

BLIPS, BITES & SAVVY TALK

Television's Impact on American Politics

In the pilot film for the 1987 television series *Max Headroom*, an investigative reporter discovers that an advertiser is compressing television commercials into almost instantaneous “blipverts,” units so high-powered they can cause some viewers to explode. American television has long been compressing politics into chunks, ten-second “bites,” and images that freeze into icons as they repeat across millions of screens and newspapers. The 1980s were saturated with these memorialized moments. Think of Ronald Reagan at the Korean DMZ, wearing a flak jacket, field glasses, keeping an eye on the North Korean Communists; or in the bunker at Omaha Beach, simulating the wartime performance he had spared himself during the actual World War II. Think of the American medical student kissing American soil after the troops had evacuated him from Grenada. Think of Star Wars animation and Oliver North saluting. The sense of history as a collage reaches some sort of twilight of the idols when we think of the 1988 election. There it is hard to think of anything *but* blips and bites: the Pledge of Allegiance; George Bush touring the garbage of Boston Harbor (leaving aside that some of the spot was shot elsewhere); the face of Willie Horton; the mismatch of tank and Michael Dukakis. The question I want to raise is whether chunk news has caused democratic politics to explode.

Although I pose the question in an extreme form, it is hardly alien to 1988's endless campaign journalism. Indeed, the journalists

were obsessed with the question of whether media images had become the campaign, and if so, whose fault that was. That obsession is itself worth scrutiny. But consider first the coverage itself. According to the most relentless of studies as well as the evidence of the senses, the main mode of campaign journalism is the horse-race story. Here is that preoccupation—indeed, enchantment—with means characteristic of a society that is competitive, bureaucratic, professional, and technological all at once. The big questions of the campaign, in poll and story, are *Who's ahead? Who's falling behind? Who's gaining?*

This is an observation only a fool would deny. I recall a conversation I had with a network correspondent in 1980. I criticized the horse-race coverage of the primaries. “I know,” he said. “We’ve been trying to figure out what we can do differently. We haven’t been able to figure it out.” To a great though not universal extent, the media still haven’t. They can’t. The popularity of unexamined military and sports metaphors like “campaign” and “race” shows how deep the addiction runs. This is a success culture bedazzled by sports statistics and empty of criteria other than numbers to answer the question, “How am I doing?” Journalists compete, news organizations compete—the channeled aggression of the race is what makes their blood run. In the absence of a vital polis, they take polls.

By 1988, the obsession had reached new heights, or depths: one night, ABC News devoted fourteen minutes, almost two-thirds of the news section of the newscast, to a poll—a bigger bloc by far than was given to any issue. In a perverse way, the journalists’ fancy for

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polls is a stratagem directed toward mastery. Here at least is something they know how to do, something they can be good at without defying their starting premise, which is, after all, deference. Their stance is an insouciant subservience. They have imposed upon themselves a code they call objectivity but that is more properly understood as a mixture of obsequiousness and fatalism—it is not “their business” in general to affront the authorities, not “their place” to declare who is lying and who is right. Starting from the premise that they haven’t the right to raise issues the candidates don’t raise or explore records the candidates don’t explore, they can at least ask a question they feel entitled to answer: “Who’s ahead?” How can racing addicts be chased away from the track?

By 1988 the fact that the horse race had become the principal “story” was itself “old news.” Many in the news media had finally figured out one thing they could do differently. They could take the audience backstage, behind the horse race, into the paddocks, the stables, the clubhouse, and the bookie joints. But this time horse-race coverage was joined by handicapping coverage—stories about campaign tactics, what the handlers were up to, how the reporters felt about being handled: in short, *How are the candidates trying to do it to us, and how are they doing at it?* Anxiety lay behind this new style—anxiety that Reagan really had pulled the Teflon over their eyes, that they had been suckered by the smoothly whirring machinery of his stagecraft. So handicapping coverage was a defensive maneuver, and a self-flattering one: the media could in this way show that they were immune from the ministrations of campaign professionals.

The result is what many people call a postmodern move, in two senses: enchantment with the means toward the means and ingratiation via a pass at deconstruction. There is a lot of this in American culture nowadays: the postmodern high culture of the 1960s (paintings calling attention to their paintedness, novels exposing their novelistic machinery) has swept into popular culture. An aspirin commercial dizzily toys with itself (“I’m not a doctor, though I play one on TV,” says a soap opera actor); an Isuzu commercial bids for trust

by using subtitles to expose the lies of the overenthusiastic pitchman; actors face the audience and speak “out of character” in *Moonlighting*. Campaign coverage in 1988 reveled in this mode. Viewers were invited to be cognoscenti of their own bamboozlement.

This was the campaign that made “sound bite,” “spin control,” “spin doctor,” and “handler” into household phrases. Dukakis handlers even made a commercial about Bush handlers wringing their hands about how to handle Dan Quayle, a commercial that went over far better with hip connoisseurs than with the unhip rest of the audience who had trouble tracing the commercial to Dukakis. This campaign metacoverage, coverage of the coverage, partakes of the postmodern fascination with surfaces and the machinery that cranks them out, a fascination indistinguishable from surrender—as if once we understand that all images are concocted we have attained the only satisfaction the heart and mind are capable of. (This is the famous Brechtian “alienation effect” but with a difference: Brecht thought that actors, by standing outside and “presenting” their characters, could lay bare social relations and show that life could be changed; paradoxically, campaign metacoverage, by laying bare the campaign’s tactics and inside doings, demonstrates only that the campaign is a juggernaut that cannot be diverted.) Thus, voiceovers explained knowingly that the candidate was going to a flag factory or driving a tank in order to score public relations points. Here, for example, is ABC’s Brit Hume narrating the appearance of George Bush at a flag factory on September 20, 1988: “Bush aides deny he came here to wrap himself in the flag, but if that wasn’t the point of this visit, what was it?”

In the same vein was the new postdebate ritual: the networks featuring campaign spin doctors, on camera, telling reporters why their respective candidates had done just fine, while the network correspondents affected an arch superiority and print reporters insisted that the spin doctors couldn’t spin *them*. Meanwhile, the presumably unspinnable pundits rattled on about how the candidates performed, whether

they had given good sound bite—issuing reviews, in other words, along with behind-the-scenes assessments of the handlers' skill in setting expectations for the performance, so that, for example, if Dan Quayle succeeded in speaking whole sentences he was to be decreed a success in "doing what he set out to do."

These rituals exhibited the insouciant side of insouciant subservience—reporters dancing attendance at the campaign ball while insisting that they were actually following their own beat. Evaluating the candidates' claims and records was considered highbrow and boring—and potentially worse. For to probe too much or too far into issues, to show too much initiative in stating the public problems, would be seen by the news business as hubris, a violation of their unwritten agreement to let the candidates set the public agenda. Curiously, the morning shows, despite their razzmatazz, may have dwelt on issues more than the nightly news—largely because the morning interviewers were not so dependent on Washington insiders, not so tightly bound to the source cultivating and glad-handing that guide reportage inside the Beltway. It was a morning show that discovered that the Bush and Dukakis campaigns had hired the same Hollywood lighting professionals to illuminate their rallies. (Possibly the Dukakis handlers had learned from Mondale's blunder in turning a 1984 debate lighting decision over to Reagan's more skilled people, leaving Mondale showing rings under his eyes—so Michael Deaver told Mark Hertsgaard, as reported in Hertsgaard's *On Bended Knee*.)

As befit the new and sometimes dizzying self-consciousness, reporters sometimes displayed, even in public, a certain awareness that they were players in a game not of their own scripting; that they could be had, and were actively being had, by savvy handlers; and that they were tired of being had. The problem first acquired media currency with a tale told by Hedrick Smith, in his 1988 book *The Power Game*, about a 1984 campaign piece by Leslie Stahl. Here is Stahl's own version of the story as she told it the night after the election on ABC's *Viewpoint*:

This was a five-minute piece on the evening news . . . at the end of President Reagan's '84

campaign, and the point of the piece was to really criticize him for—I didn't use this language in the piece—but the point was, he was trying to create amnesia over the budget cuts. For instance . . . I showed him at the Handicapped Olympics, and I said, you wouldn't know by these pictures that this man tried to cut the budget for the handicapped. And the piece went on and on like that. It was very tough, and I was very nervous about going back to the White House the next day, Sam [she is talking to fellow panelist Sam Donaldson], because I thought they'd never return my phone calls and they'd keep returning yours. [This is Exhibit B on factors inhibiting press criticism: the competition of the pack, which can produce protracted press honeymoons and pile-ons.—T.G.] But my phone rang, and it was a White House official [presumably Michael Deaver, the propagandist-in-chief], and he said, "Great piece, Leslie." And I said, "Come on, that was a tough—what do you mean, 'great piece'?" And he said, "We loved it, we loved it, we loved it. Thank you very much. It was a five-minute commercial, you know, unpaid commercial for our campaign." I said, "Didn't you hear what I said? I was tough." "Nobody heard what you said. They just saw the five minutes of beautiful pictures of Ronald Reagan. They saw the balloons, they saw the flags, they saw the red, white and blue. Haven't you people figured out yet that the picture always overrides what you say?"

The 1988 answer was, apparently not. For the networks and the candidates (successful candidates, anyway) share an interest in what they consider "great pictures," that is, images that evoke myths. Curiously, the famous cynicism of journalists does not keep them from being gullible. Indeed, in this setting, cynicism and gullibility are two sides of the same coin. The handlers count on the gullible side when they gamble that cameras, to paraphrase the ex-president's masterful slip on the subject of facts, are stupid things. That is why the Reagan staffers were proud of their public relations triumphs; their business was to produce what one of them called "our little playlets"—far-flung photo opportunities with real-life backdrops. Print reporters, meanwhile, were unable or unwilling to proceed differently. Although the pressure for "great pictures" doesn't apply, at least in the establishment press, the print people are unwilling to cede the "playlets" to television; they compete

on television's terms, leaving the handlers free to set their agendas for them.

What is not altogether clear, of course, is whether the Reagan staffers were right to be proud of their public relations triumphs. We don't know, in fact, that "the picture always overrides what you say." Possibly that is true for some audiences, at some times, in some places, and not for others. What is clear, though, is that when the picture is stark enough, or the bite bites hard enough, journalists, especially on television, are unwilling to forgo the drama. To be boring is the cardinal sin. Embarrassed by their role as relay stations for orchestrated blips and bites, even amply rewarded journalists purport to resent the way Reagan's staff made megaphones of them; at the least they have become acutely self-conscious about their manipulability. The White House and the television-led press have been scrambling for relative advantage since the Kennedy administration; metacoverage was the press's attempt to recoup some losses.

Too Hip for Words

But to make sense of metacoverage I want to look at the dominant form of political consciousness in a formally open but fundamentally depoliticized society, which is savviness.

Already in 1950, David Riesman in *The Lonely Crowd* described what he called the inside dopest— a consumer of politics who

may be one who has concluded (with good reason) that since he can do nothing to change politics, he can only understand it. Or he may see all political issues in terms of being able to get some insider on the telephone. . . . [In any case] he is politically cosmopolitan. . . . He will go to great lengths to keep from looking and feeling like the uninformed outsider.

The goal is "never to be taken in by any person, cause, or event."

Over the past forty years, Riesman's inside dopest has evolved into another type: a harsher, more brittle and cynical type still more knowledgeable in the ways in which things really work, still more purposefully disengaged, still more knowledgeable in a managerial way, allergic to political commitments.

The premium attitude is a sort of knowing appraisal. Speaking up is less important— certainly less fun— than sizing up. Politics, real politics, is for "players"— fascinating term, for it implies that everyone else is a spectator. To be "interested in politics" is to know how to rate the players: Do they have good hands? How do they do in the clutch? How are they positioning themselves for the next play?

Savviness flatters spectators that they really do understand, that people like them are in charge, that even if they live outside the Beltway, they remain sovereign. Keeping up with the maneuvers of Washington insiders, defining the issues as they define them, savviness appeals to a spirit both managerial and voyeuristic. It transmutes the desire to participate into spectacle. One is already participating, in effect, by watching. "I like to watch" is *the* premium attitude. If you have a scorecard, you can tell the players. The ultimate inside dopesters are the political journalists.

Today, both advertising and political coverage flourish on, and suffer from, what Mark Crispin Miller has called "the hipness unto death." Miller argues that television advertising has learned to profess its power by apparently mocking it, standing aside from vulgar claims, assuring the viewer that all of us knowing types are too smart to be taken in by advertising, or gaucherie or passion of any kind. In the same way, the postmodern savviness of political coverage— whether in the glib version of a Bruce Morton or the more sedate version of MacNeil/Lehrer— binds its audience closer to an eerie politics of half-truth, deceit, and evasion in which ignorant symbols clash by night. If the players evade an issue, the savvy spectator knows enough to lose interest in it as well.

Coverage of the horse race and metacoverage of the handicappers both suit the discourse of savviness. They invite and cultivate an inside dopest's attitude toward politics— vicarious fascination coupled with knowing indifference.

It might well be, then, that Leslie Stahl's 1984 piece, like many others, was really three

pieces. A critical audience got her point—Reagan was a hypocrite. An image-minded audience got the White House's point—Reagan personified national will and caring, even as the nice-guy martyr to wise-ass Eastern commentators. And inside dopesters got still another point—Reagan, master performer, was impervious to quarrelsome voiceovers.

Perhaps, too, there was a fourth piece—the backstage drama in which the White House made a point of showing Leslie Stahl her place. This must be humiliating for any reporter so old-fashioned as to want to take the measure of images against realities. Stahl's story reveals that the only alternative to complicity would be the damn-it-all spirit of an outsider indifferent to whether the handlers will favor her with scoop-worthy tidbits of information the next time. While telling Stahl that she's been had, the White House knows that, given her understanding of her job, she's going to be coming back for more stories; Deaver, the public relations man, knows that the surest way to make a reporter complicit is to treat her as an insider. As long as the agenda is set by the White House, or the campaign, the watchdog is defanged.

An Audience for the Spectacle

More must be said about what I just called the image-minded audience. For 1988 was not only the year of metacoverage; it was the year of the negative commercial, the bite, the clip, the image-blip. In theory, these chunks are television's distinct forte: the emotion-laden image in which an entire narrative is instantly present—Willie Horton, the flag, Bush with his granddaughter. The image is what rivets; the image is what is remembered. Research done by Ronald Lembo in the sociology department at Berkeley shows that some television viewers are inclined to follow narrative while others, disproportionately the young, pay more attention to distinct, out-of-context images.

What professional handlers and television journalists alike do is find images that condense their "little playlets," images that satisfy both lovers of story and lovers of image. Then blip-centered television floods the audience with images that compress and evoke an entire

narrative. The 1980s began with one of these: the blindfolded American featured on the long-running melodrama called "America Held Hostage," sixty-three weeks of it during 1979–81, running on ABC at 11:30 five nights a week, propounding an image of America as a "pitiful helpless giant" (in Richard Nixon's phrase). Those were the months when Walter Cronkite signed off at CBS night after night by ticking off "the umpty-umpty day of captivity for the American hostages in Iran." In this ceremony of innocence violated, the moment arose to efface the national brooding over Vietnam. Now it could be seen that the Vietnam trauma had eclipsed the larger truth: it was the anti-Americans who were ugly. In the 1980s the American was the paleface captive of redskins. It was the anti-American blindfold that disfigured him. The image cried out for a man to ride out of the sagebrush on a white horse into the White House. The script for the Teheran playlet was not written by the Reagan handlers (although it is possible that they promised weapons to Iran's Revolutionary Guards in exchange for their keeping the hostages until election day), but they certainly knew how it would end.

We know how adept Reagan was at performing his playlets—he'd been doing them all his life. For eight years we heard endlessly, from reporters rushing about with spray cans of Teflon, about the mysterious personal qualities of the Great Communicator-in-Chief. But the mighty Wurlitzer of the media was primed for a figure who knew how to play upon it. The adaptability of the apparatus is exhibited by the media success of even so maladroit a figure as George Bush during the 1988 election. Having declared that Bush's central problem was to lick the wimp image, the media allowed him to impress them that once he started talking tough he turned out "stronger than expected." In their own fashion, Bush and his handlers—some of them fresh from Reagan's team—followed. Their masterwork was a Bush commercial that opens with a still photo on the White House lawn: Reagan to the right, at the side of the frame; Gorbachev at the center, shaking hands with the stern-faced Bush. The camera moves in on the vice president and Gorbachev; Reagan is left behind—having presided, he yields

gracefully to his successor, the new man of the hour. As the camera moves closer, the stern face and the handshake take over, while the voiceover speaks the incantation: "strong . . . continue the arms control process . . . a president ready to go to work on day one." The entire saga is present in a single image: Bush the heir, the reliable, the man of strength who is also savvy enough to deal.

An American Tradition

How new is the reduction of political discourse to the horse race, the handicapping, the tailoring of campaigns to the concoction of imagery? What is particular to television? How good were the good old days?

Tempting as it is to assume that television has corrupted a previously virginal politics, the beginning of wisdom is history. As the campaigns invite us to read their blips, alarm is amply justified—but not because American politics has fallen from a pastoral of lucid debate and hushed, enlightened discourse to a hellish era of mudslinging and degraded sloganeering. Television did not invent the superficiality, triviality, and treachery of American politics. American politics has been raucous, deceptive, giddy, shallow, sloganeering, and demagogic for most of its history. "Infotainment" is in the American grain. So is reduction and spectacle—and high-minded revulsion against both.

Is negative campaigning new? In 1828, supporters of Andrew Jackson charged that John Quincy Adams had slept with his wife before marrying her, and that, while minister to Russia, he had supplied the Czar with a young American mistress. In turn, pro-Adams newspapers accused Jackson of adultery, gambling, cockfighting, bigamy, slave-trading, drunkenness, theft, lying, and murder. Jackson was said to be the offspring of a prostitute's marriage to a mulatto. Papers accused Jackson's previously divorced wife of having moved in with him while still married to her first husband. Not that all mud sticks. Some mud makes the slinger slip. In 1884 a Protestant minister called the Democrats the party of "Rum, Romanism, and Rebellion" as the Republican James G. Blaine stood by

without demurral—which may well have cost Blaine the election.

Is the preference for personality over issues new? Once elected president, Andrew Jackson set to wiping out Indian tribes—but this was not an issue in the campaign that elected him, any more than the New Deal was an issue in the campaign that elected Franklin Roosevelt in 1932. (Roosevelt campaigned for a balanced budget.)

Are the blip and the bite new? "Tippecanoe and Tyler Too," the leading slogan of 1840, does not exactly constitute a Lincoln-Douglas debate. That year, according to Kathleen Hall Jamieson's *Packaging the Presidency*, followers of William Henry "Tippecanoe" Harrison carried log cabins in parades, circulated log cabin bandanas and banners, gave away log cabin pins, and sang log cabin songs, all meant to evoke the humble origins of their candidate—although Harrison had been born to prosperity and had lived only briefly in a log cabin. A half century later, in 1896, Mark Hanna, McKinley's chief handler, was the first campaign manager to be celebrated in his own right. Hanna acquired the reputation of a "phrase-maker" for giving the world such bites as "The Advance Agent of Prosperity," "Full Dinner Pail," and "Poverty or Prosperity," which were circulated on posters, cartoons, and envelope stickers, the mass media of the time. Hanna "has advertised McKinley as if he were a patent medicine!" marveled that earnest student of modern techniques, Theodore Roosevelt. In that watershed year, professional management made its appearance, and both candidates threw themselves into a whirl of public activity.

I draw the information about Hanna from an important book by Michael E. McGerr, *The Decline of Popular Politics: The American North, 1865–1928*. McGerr presents considerable evidence that from 1840 (the "Tippecanoe" campaign) through 1896, vast numbers of people participated in the pageantry of presidential campaigns. Average turnout from 1824 to 1836 was 48 percent of eligible voters; but

from 1876 to 1900, it was 77 percent. During the three decades after the Civil War, mass rallies commonly lasted for many hours; there were torchlight parades; there were campaign clubs and marching groups. "More than one-fifth of Northern voters probably played an active part in the campaign organizations of each presidential contest during the '70s and '80s," McGerr writes. And with popular mobilization came high voter turnout—up to 84 percent of the eligible (all-male) electorate in 1896 and 1900 before it slid to 75 percent during the years 1900–16 and 58 percent in 1920–24. (It rose again in the 1930s, with the Great Depression and the New Deal, and then started sliding again.) Arguably the mass mobilization and hoopla turned out the vote; voting was the consolidation of a communal ritual, not an isolated act by which the isolated citizen expressed piety.

In the age of professionalization, reformers recoiled. What developed in the 1870s and 1880s, with a push from so-called "educated men," was a didactic politics, what McGerr calls an "elitist" politics. The high-minded reformers insisted on a secret ballot; they approved of social science; they wanted enlightened leaders to guide the unwashed. Under their leadership, they worked toward a new-style campaign: a campaign of education. Independent journalism helped—newspapers no longer under party management. Alongside the waning partisan press, two new kinds of newspapers emerged: the high-minded independent paper with its educated tone, cultivating political discernment; and the low-minded sensational paper with its lurid tone, cultivating antipolitical passion. The way is already open to our contemporary bifurcation: the *New York Times* and the *New York Post*; Arthur Sulzberger and Rupert Murdoch; MacNeil/Lehrer and Geraldo Rivera. This split corresponds to the highbrow/lowbrow cultural split that developed around the same time, as traced by Lawrence W. Levine in his recent book of that title.

The sharply bifurcated media help divide the public: to oversimplify, a progressive middle class takes politics seriously while a diverted working class is for the most part (except for the Great Depression) disaffected. Although it took decades for this process to develop, and

there were exceptional periods of working-class mobilization along the way, the lineaments of the modern campaign were already in place at the turn of the century: emphasis on the personality of the candidate, not the party; emphasis on the national campaign, not community events; a campaign of packaging, posed pictures, and slogans. Politics as a discretionary, episodic, defensive activity for the majority alongside moral politics for the few. In short, the politics of the consumer society.

The radio hookups of the 1920s made the campaigns still more national, made it possible for candidates and presidents to reach over the heads of the party apparatus directly to the electorate. The parties became gradually more redundant. Some of this was welcomed by reformers, and properly so: gradually, candidates found it harder to whisper to white southern voters what they were afraid to proclaim out loud in the north. Above all else, though, the powers of the new media made it necessary for candidates and parties to manage them. Professionally concocted newsreels played a part in the defeat of Upton Sinclair's 1934 "End Poverty in California" gubernatorial campaign. A documentary newsreel spliced together at the last minute to counter a Dewey effort probably helped Truman squeak through in 1948.

But only with television and the proliferation of primaries did media management become central and routine to political campaigns. In 1952, Eisenhower, whose campaign was the first to buy television spots, was reluctant to advertise. After 1960, when Kennedy beat a sweating, five-o'clock-shadowed Nixon among those who watched the debate while losing among those who heard it on the radio, the handwriting was on the screen. The time of the professional media consultant had arrived. When his hour came round again in 1968, the new Nixon had learned to use—and submit to—the professional image managers. Nixon, the first president from southern California, moved advertising and public relations people into his high command. And not just for the campaign. The president in office could use the

same skills. Haldeman and Ehrlichman, with their enemies lists and provocateur tactics, were the founding fathers of what Sidney Blumenthal later called “the permanent campaign”—a combination of polling, image-making, and popularity-building strategy that Reagan developed to the highest of low arts.

The pattern seems set for the 1980s: metacoverage for the cognoscenti, spurious pageantry for the majority. *The McLaughlin Group* for the know-it-all; Morton Downey, Jr. for the know-nothing. As the spectacle becomes more scripted and routine—the nominating conventions are the obvious example—more of the audience turns off. The spectacular version of politics that television delivers inspires political withdrawal along with pseudo-sophistication. As the pundits and correspondents pontificate in their savvy way, they take part in a circular conversation—while an attuned audience, wishing to be taken behind the scenes, is invited to inspect the strategies of the insiders, whether via the chilly cynicism of a Bruce Morton or the college-try bravado of a Sam Donaldson. Savviness is the tribute a spectacular culture pays to the pleasures of democracy. Middle-class outsiders want to be in the know, while the poor withdraw further and don’t even vote. Politics, by these lights, remains a business for insiders and professionals. While the political class jockeys, the rest of us become voyeurs of our political fate—or *enragés*. Can it be simple coincidence that as voting and newspaper reading plummeted in the 1980s, Morton Downey, Jr. arrived with his electronic barroom brawl, and talk radio shows proved able to mobilize the indignant against congressional salary raises? Probably not. The vacuum of public discourse is filled on the cheap. Passions are disconnected from parties, moral panics disconnected from radical or even liberal politics. The talk show hosts did not mobilize against a tax “reform” that lined the pockets of the corporate rich.

Can This Generation Be Saved?

And the future? As the artist Folon says, “I work at forgetting I’m a pessimist.” Ronald Lembo’s research suggests that younger viewers are more likely, when they watch televi-

sion, to pay attention to disconnected images; to switch channels, “watching” more than one program at once; and to spin off into fantasies about images. Of all age groups, the young are also the least likely to read newspapers and to vote. Do we detect a chain of causation? Does a fascination with speed, quick cuts, ten-second bites, one-second “scenes,” and out-of-context images suggest less tolerance for the rigors of serious argument and the tedium of modern political life? Has the attention span been shrinking; and if so, is television the cause; and what would this prophesy for our politics? Is there, in a word, an MTV generation? Future apparatchiks of the media-politics nexus are assuming it: the politicians, the Deavers, the publishers of *USA Today* and its legion of imitators. David Shaw of the *Los Angeles Times* writes (March 15, 1989):

In 1967, according to the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago, 73% of the people polled said they read a newspaper every day; by last year, the number of everyday readers had fallen by almost one-third, to 50.6%. During that same period, in the 18 to 29 age group, the number of “everyday readers” dropped by more than half, from 60% to 29%.

While 26.6 percent of *Los Angeles Times* readers are aged 18 to 29, 36.2 percent of *USA Today* readers are that age. And whereas young people used to acquire the habit of newspaper reading as they aged, this is apparently no longer happening. To recoup their losses, newspapers are trying to woo the young with celebrity profiles, fitness features, household tips.

In 1988, the Department of Education published a report—a summary of research hither and yon—on television’s influence on cognitive development. The widespread publicity placed the emphasis on television’s harmlessness. The Associated Press story that ran in the *New York Times* was headlined: “Yes, You Too Can Get A’s While Watching ‘Family Ties.’” But the report itself, by Daniel R. Anderson and Patricia A. Collins of the Department of Psychology at the University of Massachusetts, is inconclusive on the question of whether television watching affects the capacity to pay attention. “The possibility that

rapid pacing may produce effects over longer exposure has not been examined," reads one typical hedge. "There does . . . appear to be some effect of TV on attention, yet the importance, generality, and nature of the effect is unknown": that is the summary sentence. Someday the grants may flow for the research obligatorily called for. But pending research, one still feels entitled to the pessimism that one must then work to forget. Television may not have eroded all possibilities for democratic political life, but it has certainly not thrown open the doors to broad-based enlightenment.

I have tried to show that there is precedent for a shriveled politics of slogans, deceit, and pagantry. But precedent is nothing to be complacent about when ignorance is the product. And the problem, ultimately, is not simply that Amer-

icans are ignorant. On this score, the statistics are bad enough. According to a 1979 poll, only 30 percent of Americans responding could identify the two countries involved in the SALT II talks then going on; in 1982, only 30 percent knew that Ronald Reagan opposed the nuclear freeze; in 1985, 36 percent thought that either China, India, or Monaco was part of the Soviet Union. But ignorance is sometimes a defense against powerlessness. Why bother knowing if there's nothing you know how to do about what you know? Why get worked up? What is most disturbing is not ignorance in its own right but, rather, the coupling of ignorance and power. When the nation-state has the power to reach out and blow up cities on the other side of the world, the spirit of diversion seems, to say the least, inadequate. Neither know-it-alls nor know-nothings are likely to rise to the occasion. □



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LINA TRADING INC.
270 Park Ave. So.
(21st & 22nd Sts.)

THE MAGAZINE STORE
Broadway bet. 62nd & 63rd St.

NIKOS
462 6th Ave. (11th St.)

NIVA TRADING INC.
405 6th Ave.

PAPER HOUSE, INC.
18-A Lexington Ave.
(22nd & 23rd Sts.)

PAPYRUS
2915 Broadway (114th St.)

PARKSIDE STATIONERY
120 East 34th St. (Lexington Ave.)

PARSLEY SAGE, INC.
73 7th Ave. S. (Barrow)

PERIODIC NEWS
405 6th Ave.

REVOLUTION BOOKS
13 East 16th St.

RIZZOLI
31 W. 55th St.

RUTKIN NEWSSTAND
42nd St. (Between 5th & 6th Aves.)

72ND ST. STATIONERY
238 W. 72nd St. (Broadway)

SHAH STATIONERY
2795 Broadway (107th-108th)

SHAKESPEARE & COMPANY
2259 Broadway (81st St.)

SPRING STREET BOOKS, INC.
169 Spring St.

ST. MARK'S BOOKSHOP
13 St. Mark's Place

STATE NEWS
1243 3rd Ave. (71st-72nd)

STATE NEWS—WEST SIDE
2571 Broadway (96th-97th)

TOBACCO SHACK, INC.
1546 1st Ave. (80th-81st)

TOWER 67 NEWS
165 Amsterdam Ave.

WALDEN BOOKS
57 Broadway (Wall St.)

WAVERLY SMOKE
Waverly Place

WENDELL'S
302 W. 12th St.