signatories" (Memorandum of Understanding, 1992), which can imply that the candidates do not want to show their preferences. On the other hand, if the selected moderator fulfils his or her duties, such as balancing the questions and providing equal space for each candidate, there is no reason for the claim that with unchallenging moderator a debate does not have the characteristics of a real discussion. It just means that the debate is less sharp, provocative, and consequently less interesting.

Yet another aspect of a debate has to be analysed, that is the staging and production, which involve such things as the height and shape of podiums, camera placement, colours of backdrops, composition and seating of the audience, kinds of microphones, make-up persons, etc. All these aspects are included in the Memoranda as well. The candidates know that visual part of debates is important, especially when there is a limited time for discussion (Adatto, 1990, pp. 20 – 25). In this context, Farah (2004, pp. 92 – 94) claims that voters do not care about details such as the colour of backdrop or camera angle but they care about the composition of the audience. According to the Memorandum of Understanding of 1992 (Memorandum of Understanding, 1992), the press is seated in the back rows, while family members of the candidates are closest to the podium. The audience is prohibited from any reaction, such as applause, and television networks are forbidden to take any shots of the audience, except for the town hall format. The camera shots are limited to the persons speaking, whether a candidate or a moderator, but in no case a non-speaking candidate can be shown (Memorandum of Understanding, 1992). It is obvious that candidates want their supporters closest to them, while the critics – the press – are to be seated the furthest they could. As to the restrictions on camera shots, it is obvious that candidates do not want to be caught unprepared. In this sense, it is necessary for them to create the conditions to avoid such situations. Nevertheless, in 1992, President Bush was caught on camera looking impatiently at

² It has its origins in the New England town meeting, where the village residents could discuss important issues. It belongs among the earliest manifestations of democracy in American colonies (Urofsky, 1994, p. 414).

³ The Public Broadcasting Service (PBS) serves as a network for noncommercial stations (Dominick, 1990, p. 296).

his watch during the audience participation format, which was criticized by the Democrats as the evidence that Bush “didn’t care about the people” (Farah, 2004, p. 93). Clinton media advisor later said that knowing the stage, they told Clinton where to go in order to show Bush on the camera (Farah, 2004, p. 93). Clinton team also chose “oversized stools” as Perot was rather tiny and it made him seem like a child (Simon, 2000). These strategies are also part of candidates’ media strategies and illustrate the process of careful staging of U. S. presidential debates. We can claim then that looking at the pre-debate Memoranda of Understanding can uncover interesting facts about presidential debates themselves. The analysis of such documents can explain the process of media manipulation by the presidential candidates.

Conclusion

To conclude it, we can agree that the mutual relationship of the mass media and politicians is complicated and has to be seen in the context of public life and power relations. Politicians have learnt how to make use of the media to create a political image which would be positive for them and enable them to reach their aims. In the case of U. S. presidential debates, the process of media manipulation has acquired the form of pre-debate negotiations between two major U. S. political parties – the Republicans and the Democrats – which results in documents called the Memoranda of Understanding. These documents detail every aspect of the televised debates. The analysis of such documents can help us to understand the fears and preferences of major parties’ candidates and provide us with more objective view of actual debates.

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