

The Rise of Image Politics in the US and Poland.

The Case of TV Presidential Advertising

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The second half the twentieth century saw a change in the ways political campaigns are constructed and conducted. Instrumental in this process was the rise of television as a medium through which most citizens get acquainted with candidates running for office. Television brought candidates right to the homes of voters, introducing the new requirements for candidates and accompanying the decline in the importance of party systems in some cases. Due to its prominence among all other media, and its characteristics as a medium that offers the possibility to utilize several channels of communication simultaneously, television has become a staple of combat in modern electioneering. Unsurprisingly, television content and power have attracted a considerable attention among scholars, leading to the advance of communication/media studies as a discipline.

The American Beginnings

The central role of mediated communication in U.S. elections is well-documented (Diamond & Bates, 1993). The 1952 presidential campaign saw a widespread use of televised political spot announcements for election purposes. In 1960 the first TV presidential debate was organized. By the mid-sixties, all U.S. presidential candidates had started working closely with advertising agencies to communicate with their voters. The 1980s saw the beginning of the adoption of American-style political campaigning practices in other Western democracies (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 1995) and elsewhere. Today American campaign professionals work all over the world. This paper presents an overview of the rise of image politics on television in both the US and Poland to serve as a background for the following chapters that analyze more recent case studies involving the new media.

The history of televised political advertising in America can be traced back to October 5, 1948, when Harry Truman paid a TV station to get his message across to American voters (Jamieson, 1996).¹ Even though that historic announcement meets all the criteria of political advertising as a communication process, both its content and form bore little resemblance to the contemporary American 60-second spot. Namely, it was a televised speech. Obviously, it did not fully utilize the opportunities offered by the new medium.

In 1952, television was used by General Dwight D. Eisenhower who recorded forty 20-second spots that were broadcast during the last weeks of the campaign (Wood, 1990). Despite the fact that Eisenhower's Democratic challenger had another ad agency at his disposal, he said that "The idea that you can merchandise candidates for high office like

¹ Jamieson actually has not been able to determine whether the above-mentioned footage, found in one of the television archives, aired or not. One way or another, it is the first example known to researchers.

breakfast cereal--that you can gather votes like box tops--is, I think, the ultimate indignity to the democratic process” (Fox, 1984: 310).

At this early stage of televised politics, media consultants played a minor, technical role of supervising lighting, make-up, and the set. Gradually, they gained an autonomous status. By the sixties, ad people were equally important as political consultants (Jamieson, 1996).

The Republican presidential nominee in 1960, Richard Nixon, was the first American candidate to experience both the creative and destructive power of television. Having agreed to appear in a series of televised debates with his Democratic opponent, John F. Kennedy, he came across on the TV screen as a complete contradiction of the latter who seemed youthful, witty, intelligent and attractive. Tanned and relaxed, he wore a dark blue suit that contrasted well with the gray background of the studio. Nixon, on the other hand, wore gray and turned the voters off with his five o'clock shadow and profuse sweating. Radio audiences thought Nixon to be the winner, but radio days were long since over. The television viewers' opinion was different. As a result, it was the junior senator from Massachusetts who won the election, though admittedly the margin was very narrow.

When making another try at the presidency eight years later, Nixon hired advertising and media experts who helped him create a friendly and appealing TV image. One of them was Joe McGinniss who claimed in *The Selling of the President 1968* (1969) that there was no doubt that TV images rather than issues had become the substance of American politics. McGinniss thought that policies and issues are too specialized for election purposes. They require a high degree of concentration, discipline, and knowledge on the part of the voter, who has to make an intellectual effort to understand and respond to them. McGinniss thought

this was asking too much of the voter. Former editorial writer for the *New York Herald Tribune* and Nixon's best speech writer in the 1968 Nixon campaign, Raymond K. Price, expressed his assumption that "The natural human use of reason is to support prejudice, not to arrive at opinions" (DiClerico, 1989, p.107). Consequently, it is not the politician's viewpoint that the viewers want to share, but his personality. They do not care how he thinks, only how he sounds and looks. Television is a perfect medium therefore for politicians who are charming but lack ideas.

Eight years after Nixon's first defeat, his communications consultants turned him into a success. They gave him words that showed his emotional involvement in the issues, they found (or manufactured) proper settings for him, presenting him in situations which looked unstaged even though they were not. One might think his staff had a hard task--changing a man of fifty-four cannot be an easy thing to do. The point, however, is that they did not have to change him at all. As Price (DiClerico, 1989: 107) put it:

"We have to be very clear on this point: that the response is to the image, not the man ... It's not what's *there* that counts, it's what's projected - and carrying it one step further, it's not what *he* projects but rather what the voter receives. It's not the man we have to change, but rather the *received impression*. And this impression often depends more on the medium and its use than it does on the candidate himself."

Public awareness of and journalists' scrutiny of presidential image making significantly increased after the publication of McGinniss' account. Before, only

exceptionally controversial spots drew public and media attention. Some of them, like the Tony Schwartz-made and Johnson-sponsored 1964 "Daisy" commercial, were broadcast only once.² The protests they stirred made their sponsors back off. Contemporary distrust of and cynicism about politics go back to McGinniss' study.

With time, media consultants became instrumental in making strategic decisions regarding the whole campaign communication process which overshadowed traditional policy making.

Globalization of Political Communication Practices

Recently, content analysis studies of televised political advertising have expanded their scope by making cross-cultural comparisons. Political communication systems being investigated come from the U.S., France, Britain, Germany, Italy, Israel, Denmark, the Netherlands, and Finland.

Research shows that in Western democracies television is the main medium through which citizens get exposed to presidential candidates' campaign messages (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 1995). Among all means of communicating with voters, political advertising is the only one that gives candidates complete control over content (Kaid, 1981). Unsurprisingly, the televised spot has become the single largest expenditure of the majority of presidential contests. Statistics show that from 50% to 75% of campaign expenses in the U.S. goes to televised political advertising (Devlin, 1995).

² Known as the „Daisy Ad,” this controversial piece of communication was in fact called „Peace, Little Girl.” Even though several communication consultants aspire to take credit for conceiving the „Daisy,” it is widely accepted that the credit and the responsibility lie primarily with Tony Schwartz, which he confirmed in personal communication during a tribute panel organized to celebrate his input in advertising by the Museum of Radio and Television in N.Y., N.Y. in March, 1998. Also see: Schwartz, T. (1973). *The responsive chord*. New York: Anchor Books.

American political campaigns are seen primarily as communications efforts (Denton, 1994; Denton, 1998). The position of parties has been overshadowed by pollsters and admen. Since most of the campaign spending goes to spot production and airtime buys, both of which are costly, fundraising's prominence has been significantly enhanced.

Gurevitch and Blumler (1990) claimed that “the American video-politics has become something of a role model for liberal democracies.” Subsequent comparative analyses (Kaid & Holtz-Bacha, 1995) talked about Americanization in the big picture. To them, the term signified a phenomenon that involved:

- (1) the prevailing role of television among the different campaign channels;
- (2) the predominance of images instead of issues going hand in hand with a personalization in the presentation of the political process; and
- (3) as a consequence of increased media orientation, a professionalization of political actors in the development of their media strategies;
- (4) the decline in the importance of political parties.

Early Changes in TV Political Communication in Democratic Poland

In contrast, Poland saw its first presidential campaign TV broadcasts only in 1990. It took another five years to introduce skillful and consistent image-making and still infrequent paid ads.

The first democratic parliamentary and presidential elections in Poland (respectively 1989 and 1990) were seen primarily in political terms. Some candidates and parties used the advice of media practitioners. However, all candidates attached more importance to the content rather than the form of their presentations. Seeing a candidate sit at a conference table

with a bottle of mineral water and a fern on it, and have him go on about an issue reading from notes was not an unusual sight. As might be expected, election results came as a surprise to most electoral committees who thought being right sufficed.

The Polish political stage was still considerably unstable, with a small number of committed and loyal voters. The number of those voting for a particular party in the 1997 elections and intending to do so all the time varied from 43 to 74 percent³. The percentage of voters who had remained loyal to their party since the previous elections which were held four years before was also dramatically low, in some cases as low as 18 percent. According to CBOS (Centrum Badania Opinii Społecznej, a Polish polling firm) research⁴, voters' decisions were determined primarily by television election programs and radio and press information (in their own declarations). Given the characteristics of television as a medium that cuts across all social boundaries and has the highest ratings, it is no surprise that television campaigning was a staple of political combat in Poland during the first two decades after 1989. With so many floating and undecided voters (in 1993, 14 percent made their final decisions on Election Day), there was really a lot to campaign for.

The 1990s saw a definite increase in the adoption of American/global political communication practices in Poland. Former studies reveal that individual elements of skillful image-making were indeed found. As had been the case in all democratic countries before, Poland's politicians and media experts discovered one another for election purposes. The 1993 parliamentary campaign saw the beginning of that cooperation when the KLD (Kongres Liberalno-Demokratyczny) hired "Saatchi & Saatchi," a most renowned marketing company in order to get into the Sejm, the lower house of the Polish Parliament. Experienced in

conducting successful political campaigning for the British Conservative Party since 1978, the agency helped the KLD portray its candidates as young, smart, market economy-oriented politicians. Filmed in elegant suits in front of newly-built, modern glass buildings, or in large supermarkets holding a cardboard container of milk (an expensive novelty at that time), they stood out in the block of television electoral programs. The UP (Unia Pracy), on the other hand, had one of the cheapest and most amateurish campaigns in that year. The result was surprising to everyone: the UP received the support of 9 percent and had the fourth largest representation in the Parliament, whereas the slick professionals from the KLD did not cross the 5 percent threshold needed to get into the Sejm. Apart from other reasons, the failure of professional image-making at that particular time can be accounted for by the fact that the Poles were not yet accustomed to advertising. Both the approval ratings for television commercials and the economic situation of the country were much worse than they are now. In short, the KLD's slick spots were an eyesore to all those suffering from economic hardships.

Two years later, the situation was different. Most advertising experts agree that Aleksander Kwaśniewski's 1995 presidential campaign was the first truly professional attempt at projecting a carefully packaged image of a candidate on the television screen in the history of Polish democracy. Observing the rules of political correctness during his speeches, interviews, TV programs and two televised debates, he not only expressed the least objectionable opinions possible, but he also looked good. Professional image-makers, including the famous Frenchman Jacques Sequela, took care of his clothes, contact lenses, weight and even the gestures and facial expressions he made during the two debates. This is not to say that the candidate himself was of no significance at all, but the skillful image-

making resulted in influencing the choice of a considerable number of voters. With the narrow margin of votes by which the President was elected, it ultimately made a difference. Given the fact that Kwaśniewski actually won the campaign of 1995 even though he was expected to get no more than a third of the vote helps explain why the presidential campaign of 1995 is considered the first really professional *and* successful attempt at political campaigning Western/American-style.

During the first all-important television debate between Kwaśniewski and Wałęsa, the image was that of a tanned, handsome, relaxed young man whose charming smile and soothing voice contrasted favorably with his opponent's angry words, old looks and nervous gestures. As it is often the case on TV, the eye won with ear for the viewers' attention. Most participants of the focus groups conducted before and after the two debates focused on the visual and emotional rather than verbal or rational aspects of both candidates' appearances (Pankowski, 1995).

Kwaśniewski made history in Poland with his television campaign very much like John Kennedy did in America during his famous 1960 debate with Nixon after which the radio and TV audiences differed in their opinions as to who was the winner. Polish right-wing politicians, at least some of them, learned their lesson and the 1997 parliamentary campaign was clear evidence that the peripheral strategy of persuasion had become an inseparable part of political campaigning in Poland.

In 1997, it was the two most popular post-Solidarity parties, the AWS (Akcja Wyborcza Solidarność) and the UW (Unia Wolności), that were most consistent, professional and successful in employing the lighter, more entertainment-focused version of television campaigning. The voters were flooded with pictures of the party leaders on a blue background

or surrounded by cheerful supporters holding balloons and smiling optimistically. On the air, celebrities who were not experts on economy, politics or law, namely pop singers, actors, and sportsmen endorsed both parties. Public utterances and stances on issues were highly limited; instead the voters got images projecting pure bliss, prosperity, and unity. Moreover, they were aided by pop songs. The leader of the AWS - Marian Krzaklewski - went as far as to sing a rock hit on stage with a popular Polish band. To lend authenticity to the event and make it look like an unstaged documentary, the scene was filmed with a hand-held camera in black and white. The scene was broadcast regularly and its total air time was much longer than the leader's all-verbal appearances altogether. Although good-looking, Krzaklewski was a highly controversial character who was particularly good at turning voters off with his radical statements, pompous gestures, and facial expressions. In order to limit the above-mentioned negative impact, he was used in the party's political propaganda as a product, a face, an image. Having maximally limited the amount of his verbal behavior on TV, the AWS's media consultants used Krzaklewski during the last period of the campaign as an attractive billboard face with a smile that was more sunny than his usual grin. The 30-second spot that always started the AWS's electoral program had been prepared by the O-Kay ad agency which had extensive experience in producing TV ads for commercial products. The agency's director, Jerzy Orłowski says that "working for the AWS was very much like doing a Coca cola spot."⁵

The UW also hired a professional marketing agency and had a costly television campaign which aspired to change the party's image. Perceived by many as a slow and ineffective circle of respectable society ladies and college professors, the image earned by the party's endless inner intellectual disputes and its former leader whose slow manner of

speaking made him a most non-media personality⁶, the party changed its leader and built the campaign around him. Having done away with his academic new-speak, the UW's new-found first violin Leszek Balcerowicz learned to speak simply about the economy and mastered a reassuring and radiant smile which was extensively used throughout the campaign. The otherwise respectable party members like Hanna Suchocka and Tadeusz Mazowiecki were depicted in TV spots yelling at an open air rally. All these changes were pointed at contradicting the party's stereotype and proved to be skillful enough to work.

Other parties also resorted to a more visually-oriented and "voter-friendly" campaigning, but due to lack of skill, funds and consistency, it was not fully successful. A supporter of capital punishment, the UPR (Unia Polityki Realnej) tried to influence voters by appealing to the strongest emotion, i.e. fear. In prime time, the audience saw a long and brutal scene from Kieślowski's "Short Film about Killing" in which a mindless teenager strangles and repeatedly hits a taxi driver over the head with a stone. Another party, the UP, showed a group of young marching right-wing radicals that could easily be associated with the Nazis. In both cases, the parties' consultants must have known of the notorious "Willie Horton" spot. This time, however, the strategy was not flushed with success. One way or another, the tendency toward a more entertainment-focused and image-based political campaigning in unpaid electoral blocks on public television is an indisputable phenomenon.

What is Americanization of Political Campaigning?

It is believed that the notion of the Americanization of political campaigning is linked to the following political communication issues and phenomena:

- the role of TV among various campaign channels,
(In Poland, TV became the most important election communication channel but all candidates use face-to-face communication, public meetings and recently social media as well)
- the rise of candidate-centered campaigns,
(the role of political structures is more important than in the U.S., but increasingly campaigns are built around single candidates as opposed to social movements, organizations, etc.)
- substance and presidential character in TV spots,
(as my content analyses reveal, Polish spots do not contain any more substance than American ones despite a longer format)
- application of the marketing approach to political campaigning,
(all candidates who can afford to have well-structured marketing efforts involving the professional formation of the message, identifying a target audience, measuring effects, do)
- the rise of single-issue campaigning,
(increasingly, campaigns revolve around one to three issues)
- the importance of money,
(due to the free-time allocation system, money is not as important as it is in the U.S., but the most successful candidates happen to be the ones with most money and organizational resources)
- the rise of political consultants,
(on the increase)

- the decline of political parties (still strong, although with few formal members),
- the media's preoccupation with the horse-race aspect of the campaign, (very much so)
- the degree of media competition, (media competition on the increase, but the public broadcaster still most influential politically)
- the position of the public broadcaster. (as in most European countries, the position of the public broadcaster definitely stronger than in the U.S.)

Political Communication System Differences

In the United States, political advertising is confined to commercial TV and radio stations. Candidates are free to buy an unlimited amount of airtime on any channel or network. Money is the only constraint. As in most countries that allow free purchase of time, spots tend to be short (30-60 seconds) and reminiscent of product ads. There is no constraint on content.

Even though Poland allows free purchase of time, most candidates do not jump at the opportunity. In 1995, only four minor candidates used paid ads: Waldemar Pawlak, Hanna Gronkiewicz-Waltz, Janusz Korwin-Mikke, Leszek Bubel (Dziemodok, 1998). There are three conceivable reasons for that situation. Firstly, airtime is costly. Secondly, the airtime made available to candidates free of charge is plentiful. Thirdly and most importantly, politicians are afraid of being accused by opponents of wasting money. In the 20th century,

campaigns started combining free-time messages with paid old media spots as well as the new, social media which are cheap and more popular with young voters (see the following studies).

Thus, all candidates still make use of airtime provided free of charge by public television. The number of spots is limited and their length is determined by the number of candidates running for office in a given year. The more candidates/parties the shorter the time slots. That is because public television provides airtime in one-hour blocks broadcast five days a week during the last 3-4 weeks before Election Day.

There are no specific restrictions on advertising content, but ads are approved by the Election Commission prior to broadcasting. Occasionally, election broadcasts have been stopped from airing, e.g. during the 1995 presidential contest, part of Leszek Bubel's programming was censored on grounds of anti-Semitism.

The following tables summarize the differences between American and Polish political broadcasting systems.

Table 1. Differences between Polish and U.S. political communication systems

CATEGORY	UNITED STATES	POLAND
Sponsorship of Spots	Candidate	Candidate's Electoral Committee
Electoral Procedure in case of President	Elected through Electoral College to a four-year term	Elected by popular vote to a five-year term
Where Spots Are Broadcast	Private TV	Public TV + Private TV
Can airtime be bought?	Yes! (no restrictions)	Yes (with restrictions)

Is there free & guaranteed air-time for all candidates?	No	Yes: equal amount
Number and Length of Political Broadcasts	Unlimited, Any length; usually 30/60 sec.	Limited, 3,5/5 min. (Pub.) Unlimited, MC 30 sec. (Private TV)
Restrictions on Content	None	Must not violate the law

The next chapters look at particular recent case studies from both Poland and the US, analyzing candidate image, use of social media and tabloid press.

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