

Media News Coverage As Political Rhetoric: Hart, Jackson, and Mondale in 1984

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This examination of the political rhetoric of selected media news coverage of the Gary Hart-Jesse Jackson-Walter Mondale Democratic Party's presidential nominating process researches ways in which media messages might influence the public's perceptions of candidates.

Our Dependence Upon Mass Media for Political Information

There is a pervasive belief by many in America that much of what the average person learns about political norms, roles, and values comes from the mass media systems.¹ Davis and Baran in their book, *Mass Communication and Everyday Life: A Perspective on Theory and Effects*, point out that the eighteenth and nineteenth centuries were years of great orators and people who were skilled in articulating the objectives of the communities in which they lived. Such orators, they believe, were capable of motivating public actions to accomplish those community objectives.² Since that time, the development of mass newspapers, then radio, and later television has not only changed the manner of political orators, but also has reduced the control of political parties over what the public learns about politics.³

Doris Graber, in her book, *Mass Media and American Politics*, suggests that peoples' opinions, feelings and evaluations about the political system may spring from their own processing of facts supplied by the media. She further argues that the attitudes, opinions and feelings explicitly expressed by the media also enter into a person's concept of the political system in America.⁴ Candidates for political office over a period of time have come to realize that media coverage is more important than, for example, platforms provided by their political parties.⁵ The implication seems to be that mass media delivers more votes than does a well organized political party during a national or primary election.

In America today, what we know of the world of politics comes largely through what we see, hear, and read through the mass media, and it appears that politics has become a sport for spectators.⁶ It would seem that the organized political party no longer acts as the sole disseminator of political information and that mass media has become the purveyor of political information and political persuasion about candidates. While the political party of the past involved numbers of people in its workings, mass media coverage of politics does not require our active participation in a candidate's campaign for office. The problem is that we will mistake watching, reading or listening to communication with being involved in it. We mistake the media genre representations of political communication for political communication itself.⁷

Though most citizens would probably call media news reporting of politics "informative" rather than "persuasive," because the news adds to our knowledge, the fact is that the news media coats itself with the rhetoric of objectivity.⁸ It often appears to be objective by being dull, factual, and wordy.

Craig R. Smith in his article, "Television News as Rhetoric,"⁹ claims that since "informative" conjures a more credible image than does "persuasive," we tend to let newsmen work their spells unchecked. "The word 'persuasive,'" says Smith, "is a Devil-term clustered with 'manipulation,' 'coercion,' and 'salesmanship'." The fact is, however, that what a viewer sees on television or what the reader derives from the newspaper or news magazine is quite different from what a live audience would experience.¹⁰ Those who use media for their grasp of political news tend to believe that they are participating in the political process of the United States.

We sometimes think, by watching candidates on television, reading about them in the print mediums, or hearing them on the radio we can responsibly participate in politics. We think we can get to know candidates by watching political advertisements or newscasts. Our naivete simply encourages politicians to use media as a means of appealing to us.¹¹

The Impact of Media upon Political Campaigns

Writing in the Spring 1980 issue of *Journalism Quarterly*, Richard A. Joslyn defines political campaigns as, "periods of time during which candidates for public office transmit information to potential voters in an attempt to create support for one's candidacy and to convince voters that they should vote in a particular way on election day."¹² To carry this a little further, it should be remembered that coverage by news media is a means of transmitting information to potential voters about candidates.

The disruption of traditional political parties and the political process that they controlled, which was discussed earlier, is only one example of how mass media may have transformed public communication.¹³ For example, Swanson¹⁴ feels that the increasingly elaborate and sophisticated use of television has been the most visible

hallmark of presidential campaigns and candidates since 1956. Another way in which mass media has transformed public communication of politics is offered by Dan Nimmo. In his book, *The Political Persuaders*,¹⁵ Nimmo suggests with impressive evidence that campaigns are geared primarily to images and only secondarily to discussion of issues.

Belquist and Golden carry this point further in their 1981 study of the 1980 presidential debates.¹⁶ They suggest that the 1980 presidential debates were electronic media events in which a speaker's delivery, appearance, and over all manner - as filtered through the television screen - proved to be more important than substance. Supporting Nimmo and Belquist and Golden is Clark¹⁷ who writes in his article, "An Exploration of Generic Aspects of Contemporary American Campaign Orations," that since most candidates are more concerned that they be elected than that they persuade audiences to agree with them on a range of substantive issues, campaign messages are usually "personal rhetoric" serving primarily to enhance the ethos of the candidate.

Journalists deem conflict as attractive and memorable and often help campaigners to create confrontations by pointing up existing conflicts that may lead to new battles.¹⁸ Mass media coverage of politics tends toward several kinds of distortion. Gregg, in his article, "The Rhetoric of Political Newscasting," thinks that, ". . .there is the tendency to present the dimensions of governing, of decision-making and of leadership along the lines of clarity and conflict, romance and drama, Cameloteon heroes and Machiavelian villains."¹⁹

Graber²⁰ believes that over the years, the media are deliberately packed with symbols to convey stock messages quickly and easily. She gives as examples: showing candidates with old people, black workers, or college students, proclaims affinity for these groups; showing candidates in informal settings, surrounded by family members, attests to their being "regular" folk and good family people. Without question media devices and symbols speak to the reader, viewer, and listener.

Another way in which the mass media speak rhetorically to us is through agenda setting. Theodore White writes in his book, *The Making of the President*,²¹ that the power of the press in the United States is a primordial one. White feels that the media sets the agenda for the public discussion of politics and that this sweeping political power is unrestrained by any law. "It determines," says White, "what people will talk and think about - an authority that in other nations is reserved for tyrants, priests, parties and mandarins. No major act of the American Congress, no foreign adventure, no act of diplomacy, no great social reform can succeed in the United States," concludes White, "unless the press prepares the public mind."

Prediction, as possibly set by mass media's agenda setting, is a powerful illusion builder. Predictions and agenda setting can become self-fulfilling prophecies.²² Graber presents a chilling example of the power of the press to predict political outcomes and guide media users:

The 1976 presidential debates provide an excellent example of the effectiveness of media opinion guidance in even comparatively simple evaluations. A telephone survey conducted immediately after the second debate showed that viewers, by a 9% margin, judged President Ford to be the debate winner. Following media commentary, which strongly attacked a statement Ford had made about Eastern Europe, viewers in increasing numbers called Carter the winner. Within 24 hours, Carter's lead over Ford had risen to 42 percentage points. A number of the later interviewees commented that they had originally judged Ford to be the winner, but felt that they must have been wrong because the media judged otherwise.²³

Rhetorical Messages Sent By Mass Media

There are two major difficulties in criticizing the rhetoric of political media coverage. First, the media often has a lack of what is thought of as traditional discourse formats and, second, there exists a large number of "languages" used by the various media and within each medium. For example, the "languages" of camera angles, movement, type or print size, page location or any number of special media effects all speak rhetorically. Most, however, have not been considered rhetorical in nature, at least by speech communication scholars.²⁴ As mass media becomes more and more pervasive and mediated, it is unrealistic to ignore the rhetorical nature of mass media's presentation of political messages to the viewer, reader, and listener.

Here are some typical ways in which mass media speaks to us in a rhetorical manner:

1. Clearly, the arranging, cutting, emphasizing, and commenting in the media of politics is manipulation and persuasion on a sophisticated level.²⁵
2. The pool of possible political candidates has been altered to eliminate people who are not telegenic.²⁶
3. In order to hold audience and reader interest, political candidates design many of their campaign statements to fit in a 60 second commercial or news clip on the evening news.²⁷ Statements such as Mondale's "Where's the Beef?", and Jackson's "From the outhouse to the Whitehouse" fit into this area.
4. Typical rhetorical methods used by the mass media when covering politics are:²⁸
 - A. Use of metaphors (horse race, battle, etc.)
 - B. Tone of voice of the reporters and anchorpersons in electronic media.
 - C. Use of colorful graphics and charts.
5. The media uses stereotypes of the various candidates. Early in the campaign media reporters build their stories around these created stereotypes. In the 1972 primaries, for instance, Senator Hubert Humphrey was

stereotyped as "the politician of the past. . ." Senator Edmund Muskie was stereotyped as the "Front-runner," and Senator George McGovern was depicted as the "Anti-establishment populist." Alabama Governor George Wallace was "The creator of division and discord."²⁹ In the 1984 Democratic primary Mondale was often stereotyped as "the candidate of special interests"; Hart as "dissenter in the Eugene McCarthy/Jimmy Carter Mold"; and Jackson as the "Civil Rights candidate."

6. Davis and Baran³⁰ propose that the media has developed genres for representing campaigns to their audiences. Various types of campaign news stories have been developed, they suggest, including the genres of **Romantic Stories** which glorify particular candidates as political heroes and **Ironic Stories** which reveal that even heroes have feet of clay.
7. The segmenting of time on the typical media newscast creates a kind of flatness which gives equal importance and weight to all items which appear there.³¹ This speaks to us rhetorically.

The Nature of the Study

This study investigated the general question, what were some of the ways messages produced by mass media news presentations might lead us to know and judge political candidates and political leadership? Specifically, this study examined two kinds and forms of rhetorical devices projected in national mass media news reporting.

The study and its findings were limited to national mass media political reporting of the Hart-Jackson-Mondale Democratic Party's presidential primary nomination-process, which took place between April 7, 1984, and April 9, 1984. Those media examined for their coverage of the three candidates during the selected period were: **U.S. News & World Report**³², **Newsweek**³³, **Time**³⁴, **NBC Nightly News**³⁵, **The ABC Evening News**³⁶, and **CBS Evening News**³⁷.

This study could not examine all of the kinds and types of rhetorical devices used and projected by the three print and three electronic media which were selected as representative of national news media. This study assessed two of the more recurring rhetorical images and devices used by the media in their reporting of this period during the 1984 Democratic Party nominating process. Following the example of Kenneth Burke, this paper looked for "a general body of identifications that owed their convincingness much more to trivial repetition and dull daily reinforcement than to exceptional rhetorical skill."³⁸

The content of the six national news media outlets was examined for rhetorical content, including written, spoken, and pictorial composition of all six presentations of the primary during the selected period of time. From the many possible rhetorical devices which could have been examined, two were selected for systematic investigation in this study. Those chosen were: 1) **Conflict** projected to the reader or viewer from the selected media and 2) **Metaphor Images** projected to the reader or viewer by the selected media.

Through systematic examination of each of these two elements, a pattern and, perhaps, an explanation of what happens in reader/viewer perceptions based upon rhetorical information from mass media became clearer.

Conflict Projected by the Selected Media in This Study

That all six of the media news organizations attempted to create and promote conflict in their news reporting of the three candidates became immediately apparent. They relied heavily and with much repetition on phrases and words suggesting warfare and violence. **U.S. News & World Report** used lines suggesting warfare, such as, ". . .with battle lines. . .sharply drawn. . .," and ". . .both men. . .coming under fire. . ." **Newsweek** told the reader, "Mondale has attacked Hart. . .," and "The battle for the party was waged. . ." When speaking of Jesse Jackson **Newsweek** pointed out that he is ". . .mobilizing the black vote. . ." **Time** projected the war theme in its reporting of the candidates by reporting that "Hart intensified his attacks on Mondale. . ." and spoke of "the attacks between them. . ." While the three electronic news reporting networks (ABC, CBS, and NBC) did not emphasize the warfare aspect in their reporting, they did contain much reference to general violence and conflict in their newscasts of the study period.

NBC, for example, asked us to "Stay tuned as the Democratic candidates fight for the hard-hat vote. . ." CBS, when speaking of Jackson, said he ". . .was angry at the timing. . ." and presented the conflict between Hart and Mondale as ". . .a cross between a generation gap and a family feud." ABC felt that one person was ". . .trying to force Mondale and Hart on to some dangerous ground. . ."

The print media also presented its share of references to general violence in their reporting of the three candidates. "Hart. . .then took a swipe at Mondale. . ." reported **U.S. News & Report**, as well as ". . .a bristling exchange erupted." **Newsweek** reported that "Hart and Mondale seemed wholly absorbed by their rock-'em, sock-'em rivalry." **Time** magazine suggested to the reader that "the conflict between Hart and Mondale" was a clash that ". . .was more than a family feud. . ."

From a rhetorical perspective, the emphasis on conflict and related reporting techniques played a significant role in the reporting about the candidates in this study. It seemed that the media commonly used references to warfare and conflict to enhance their reporting of the candidates and, perhaps, to convince the reader and viewer that a real war was being waged in the Democratic Party in 1984. The media tended to emphasize disagreement and conflict

between candidates as well as conflict within the Democratic Party in their political reporting of the campaign. Relatively little space or time was given to reporting substance and issues.

Metaphors Projected by the Selected Media

Technically, two examples of metaphors were presented in the last section: one being a theme of general violence and the other being the warfare theme. They, however, reflect the media's preoccupation with conflict and were placed in the previous section rather than in this section, which is concerned primarily with the use of metaphors by the selected media.

Do the media use metaphors of natural phenomena? Yes, they do! There was a reference to volcanoes by U.S. **News and World Report**, when they reported that an ". . .exchange erupted. . ." "Newsweek noted that Mondale and Hart had ". . .narrow but unmistakably real generational and ideological fissures."

Sports metaphors were used commonly by many of the six sources examined. U.S. **News & World Report** relied on track and field when they informed us that the ". . .Democratic marathon. . ." was nearing ". . .the halfway mark. . ." Others, including **Newsweek**, which stated that ". . .positions will affect the race itself. . ." and ABC News which found the race ". . .very close between Walter Mondale and Gary Hart with Jackson third. . ." seemed to emphasize horse racing metaphors.

Boxing was a popular metaphor with **Newsweek** which reported, "Jackson chooses to fight for a peace policy. . .," and NBC News which showed a film clip of a Mondale ad proposing that Mondale was ". . .a fighter and a winner. . ." **Time** suggested to the reader that Jesse Jackson who was ". . .skillfully. . .playing. . .referee" would ". . .step in."

Metaphors related to show business were one of the more developed rhetorical techniques used by the print media in this study. Almost the entire **Newsweek** article which reported on the candidates was cloaked in the theatre metaphor. Examples used by **Newsweek** were: "Mondale cast himself. . ."; ". . .sneering at Hart's Peter Pan Politics."; ". . .the Rev. Jesse Jackson in a supporting role played with such verve that he threatened to upstage the other two,."; ". . .revival of the Democratic Party's quadrennial comedy. . .had clearly reached its second act"; and "The cast of characters had been narrowed to three." **Time** also used an occasional show business metaphor such as ". . .which Mondale melodramatically calls. . ."

It came as a surprise that there was much use of medical metaphors in the media's reporting of the campaign. **Time** pointed out that "Hart and Mondale offer very different prescriptions. . ." while NBC reported that Hart's campaign will soon be in the same shape as ". . .the ailing steel industry." NBC also ran a film clip of Jackson who stated that many lived in a ". . .democracy of pain." U.S. **News & World Report**, as well as **Newsweek**, seemed to have references to mercy killing when both reported problems between candidates about ". . .pulling the plug. . .in Central America."

There was some use of animal metaphors in the media aimed at or used by Jesse Jackson. For example, Jackson was quoted by U.S. **News & World Report** as saying ". . .you cannot embrace doves and missiles at the same time" and **Newsweek** called him ". . .the most dovish of the three."

Vehicle metaphors were often used by both the media and the candidates. NBC quoted Mondale, ". . .there wouldn't be a rowboat in the. . .Navy Yard today. . ." if it weren't for him. **Newsweek** quoted Hart as saying the Chrysler loan guarantees were ". . .an instance of trying to patch up a leaking boat." **Newsweek** also referred to ". . .Federal bailouts. . ."

Metaphorical references to the military were used frequently with some of the more common being: ". . .to capture the Jewish vote. . ."; "battle lines on issues. . ."; "The real enemy is. . ."; ". . .intensified his attacks. . ."; ". . .enemy was global communism. . ."; and ". . .coming under fire. . ."

The media, particularly the print media, relied heavily upon the use of metaphors in their reporting of the 1984 Democratic party's primary campaign.

Conclusions From the Study

Based upon the limited scope of the study, several conclusions immediately become apparent. First, the mass media reporting during the period of the study created images of the candidates and the party by their extensive use of metaphors. Secondly, during the period of the study the print media made far more use of metaphors than did the electronic media. Third, during the period of the study there was an emphasis on conflict among candidates and within the party structure in the political news reporting of the mass media. Agreement among the candidates was de-emphasized while disagreement was maximized by the selected media involved in the study.

More research into the mass media's reporting of political news needs to be done, especially into the effects of media's use of rhetorical devices on the reader or viewer. Questions for research include: Do metaphors used by the media constitute a projection of values and/or arguments for or against a candidate or a political party? What part does this "mass media rhetoric" play in the selection or rejection of a candidate by the general voting public? What part, if any, does "mass media rhetoric" play in the projection of images of competence and leadership on the part of candidates to the voters? Does the amount of space given a candidate in the print media, or the amount of time

devoted to a candidate in the electronic media have an influence on voter perceptions of that candidate?

This research demonstrated that, during the period studied, mass media relied extensively on the use of rhetorical devices in their political reporting of the 1984 Democratic Party presidential nominating campaign.

Notes

¹Doris A. Graber, *Mass Media and American Politics*, (Washington, D.C.: Congressional Quarterly Press, 1980), p. 123.

²Dennis K. Davis and Stanley J. Baran, *Mass Communication and Everyday Life: A Perspective on Theory and Effects*, (Belmont, California; Wadsworth Publishing Company, 1981), p. 103.

³Davis and Baran, p. 102.

⁴Graber, p. 122.

⁵Davis and Baran, p. 105.

⁶Davis and Baran, p. 107.

⁷Davis and Baran, p. 105.

⁸Craig R. Smith, "Television News as Rhetoric," *Western Journal of Speech Communication* 41 (1977), 147-159.

⁹Smith, p. 148.

¹⁰Goodwin F. Berquist and James L. Golden, "Media Rhetoric, Criticism and the Public Perception of the 1980 Presidential Debates," *The Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 67 (1981), 125-137.

¹¹Davis and Baran, p. 106.

¹²Richard A. Joslyn, "The Content of Political Spot Ads," *Journalism Quarterly*, 57 (1980), 92-98.

¹³Davis and Baran, p. 105.

¹⁴David L. Swanson, "And That's the Way It Was? Television Covers the 1976 Presidential Campaign," *Quarterly Journal of Speech*, 63 (1977), 239-248.

¹⁵Dan Nimmo, *The Political Persuaders*, (Englewood Cliffs, New Jersey: Prentice-Hall, 1970).

¹⁶Belquist and Golden, p. 132.

¹⁷Thomas D. Clark, "An Exploration of Generic Aspects of Contemporary American Campaign Orations," *Central States Speech Journal*, 30 (1979), 122-133.

¹⁸Graber, p. 164.

¹⁹Richard B. Gregg, "The Rhetoric of Political Newscasting," *Central States Speech Journal*, 28 (1977), 221-237.

²⁰Graber, p. 163.

²¹Theodore White, *The Making of the President*, (1972), p. 327.

²²Smith, p. 152.

²³Graber, p. 123.

²⁴Charles U. Larson, "Media Metaphors: Two Models for Rhetorically Criticizing the Political Television Spot Advertisement," *Central States Speech Journal*, 33 (1982), 533-546.

²⁵Smith, p. 151.

²⁶Graber, p. 161.

²⁷Gregg, p. 225.

²⁸Smith, p. 148.

²⁹Graber, p. 175.

³⁰Davis and Baran, p. 105.

³¹Gregg, p. 225.

³²John W. Mashek, "The Issues Sharpen," *U.S. News & World Report*, (April 9, 1984), 24.

³³Tom Morganthau, et. al., "Battling For A Party's Soul," *Newsweek*, (April 9, 1984), 32-34.

³⁴Evan Thomas, "Local Politics, Global Power," *Time*, 123 (1984), 20-22.

³⁵*NBC Nightly News*, National Broadcasting Company Television Network, April 7, 1984 edition.

³⁶*ABC Evening News*, American Broadcasting Company Television Network, April 9, 1984 edition.

³⁷*CBS Evening News*, Columbia Broadcasting System Television Network, April 9, 1984 edition.

³⁸Kenneth Burke, *A Rhetoric of Motives*, (New York: The World Publishing Company, 1962), p. 550.