

**Political Advertising
and Ad Watch Journalism:
Beyond the Reason/Emotion Divide**

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"I'm more interested in how you feel than how you think."

--Political consultant Frank Luntz (2004).

Throughout history, political appeals have largely been emotional appeals, much to the chagrin of rationalists at least since the time of Aristotle. While scholars and journalists have begun to police the factual content of campaign advertisements for evidence of distortion and deception, ads' emotional appeals have, until recently and for the most part, escaped such scrutiny. This paper advances the following claims: Abandoning the reason/passion bifurcation may yield a more enlightened approach to both the analysis of campaign advertising and the study of emotion in politics. Viewing emotion in the same light as other cognitive processes often seen as biases may offer a particularly useful analytical framework for analysts charged with addressing the highly politicized issues of political communication surrounding campaign spots. Approaching ads from the perspective of potential bias in viewers may be more fruitful than seeking to identify the potential bias in ads.

In 2004, presidential candidates, political parties and interest groups spent more than half-a-billion dollars on campaign advertising, more than doubling the previous record of \$200 million spent during in 2000. At the peak of the campaign, ad spending was running nearly \$45 million per week; viewers in targeted major media markets were literally being bombarded with hundreds of ads per day (Anderson 2004a). Once again, the tone of this tidal wave of campaign communication was greeted with opprobrium. Kathleen Hall Jamieson, perhaps the nation's most distinguished academic student of political advertising, noted that the campaign was "the most attack-driven campaign, period, in the history of the modern presidency" (Jamieson 2004).

Since the early 1990s, journalists, academics and self-styled civic watchdogs have sought to police the content of the tidal wave of campaign commercials, alerting viewers to the ways in which they deceive and distract from democracy (see Broder 1990; Jamieson 1992; West 1992). While the quantity and quality of such efforts has varied, they nonetheless represent an important analytical front in a larger effort to understand the politics and process of democratic elections.

At the same time, social science research has witnessed something of a surge in interest in the ways in which actual perception and decision making depart from rational expectations. Subfields such as behavioral economics, cognitive psychology and a range of multidisciplinary efforts to better understand the role of emotion in thought and action all call us to think more carefully about the bases of behavior. Recent research in political science on political advertising and emotion suggests that “emotion” and “cognition” are complimentary rather than opposed, and that the negativity associated with campaign ads may serve the vital function of increasing citizen interest and engagement rather than acting to drive down voter turnout.

This paper is an attempt to investigate how the 2004 presidential campaign can shed light on issues such as these. It begins with a brief review of the role of emotion in political research and an analysis of the role of emotion in research specifically trained on political advertising. The next sections attempt to extend our understanding of emotion in political advertising and in ad watch journalism, respectively, and are followed by an effort to articulate a “unified” framework for dealing with emotion and other sources of “bias” in ad watch journalism.

Emotion in Political Research

Recent scholarly investigation of the political role of emotion, drawing upon the insights of brain science work from a variety of disciplines (Lodge and Boynton 1998; Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000; Kuklinski 2001; Kuklinski 2002; Brader 2005) is long overdue. Nearly two decades ago, Glendon Schubert (1989:258) wrote: “Charles Merriam (1925:171) placed human biology front and center – not at the wings – of his prescient scenario for a biobehavioral science of politics.” He noted:

“many ... striking and innovative developments in brain science during the past two decades, reflecting advances in a dozen different biological disciplines (such as biochemistry, biophysics, endocrinology, neuropsychology, genetics and human development) which have created a new psychobiology that nevertheless has had no impact on mainstream political science theory and research”
(1989:245)

Perhaps it is not surprising that it has taken so long for scholars to fully embrace the non-rational. Quite apart from the fact that much of the best known and most widely cited political science work of the past two decades has been influenced by rational choice theories (Lupia, McCubbins and Popkin 2000:3 *n.* 1), the very Western tradition of scholarship has elevated reason and logic at the expense of passion and biology. Nelson and Boynton describe how Western rhetoricians have followed the lead of Aristotle in relegating elements of the delivery of a message to the ornamental and incidental (1997:87-118). Marcus, Neuman and MacKuen single out the ancient Greek philosopher Anaxagoras:

His doctrine of *Nous*, the concept of the rational mind that inspired Plato and Aristotle and became the cornerstone of Stoicism, the ideal of rational control

over emotional impulses, would also influence Roman philosophy, medieval Christianity, and the Puritans, among others, in American political culture.

(2000:12)

It is not hard to trace this arc through much academic analysis of voting behavior, political communication, and campaign advertising in particular. And perhaps nowhere is this more so than in the ad watch journalism movement that has emerged to police the content of political commercials. In 2004, the Annenberg Public Policy Center at the University of Pennsylvania set out to analyze the “factual accuracy” of campaign claims, representing the most recent elaboration of the work of Kathleen Hall Jamieson, whose 1992 book, *Dirty Politics: Deception, Distraction, and Democracy* provided the blueprint for the ad watch movement among journalists. What began as analytical segments on news programs in the early 1990s became a website in 2004 that even managed a reference from Vice-president Cheney during his debate with Senator John Edwards. Notably, the site’s focus on factual claims by definition excludes emotional aspects of persuasion.

Indeed, when emotion has been linked to political thought and action, it has typically been viewed as pathological. Marcus, Neuman and MacKuen (2000:18-20) identify four specific underlying pathologies of emotion in the western canon: displacement (distortion of judgment when reason is displaced by passion), distraction (diversion of attention from relevant evidence to emotional symbols), intransigence (unwillingness to compromise or adjust to new information), and self-absorption (in one’s base instincts). They argue that three themes recur in such views: the conflation of emotion and extreme emotion, a one-way causal pathway from emotion to cognition,

and confusion between enduring *traits* and transient *states* (2000:20). They find this antipathy toward emotion in important measure unwarranted.

Marcus and MacKuen (2001:41) argue that for centuries, Western culture has fused normative commitments to reason and democracy, viewing passion as disabling the capacity to reason upon which democracy must rest. Instead, they suggest, reason and affect can be seen as complimentary. Affect serves to trigger reasoning, indeed emotionality can be seen as a form of intelligence (49). More specifically, increased anxiety leads to greater cognitive awareness and consideration and a “lessened reliance on habituated responses” (51). In electoral terms, agitated voters are less influenced by partisan loyalty and more concerned with issues and the qualities of the candidates (58-59). In short, they find that “people seem to be rational because and when their emotional cues motivate them to do the work that rational choice requires” (60).

Much of this work has been explicitly grounded in recent developments in neuroscience. And while Marcus, Neuman and MacKuen are clear in viewing the nexus between thought and emotion as a reciprocal one (emotions can both stimulate cognition and be caused by it) their framework remains essentially tethered to a conceptual distinction between cognitive and emotive elements, albeit one where emotions have been freed from their pathological denotation. From a more biologically informed perspective, however, the emotion/cognition distinction begins to blur. When both cognition and emotion can be seen as spreading activation across multiple neurochemical paths or systems, the empirical basis for distinguishing the two weakens. We will return to this theme, but first it is necessary to briefly consider the role of emotion in research specifically trained upon political advertising. Here, too, emotion,

either positive or negative, has typically been placed in opposition to the reasoned deliberation upon which democracy is assumed to depend.

Emotion in Political Advertising Research

According to Kaid and Johnston (2001:15), in the study of political advertising, the “minimal effects” model of political communication, despite some notable support (see for example Patterson and McClure 1976), never took hold to the extent that it did in the study of other areas of mass media. Indeed, the first comprehensive review of political advertising research found that campaign ads had identifiable cognitive, affective, and behavioral effects (Kaid 1981; see also Lang 1991). Those affective effects, however, were largely seen as distinct from logic. Indeed, Kaid and Davidson’s (1986) effort to unpack the elements of candidate videostyle specifically coded verbal appeals in light of Aristotle’s tripartite categorization of the types of proof: *logos* (logic), *pathos* (emotion) and *ethos* (ethical).

Montague Kern’s pioneering work, *30-Second Politics: Political Advertising in the Eighties* also embraces the distinction between affect and reason (1989:71). Her detailed and nuanced analysis sees emotion and feeling flowing from affect-laden cues in ads. Noting that in 1972, “there were two major schools of political advertising philosophies, the emotional and the informational” (1989:208) Kern saw in the mid-eighties first the increasing use of emotionally evocative production values (borrowed from commercial advertising) and then the notion that negative ads were indispensable.

The 1988 presidential campaign proved a watershed, if only in terms of the torrent of scholarly research it subsequently spawned. Perhaps the most significant effort to emerge as a response to that race was that of Jamieson and her Annenberg colleagues at Penn. Jamieson demonstrated the sheer persuasive power of the most

incendiary charges made by the Bush-Quayle campaign against Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis, and their nearly complete imperviousness to counterargument (Jamieson 1992:15-42). For Jamieson, “our fears shape our perception of ‘the facts’.”

Motivated to empower journalists to resist further reinforcing the questionable claims of campaign spots, Jamieson and her research team developed a “visual grammar” designed to distance the analyst from manipulative ads, allowing one to disclaim and displace (verbally and visually) and ad’s questionable claims. Yet, despite the fact that Jamieson both recognized the ways audiovisuals in ads evoke emotion and invite flawed inference and saw the need to use audiovisual techniques to counter such evocations, the visual grammar that emerged from the Annenberg project was largely a visual way of policing the verbal claims of ads. Much like the Western rhetoricians in Nelson and Boynton’s telling, Jamieson’s visual grammar did not produce the deconstructionist icons or tools that might actually contest the questionable claims in ads because it saw those claims largely as matters of fact, not delivery, as residing ultimately in the words more than the pictures and sounds, even as those sounds and pictures deceived and distracted. In fact, by the 2000 campaign, the very visual grammar designed by Jamieson’s team to combat questionable campaign claims became a part of the ads themselves (Richardson 2002).

Other research on political advertising has charted a similar path. Iyengar and Valentino ground their analysis of source credibility in ads in the literature of social psychology, which they note, “differentiates between message-based and cue-based accounts of persuasion” (2000:109). They find that ads that resonate with voters’ prevailing expectations (particularly partisanship) are seen as credible.

It is on exactly this point that scholars have found emotion to serve a far less benighted function: it can cause voters to re-evaluate pre-existing attachments (like partisanship) and consider new information (Lodge and Taber 2000; Marcus, Neuman, and MacKuen 2000; Brader 2005). Additionally, an earlier literature found negative ads more memorable than positive ones (Reeves, Thorson, and Schleuder 1986; Lang 1991). In short, the “problem” with political advertising research is not that it has ignored emotion. Rather, it is that emotion has been so frequently misspecified.

Consider Freedman, Franz and Goldstein (2004:725) who argue that the emotional content of ads contributes to a more interested and cognitively and affectively involved electorate. Their analysis of aggregate survey data (ANES) and ad buy data attempts to measure ad exposure, but doesn’t distinguish between emotional and non-emotional ads (731-33). The causal process within the viewer is a conceptual black box. Perhaps ads stimulated thinking about issues. Or maybe they stimulated one of a variety of biased responses also linked to interest in the election or candidate likes and dislikes. Voters may have been thinking scared, or scared into thinking. We cannot tell empirically nor are we offered theoretical guidance.

Brader (2005) does begin to take ads as ads more seriously, and his work establishes a baseline from which future advances can be measured. Rather than presuming emotional content in ads, Brader uses an experimental design to test the effects of audiovisual emotional cues. The failure to see ads as essentially audiovisual (and not merely propositional) has bedeviled previous attempts to explain how political advertising works (Richardson 1995, 2003; Nelson and Boynton 1997). As such, Brader’s work represents a point of departure for further refinement in our knowledge of how ads work cognitively and affectively.

The great value in Brader's work is that it examines ads as ads, and seeks to identify how specific audiovisual elements produce various responses in viewers. Brader (2005:392) rightly identifies the elements that constitute threatening cues ("tense, discordant music and grainy, black-and-white pictures") and acknowledges that music, images, and message must be matched to achieve greatest effect. What he does not consider is why those types of sounds and images have such effects and why exactly it would be inappropriate to combine threatening images or sounds with an uplifting message. Such considerations may seem patently obvious, but that is exactly the point. They are obvious because we are all, to one degree or another, relatively familiar with the audiovisual conventions of popular culture. Moreover, the audiovisual elements of ads work wholistically, triggering a response in viewers approximating "top-down" cognitive processing. Viewers familiar with the form can then reconstruct details (including narrative and affective components) that are consistent with the form. The source of these forms is often popular culture, specifically the familiar combinations of sight, sound, and story that literary and film critics refer to in terms of "genre." Familiar genres like biographies, satires, and horror stories offer admakers a rich palette from which to draw communication in ways likely to resonate with viewers' own pre-existing patterns of association (Nelson and Boynton 1997; Richardson 1998, 2003).

The political significance of the generic evocations found in political advertising lies in the substantive meaning of spots, a point often overlooked in studies of political ads in general and particularly in studies of ads and emotion. That is, the key to understanding why some ads are as emotionally resonant as they are is not merely that they use frightening music or images, but rather that they do so in readily recognizable ways, ways that invite further rich and specific cognitive linkages, narratives, and

affective responses. Richardson (2003:19-25) notes how one can trace the shifting referents of popular culture found in political ads over the past decade and link them to specific substantive political appeals. The generic forms of horror, dystopia, “C.O.P.S.-style” reality programming, tabloid TV news, family melodramas (think Lifetime TV), cartoon/action-figures (Jesse Ventura) and even the irreverence of “South Park” have helped political communicators convey their messages in ways voters are ready to hear, unlike appeals more narrowly grounded in overtly political components.

It was the great insight of admaker Tony Schwartz (whose book *The Responsive Chord* [1973] inspired the title of Brader’s *AJPS* article) that successful ads were not about planting messages in viewers’ minds but rather about drawing out from viewers what was already there. Brader’s analysis, however, is not focused so much on how and why what is in ads effects what is inside the viewers’ mind, where Schwartz’s responsive chord resonated, but rather on what in ads resonates. This is a remarkable improvement over other work that has treated ads as black boxes, but fails to properly situate the nexus of message and response.

For example, Brader rightly seeks to analyze imagery associated with enthusiasm and fear, but fails to place imagery, narrative, and music into the wholistic context in which they take place. For Brader (390), positive moods lead to top-down processing, negative ones to “bottom-up” processing (citing Schwarz 2000; Bless 2001). In the minds of viewers, however, negative information and fear evoking cues can also prompt top-down processing when that negative information is packaged along with the recognizable generic referents of popular culture (Richardson 1998). Brader’s experimental manipulation of fear is, therefore, somewhat underarticulated. It may draw its effectiveness from the way it captures *some* of the aspects of a culturally

resonant whole, but cannot tell us more because it does not fully appreciate the wholistic nature of the audiovisual conventions of popular culture, the way they join sound, image, narrative, and affect.

This also suggests a limitation, not only of Brader's work but of much of the research on emotion in general and the emotional bases of politics specifically: fuzzy boundaries on the categories of emotion. Brader conflates fear with anxiety (2005:390). Seeking to define emotion in terms of involuntary response, some see surprise as an emotion (with concomitant facial reactions that are relatively uniform across cultures), while others refuse to accept "startle" as an emotion (Ekman, Friesen, and Simons 1985). Indeed, confusion over the boundaries of different emotions and a general lack of conceptual clarity within the literature had led the philosopher Paul E. Griffiths to conclude "the general concept of emotion has no role in any future psychology" (1997:247). This is a theme I will return to below.

If conceptual clarity regarding the nature of emotion is a significant issue, so too perhaps is Brader's adoption, perhaps more implicitly than explicitly, of a unitary model of the viewer. For all respondents, negative ads should serve to release the viewer from the "grip of a 'standing decision' and make way for critical reflection" (2005:391). This suggests that it doesn't matter whether one is a rabid Republican, die-hard Democrat, or apathetic and unattached, all ads are seen as having more or less the same effects on all viewers. Indeed, Brader's evidence on the capacity of fear-based appeals to shift the voter's calculus of candidate choice is impressive, perhaps overly so. He reports a 90 percent reduction in the impact of prior preferences (like partisan attachment) when comparing viewers of a negative frame + fear cues ad to those exposed to merely a negative frame (2005:401).

Brader is clearly aware of such concerns, and notes three caveats to his research, including the need to learn more about how ads and emotion work, whether they appeal to a wider range of emotions than fear and enthusiasm, and whether dramatic short term changes are likely to fade over time. On this last point, Brader urges attention on effective ad campaigns, rather than on campaign ads, and he is certainly right. I would, however, suggest a slight modification in focus. Rather than focusing on *ad campaigns*, I would suggest it is best to conceptualize matters as, largely, *a campaign of ads*. Indeed, below I will offer some suggestions as to how ad watch journalism can help track the emotional ebbs and flows of a campaign of ads. Until we truly do know more about how ads work, however, such attention may not prove warranted. The next section of this paper is an attempt to extend our understanding of the role of emotion in political advertising.

Emotion in Political Advertising

The 2004 Bush-Cheney campaign (and a pro-Bush political action committee) produced five ads that can serve as a springboard toward extending our theoretical understanding of the role of emotion in political advertising. The first pairing of ads demonstrates how an ad's message can draw upon a larger extant emotional context. The second pair illustrates specific types of emotional appeals that may have received less attention than warranted.

Emotional Context I: Ads swimming in a sea of emotion. ("Victory")

In August of 2004, during the summer Olympics, the Bush-Cheney ticket aired an ad featuring images of competitive swimmers and making the claim that "this Olympics, there will be two more free nations" (referring to Iraq and Afghanistan). The ad immediately drew howls of protest from Olympic officials (both international and U.S.)

and from members of the Iraqi soccer team for politicizing the games for partisan purposes. What is noteworthy is that the emotional impact of the ads was magnified, not merely by the evocation of Olympic imagery in the ads, but by their very airing during the games when American swimmers swelled the pride of the nation. That is, the ads attached themselves to extant ambient emotion as much or more than they attempted to instill an affective response. Merging pride attached to aquatic athletes with the fruits of the president's foreign policy is a particularly powerful use of emotion, though it is less the emotion in ads than the emotion surrounding them that drives this response. This is a phenomenon researchers would be well advised to note.

Emotional Context II: Ads in a time of terror ("Peace and Security" and "Risk")

I have suggested above that much of the emotional resonance in campaign ads derives from their ability to draw upon the audiovisual conventions of popular culture. Such ads are exemplars of "referential" advertising, which attempts to attach meaning or affect from one referent to another object. In 1988, for example, the Bush-Quayle team produced ads attacking Michael Dukakis record on crime using the audiovisual conventions of a horror story. It was as if the ad became a 30-second trailer for the *Nightmare on Elm Street* that America would become under a Dukakis presidency where convicted violent felons marched through a "revolving door" prison policy. In 2004, popular culture once again provided the referential substance of the Bush campaign, but this time the popular culture referents reflected America in a time of terror. This was a theme woven through several Bush-Cheney ads, but perhaps most notably in an ad that began airing in late September titled "Peace and Security" that evoked the audiovisual conventions of "24," the FOX network drama about an elite domestic counterterrorism unit.

The ad begins, as does the FOX drama, with a ticking clock. Each episode of “24” takes place in “real time,” lasting for exactly one hour. The clock reappears at the beginning and end of segments to remind viewers of the passage of time. The Bush ad script reads as follows:

ANNOUNCER: History's lesson: Strength builds peace. Weakness invites those who would do us harm. Unfortunately, after the first World Trade Center attack, John Kerry and congressional liberals tried to slash \$6 billion from intelligence budgets. And tried to cut or eliminate over 40 weapons now fighting the war on terror. And refused to support our troops in combat with the latest weapons and body armor.

BUSH: I'm George W. Bush, and I approve this message.

The script is all about intelligence budgets and troops overseas, but the images are *all* very domestic, featuring a mom and baby in a stroller, a young black businessman flagging a cab and anxiously checking his watch, a young boy and a bowl of cereal, a young mother grabbing milk from a refrigerator, another young mom on the phone while she checks her watch, a family boarding a mini-van and finally the clock again, now spinning wildly out of control. All through the ad the clock continues to tick ominously. The ad's soundtrack combines slasher sound effects and haunting music, which carefully punctuate the ad's verbal charges. As well, the speed of movement of the persons shown in the ad has been edited to produce a sudden, momentary shift into hyper-speed, quickly followed by a return to normal. This effect has appeared in recent horror films and serves to heighten the ambient tension level portrayed in the ad, while also punctuating the ad's allegations.

Another Bush ad, "Risk," combines pictures of innocent children with visuals of masked and armed men and high tech weapons of counterterrorism that are virtually indistinguishable from those in a FOX network trailer for "24." The high tech beeping of the computers (presumably used to track terrorists) and explosions of weapons provide aural punctuation for the ads charges. These ads clearly evoke highly emotional responses, yet they do so mostly by drawing out the post-September 11, 2001 anxieties of the public, rather than through free-floating emotional cues. In short, the full effect of the ad, emotional and otherwise, flows from the interaction of sound, image, narrative and memory, and not from a hypodermic injection of emotional cues onto an otherwise blank slate. This may have important implications for scholarly investigation of the role of emotion in viewers' processing of political ads, most obviously being that the relationship between what you see and what you feel may be more complex than has been previously acknowledged.

Emotional Content I: Fighting Words: ("Any Questions?")

A full accounting of the ad campaign launched by the group Swift Boat Veterans for Truth is beyond the scope of the present paper. Nonetheless, some key facts stand out. The initial ad ("Any Questions?") injected some of the most emotional and incendiary charges into the campaign discourse through a relatively meager ad buy. The institutionalized right-wing media (FOX News, the *Washington Times*, *New York Post*, and various and sundry talk radio outlets) fanned the story's flames and eventually the conflagration spread to the mainstream media. As these events unfolded, Senator Kerry's narrow advantage over President Bush eroded, wiping out the Massachusetts Democrat's post-convention "bounce." In many respects, it was a setback from which he would never recover.

While the Swift Boat ads do include the kind of emotionally evocative audiovisual cues normally associated with attack ads, this ad's effectiveness can be found principally in its afterlife as fodder for TV news and opinion shows. This, too, carries important implications for students of the emotional effects of campaign ads.

Emotional Content II: Presidential Voice ("Whatever it Takes")

In the closing days of the campaign, Bush-Cheney 2004 began airing an ad featuring video of the president's acceptance speech at the Republican National Convention in New York. The ad, titled "Whatever it Takes," is an emotionally powerful response to Democratic charges (and those found in Michael Moore's *Fahrenheit 9-11*) that Bush was oblivious to the terrible human costs of the war in Iraq. The script reads

PRESIDENT BUSH: These four years have brought moments I could not foresee and will not forget. I've learned first hand that ordering Americans into battle is the hardest decision, even when it is right. I have returned the salute of wounded soldiers who say they were just doing their job. I've held the children of the fallen who are told their dad or mom is a hero but would rather just have their mom or dad. I've met with the parents and wives and husbands who have received a folded flag. And in those military families, I have seen the character of a great nation. Because of your service and sacrifice, we are defeating the terrorists where they live and plan and you're making America safer. I will never relent in defending America, whatever it takes.

BUSH: I'm George W. Bush and I approve this message.

The ad intersperses images of Bush speaking and various members of the audience (including a soldier in uniform) in rapt attention to the president's words. The

campaign would face press scrutiny when reporters became aware that doctored images of soldiers had been digitally added to the ad to enhance the backdrop of the president's speech, and eventually pulled the ad as a result (Anderson 2004b). The ad's swelling musical score and somber audience reaction shots reinforce its powerful emotional resonance.

For all the ad's clever production values, however, it ultimately trades upon the power of the office, the presidential voice. The ad's narrative invites the inference the Mr. Bush himself handed grieving loved ones folded flags. This is the power of incumbency writ large. One key implication for the analysis of emotion in ads is that for at least one very prominent office, incumbents will have forged specific "emotional" bonds (for good or ill) with the public.

Emotion in Ad Watch Journalism

In varying degrees, since 1992, political advertisements have been subjected to journalistic truth squads operating under the rubric of ad watch journalism. As a rough estimate, Lexis-Nexis indicates that between 15 and 50 stories with "ad watch" in the headline or lead paragraph appear in the nation's leading newspapers during a typical month of a presidential campaign. Of that total, on average, perhaps one of those stories also includes the word "emotion" or "emotional." A cursory reading of some of these ad watch stories confirms a near total lack of attention to the emotional impact of ads, save for the occasional reference to a particularly "emotional appeal." Where emotion is mentioned, in other words, little or no effort is made to be more specific.

Revealing Bias: A Framework for Ad Watch Journalism

The utter inattention to emotion in ads by ad watch journalists may reflect more than oversight or ignorance. It is likely that at least part of the problem is the absence of

a defensible critical stance from which to weigh the various emotional appeals found in political advertising. To point out that an ad appeals to fear is to run the risk of being accused of “bias” (or worse) by supporters of the ad’s sponsor. It is hard enough for journalists to police factual claims in ads without treading into the seemingly much murkier waters of emotionality. What’s a journalist to do?

I would like to suggest a subtle shift in focus that might provide a more productive framework for ad watch journalism. Rather than focusing on errors in ads, ad watch analysts may wish to train their analytical lens on “errors” in viewers, where a variety of what are typically seen as cognitive and emotional biases may contribute to faulty judgment, reasoning, and even unwarranted emotional responses. The goal would be less to say, “this statement in an ad is false” than to say, “these are the types of cognitive and emotional effects that are likely to accompany viewing this ad” in certain types of viewers.

In essence, this approach would treat emotion as a potential source of bias in inference. Bias, it should be noted, does not necessarily connote inaccuracy. Rather, it represents increased probabilities of certain conclusions being drawn or of certain affective responses being generated. Indeed, a more clinical vocabulary of emotion might facilitate ad watch analysis by depriving emotionality of some of its pejorative baggage. Instead of writing that an ad appeals to fear, one might write that the ad invited a heightened response of the autonomic nervous system likely to increase alertness and the search for new information. In some cases, of course, the description might be somewhat less flattering. Once one has adopted a more clinical language of emotion, the move to merge emotional and cognitive sources of bias becomes much smoother.

Nisbett and Ross described cognitive bias as “over utilization of certain generally valid, intuitive, inferential strategies and the underutilization of certain formal, logical, and statistical strategies” (1980:15). A similar approach can be extended to emotion, though there are some complications. Emotion is multifaceted. It reaches across various psychobiological systems in complex ways. Emotion is also, to some extent, different for different types of people. These obstacles, however, are not insurmountable. In shifting our focus for errors in ads to “errors” in viewers, it is at least implicit that different viewers will bring different perspectives to bear on the political ads they see. The multifaceted nature of emotion, moreover, actually paves the way to blur the boundaries between emotion and reason – for the better.

Consider negativity. A lengthy and robust literature has linked negative ads to a variety of viewer responses (see Lau, et al 1999 for a meta-analysis). (The most common refrain, however, that spots are “too negative,” provides neither analytical leverage to scholars interested in understanding how political advertising works nor an actionable agenda for reform [Richardson 2001]). But is “negativity” an emotional response or a cognitive one? From the perspective of the ad watch analyst, it may not matter if one were to treat the resulting thoughts and actions the same way whether negativity was considered emotional or not. Perhaps more to the point, as I shall conclude below, the very basis for bifurcating reason and emotion may be fundamentally flawed.

Nisbett and Ross (1980) catalog a wide range of cognitive biases of potential relevance to viewer processing of political advertising including representativeness (resemblance, goodness-of-fit) (24), vividness (60), emotional interest (45), concreteness (47), temporal, spatial and sensory proximity of information (49), schemas (54), familiarity, availability (information quantity and redundancy), ignorance of statistical

considerations (chiefly sample size and bias), expectation of covariance and ignorance of data and little appreciation for strategies of disconfirmation of theories. For example, they note how the “vividness of information is correlated only modestly, at best, with its evidential value” (60), and that vivid information may recruit schemas, which they note contain casts of characters and stock scenes that make scripts capable of strongly influencing one’s inferences and behaviors (54). As noted above, the widely recognized cultural conventions of popular genres of film and fiction not infrequently serve to shape viewer response to campaign ads.

At the same time that analysts take note of how cognitive or emotional biases may interfere with reasoning, it may also be necessary to appeal to cognitive and emotional biases to more effectively communicate with viewers. Nisbett and Ross argue that aggregate statistical information often has little effect on inference because it lacks concreteness and emotional interest (1980:55). Providing such concreteness and emotional interest may be vital to building a better ad watch (see Richardson 2002). Borrowing from Nisbett and Ross (1980), journalists may attempt to add emotional content to “pallid” statistical data to draw in viewers. They also note that face-to-face recommendations may be more influential than informationally superior data summaries (58) a point with obvious implications. It is readily apparent that any truly effective ad watch journalism must be essentially audiovisual in nature. Indeed, one can argue that a new paradigm of multimedia scholarship in academia is needed as well. Once scholars have recognized that audiovisual and emotional elements of ads are worthy of study, it becomes very difficult to argue that such scholarship can be accommodated by research published in ink on paper.

Toward a Unified Approach to Sources of Bias in Political Advertising

Throughout this paper I have suggested that abandoning the reason/emotion bifurcation may advance our understanding of how political advertising works and serve to better inform journalistic and scholarly efforts to police the content of campaign spots. My point is not merely that thought and emotion interact, but that even more fundamentally, distinguishing between thought or reason on the one hand, and emotion or affect on the other, does little to advance our understanding and knowledge of how political communication works. Thoughts and emotions alike are neurochemical phenomena. The degree to which one evaluates and chooses or responds in a patterned manner may vary from one instance to another, but at some level, aren't both thoughts and emotions ultimately comprised of electrochemical signals of one form or another? In short, both thinking and emoting can be seen as multimodal simultaneous asynchronous spreading activation across various neurochemical systems relying on varying degrees of things that resemble what we call emotion on the one hand and reason on the other.

Even if one is not prepared to go quite so far, there is another danger in the emotion/reason duality, and that is that emotion becomes something of a residual category subsuming a diverse range of phenomena. Griffiths (1997:14) notes that there is no single underlying process that effectively distinguishes emotion, equating it to the category of superlunary objects in ancient astronomy:

there is a well-defined category of 'everything outside the orbit of the moon' but it turns out that superlunary objects do not have something specially in common that distinguishes them from other arbitrary collections of objects.

In some ways, emotion appears poised to become the “new negativity” of political advertising research, an umbrella concept under which a plethora of distinct phenomena have been vexatiously subsumed (Richardson 2001).

Yet another unarticulated major assumption underpinning much of the research on emotion and political advertising, and of ad watch journalism more specifically, is that there is a theory of democracy that can be used to help us distinguish between healthy and pathological practices of popular rule. In fact, no single such theory exists. Participatory theorists like John Dewey and Benjamin Barber ask quite different things of democracy than theorists like Friedrich Hayek or Milton Friedman, who value democracy principally for its role in protecting citizens against an overbearing state. Grounding our analysis of ads and emotion in “democratic theory” requires us to stipulate exactly whose democratic theory we are propounding.

Ultimately, for the ad watch analyst, this requires staking out a normative or otherwise predetermined approach to appropriate and inappropriate balances of reason and emotion, or however we can describe the two inextricably linked concepts. Until now, for journalists, that approach has presumably been defined as rational (as opposed to emotional). It is now clear that such a position is problematic if not untenable.

Emotion has long been seen as a dark influence on the body politic, antithetical to the light of pure reason upon which our salvation must rest. Yet, as Sheldon Wolin (1996) argues in his critique of John Rawls, “to impose the bland idea of reasonableness and to posit a nonhistorical original position from which to stipulate basic principles is to lobotomize the historical grievances of the desperate.” Indeed, scholars have begun to turn their attention to the role of emotion in social movements (Goodwin, Jasper, and Polletta 2001; Altemeyer 1988). The future of democracy demands no less.

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