

The Role of Non-Traditional News Sources in the 1992 Presidential
Campaign

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I. INTRODUCTION

Sig Mickelson's hopes for television were dead in the water after the 1988 presidential campaign. Nearly four decades earlier, when Mickelson helped direct network television's first large-scale coverage of presidential politics, he envisioned that the powerful new communication medium "would open up the electoral system, encourage candidates to be more candid with voters, increase the turnout at the polls, and create a more responsive democracy." Nine presidential campaigns later, however, Mickelson admitted that his dream had "collapsed" and that television, instead of facilitating democracy, had contributed to the debasement of presidential campaigns.¹

"The dream on election night 1952 was one of better candidates, a more informed electorate, wiser decisions, all at less cost and taking less time," Mickelson wrote in 1989. "Television was the prime force that would make it all possible. The reality is like the cold gray dawn after a binge."²

But Mickelson may have surrendered the fight one campaign too soon. In assessing television's role in the three-way presidential contest between George Bush, Bill Clinton and Ross Perot, there is evidence that Mickelson's dream finally may be coming true. In 1992 much of the country gathered around television sets and tuned out the most traditional American event, baseball's World Series, in favor of substantive issue discussions. The Sunday Oct. 11 presidential debate, the first of three similar happenings, drew about 87 million viewers; CBS' World Series coverage that aired opposite the debate attracted just 11 million viewers.

¹Sig Mickelson, From Whistle Stop To Sound Bite, (New York: Praeger, 1989), 167.

²Mickelson, 19.

By comparison, the Bush-Dukakis debates in 1988 drew audiences of about 54 million viewers.³

Television in 1992 came closer than ever to accomplishing several of Mickelson's objectives. In place of three-second sound bites, television delivered to voters 30-minute infomercials on the federal deficit. In place of blow-dried anchor men reading scripted questions, television brought voters town meetings that gave average Joes and Janes a chance to go one-on-one with presidential contenders. The two major-party candidates were unable to monopolize the issue agenda because television provided Perot's third-party candidacy the forum it needed to ridicule the status quo.

Robin Toner of The New York Times wrote that "voters provided a merciless reality check on the candidates" and that "the process of campaigning itself was transformed, turning talk shows into primaries, allowing a Ross Perot to burst full blown on the scene while the political professionals were off analyzing caucus returns."⁴ In the end, about 55 percent of the nation's eligible voters - more than 100 million people - cast ballots. The showing reversed a 32-year trend of declining turnout.

II. TALK SHOWS, LATE NIGHT AND MTV

The surprise of 1992 was that television performed in a manner no one could have imagined in 1952. Non-traditional sources of news and public affairs, including a growing number of cable offerings, were thrust to the forefront of the presidential campaign. Perot's historic run for the presidency began publicly with a February 1992 declaration on CNN's

³ABC's "Nightline," 14 October 1992.

⁴Robin Toner, "Public Ordered Meaty Campaign," (New York Times News Service) Raleigh (N.C.) News & Observer, 3 November 1992, 2(A).

“Larry King Live” that he would agree to run for president if volunteers put him on the ballot in all 50 states. Perot returned for many more appearances, and King’s cable television show became one of the most popular stops on the presidential campaign trail. There was even talk of staging a presidential debate on King’s show. That never materialized, but in the final week of the campaign, Perot, Clinton and Bush did appear separately on King’s program.

Candidates used talk shows to bypass traditional media filters and speak directly to voters, often on a personal level. In an Aug. 26 appearance on The Nashville Network’s nightly variety show, “Nashville Now,” Bill and Hillary Clinton and Al and Tipper Gore chatted with the show’s host, and Bill obliged a request and led the studio audience in a hog-calling: “Whooo, Pig! Sooie!” - the official battle cry of the Arkansas Razorbacks. During Bush’s Sept. 29 appearance on “Nashville Now,” he mimicked country music singer and pork pitchman Jimmy Dean hawking sausage on a stick covered in pancake.⁵

Phil Donahue’s syndicated television program organized a key Clinton-Jerry Brown debate at a time when the former California governor was challenging Clinton in the primary. While the networks’ morning news shows usually bounce from topic to topic every few minutes, in 1992 the morning programs handed over hours of free time to Perot and Clinton. The candidates sat on the network sofas and answered questions from callers around the country. Bush, at first reluctant to appear on the morning news shows, eventually held a question-and-answer session at the White House for CBS’ “This Morning.” Sometimes candidates - or their

⁵Judy Keen, “Bush dons demeanor of landslide winner,” USA Today, 1 October 1992, 12(A). Spelling of the hog-call slang taken from the Arkansas Handbook.

spouses - even called the talk shows. Clinton phoned in to speak with New York radio personality Don Imus, who had been lampooning Clinton in his morning show, and Tipper Gore phoned in Larry King's show to speak with her husband when he was a guest.

Clinton helped resurrect his battered campaign in June 1992 by taking advantage of every free media opportunity he could get, including an appearance on Arsenio Hall's late-night show where he played "Heartbreak Hotel" on his saxophone. Once off the bandstand and on the sofa, Clinton chatted with Hall about more serious political issues, but most nights Hall and his late-night comic compatriots, David Letterman and Jay Leno, bypassed substantive topics for searing humor. The three late-night hosts set the campaign's cynicism agenda by delivering nightly attacks on Bush, Clinton, Perot and American politics in general.

One newspaper dubbed the late-night trio "the insomniac's McLaughlin Group,"⁶ and their jokes found their way into the daytime reading of the political establishment. The Media Monitor, a publication of the Washington-based Center for Media and Public Affairs, kept track of the most common late-night targets and published a selection of the jokes. Its analysis of the summer 1992 programs revealed that there were 213 jokes aimed at Bush, 137 at Vice President Dan Quayle and 130 at Bill Clinton.⁷ Also, The Hotline, a daily Washington, D.C., political newsletter, regularly published a "TV Monitor" feature recounting the best of the late-night jokes, as well as the full text of the previous night's Top 10 list from Letterman's show.

⁶Drew Juber, "Open Season on Bush," The Atlanta Journal and Constitution, 13 August 1992, 7(D).

⁷"Campaign Comedy," The Media Monitor 6 (August/September 1992): 6

Hall, Letterman and Leno held a unique niche in the campaign because they focused on highly volatile and personal topics that institutional print and electronic media generally avoided, such as accusations that Bush once had an affair while in Switzerland on government business. Leno said, "Remember Bush claiming a hotel room as his personal residence - makes a lot more sense now, doesn't it?" Hall noted news reports of the liaison and said of Bush: "I guess he really is an expert in foreign affairs." Letterman listed the "Top 10 Perks of Dating the President" - No. 7: Special pass that allows you to hunt spotted owl. - and said that while Bush was "having his alleged affair in Switzerland in 1984, Barbara Bush was in a Motel 6 in Lubbock with Willie Nelson."⁸

When Hall, who had not invited Bush on his show, learned that the president announced that he would consider appearing on any talk show except "Arsenio," Hall delivered his most irreverent broadside: "Excuse me, George Herbert irregular-heart-beating, read-by-line-lipping, slipping-in-the-polls, do-nothing, deficit-raising, make-less-money-than-Millie-the-White-House-dog-last-year, Quayle-loving, sushi-puking Bush! I don't remember inviting your ass on my show."⁹

Such radical political messages hardly fit into traditional media studies, but Hall, Leno and Letterman should not be ignored by researchers investigating the relationships between television viewing and political knowledge, participation and attitudes. Indeed, one college student keeping a journal on the political information he took in each day cited specific jokes from a Letterman show, explaining that "I thought David

⁸From the political newsletter The Hotline, 14 August 1992 and 17 August 1992, and Jubera, "Open Season on Bush."

⁹"Inside Politics," The Seattle Times, 4 August 1992, 1(B).

Letterman's Top 10 list was hysterical and very appropriate at this time when the political air is so stagnant and serious with people totally consumed with election polls and speeches." Another college student cited comedy sketches on "Saturday Night Live" as a key source of political information, saying the stereotypes emphasized in the comedic skits "reveal a lot about how America sees each candidate."¹⁰

Perhaps the MTV network worked harder than any other non-traditional news source to thrust public affairs information into the lives of young voters. MTV, the video music channel, landed interviews with all three presidential candidates between Labor Day and Nov. 3, while staid network reporters such as Ted Koppel landed none. Bush's decision to agree to an interview with MTV's Tabitha Soren on the eve of the election marked a 180-degree turnaround. Back in June, when a group of oil factory workers in California asked Bush why he had not followed the lead of Clinton and Perot and appeared on various talk shows, Bush responded by saying: "I think in a campaign year, you've got to draw the line someplace . . . I don't want to turn this thing into a call-in show. I'm not going to be out there being a teeny bopper. At 68, I just can't do it." However, after Clinton and Gore participated in MTV forums and gained valuable access to young voters, Bush apparently realized that, as the Business Week speculated in September, MTV is on the verge of becoming "the Cable News Network for the Nintendo generation."¹¹

But young voters were not willing to forgive Bush for brushing them aside in June. Several college students keeping journals cited MTV as a key

¹⁰Research in progress, Anne White, Ph.D. candidate, School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

¹¹"Now on MTV, Madonna, Nirvana - And Newt Gingrich," Mark Landler, Business Week, Sept. 21, 1992, p. 62.

source of political information. One noted that Bush, in his interview with Tabitha Soren, was "rude and interruptive." Another said: "I resented being called a 'teenybopper,' and I resented the fact that (Bush) implied that the voice of my generation would not make a difference. It really upset me a lot, and it definitely made me decide NOT to vote for Bush. He does NOT want to speak to me. He does not want to hear what I have to say. I thought the President was supposed to listen to the people that elected him. It's clear he only listens to the people that pay him."¹²

The notion of a dramatic change in the political relevance of talk shows, late-night comedy shows and MTV is supported by the results of Vu/Text searches, as presented in Tables 1 through 4. During the entire year of 1988, when Bush soundly defeated Democrat Michael Dukakis for the presidency, there were few news stories in which MTV or Larry King or David Letterman were mentioned in the same paragraph as Bush or Dukakis. Arsenio Hall was not even a TV star in 1988 and was thoroughly absent from the political coverage.

By contrast, through roughly 11 months of 1992 there were dozens of news stories in the nation's largest newspapers in which MTV, King, Letterman and Hall were discussed in the same paragraph as Bush or Clinton. This evidence is consistent with a Freedom Forum study of the most commonly mentioned political pundits. In 1988, the 10 pundits cited most often in newspapers, magazines and television newscasts were political analysts, of one sort or another, by trade. Through the first half of 1992, however, the Freedom Forum's list of the top 10 pundits had a

¹²Research in progress, Anne White, Ph.D. candidate, School of Journalism and Mass Communication, University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill.

different look. Larry King ranked second, Arsenio Hall fifth and Phil Donahue tenth.¹³

-insert Tables 1, 2, 3 and 4 about here-

Tables 1 through 4 yield persuasive evidence to support the theory that non-traditional news sources did play a greater role in the 1992 presidential election.¹⁴ Though the non-traditional news sources were mentioned in various contexts., in all instances the MTV, Larry King, David Letterman and Arsenio Hall were elevated to the level of presidential campaign coverage in 1992.

III. RESEARCH QUESTIONS

By election day, the impact of non-traditional news sources had become a primary story line in the coverage of the campaign. The Boston Globe declared that 1992 marked the "political ascendance of the New Media - the year Dan Rather was replaced by Phil Donahue, The New York Times by Spy magazine and 'Meet the Press' by MTV."¹⁵ TV Guide explained that the candidates "swam around, through and over the

¹³John Leo, "Entertaining the Voters," U.S. News & World Report, 9 November 1992, 28.

¹⁴The online Vu/Text search counted the number of articles that mentioned "Bush" or "Clinton" in 1992 (for 1988, the search terms were "Bush" or "Dukakis") in the same paragraph with MTV, Larry King, Arsenio and Letterman. Measures for 1988 span the entire calendar year. Measures for 1992 span Jan. 1, 1992 through Nov. 20 of that year.

¹⁵Renee Loth, "The Campaign: Lights, Camera, Elective Office," The Boston Globe, 18 October 1992. 76.

TABLES

Table 1. For 1992, the number of newspaper stories in which "MTV" was mentioned in the same paragraph as "Bush" or "Clinton.". The 1988 tally is a count of the number of stories in which "MTV" was mentioned in the same paragraph as "Bush" or "Dukakis."

NEWSPAPER	1992 stories	1988 stories
Washington Post	50	1
Los Angeles Times	48	3
Newsday	44	5
USA Today	41	2
Boston Globe	27	3
Miami Herald	27	4
Chicago Tribune	24	0
Detroit Free Press	24	2
Philadelphia Inquirer	20	4
Wichita Eagle	17	1
Charlotte Observer	13	3

Table 2. For 1992, the number of newspaper stories in which "Larry King" was mentioned in the same paragraph as "Bush" or "Clinton.". The 1988 tally is a count of the number of stories in which "Larry King" was mentioned in the same paragraph as "Bush" or "Dukakis."

NEWSPAPER	1992 stories	1988 stories
Washington Post	94	8
Newsday	82	3
Los Angeles Times	67	5
USA Today	59	14
Boston Globe	48	5
Philadelphia Inquirer	45	4
Miami Herald	42	4
Chicago Tribune	36	0
Wichita Eagle	33	2
Detroit Free Press	27	4
Charlotte Observer	23	1

Table 3. For 1992, the number of newspaper stories in which "David Letterman" was mentioned in the same paragraph as "Bush" or "Clinton.". The 1988 tally is a count of the number of stories in which "David Letterman" was mentioned in the same paragraph as "Bush" or "Dukakis."

NEWSPAPER	1992 stories	1988 stories
Newsday	20	1
USA Today	11	6
Washington Post	9	0
Los Angeles Times	8	3
Boston Globe	8	1
Chicago Tribune	7	1
Detroit Free Press	7	4
Philadelphia Inquirer	7	6
Charlotte Observer	7	4
Wichita Eagle	5	2
Miami Herald	2	6

Table 4. For 1992, the number of newspaper stories in which "Arsenio Hall" was mentioned in the same paragraph as "Bush" or "Clinton.". The 1988 tally is a count of the number of stories in which "Arsenio Hall" was mentioned in the same paragraph as "Bush" or "Dukakis." (Note: Arsenio Hall's syndicated television show began after 1988.)

NEWSPAPER	1992 stories	1988 stories
Newsday	43	0
USA Today	37	0
Los Angeles Times	37	0
Washington Post	35	0
Boston Globe	28	0
Chicago Tribune	23	0
Wichita Eagle	23	0
Miami Herald	20	0
Detroit Free Press	19	0
Philadelphia Inquirer	14	0
Charlotte Observer	14	0

mainstream media” and predicted that “never again will a presidential campaign be run exclusively as of old.”¹⁶

Audience-centered communication models best address the changes that occurred in 1992 in the relationships between individuals and news and information media. Previous work in uses and gratifications theory provides a key distinction: it is important in this case not to focus solely on “what the media do with people” but to consider “what people do with the media,”¹⁷ Specifically, it is important to consider the motivations and needs of individuals or groups of individuals when examining patterns of media use. Because non-traditional sources of news information such as call-in talk shows are interactive, the needs of individuals are met more fully. Consumers of these media have greater control over what information they receive.

The information-seeking model is also useful because it attempts to address the complex choices involved in media usage processes. It relies heavily on the notion “that an individual has a tendency to avoid information incongruent with his image of reality because it is felt as too threatening.”¹⁸ This may be an important element in the apparent success of MTV, and to a certain extent late-night comedy shows, in reaching younger voters. These sources present information in a manner that is consistent with the image of reality held by many younger individuals, thus this information is accepted and believed.

¹⁶Barry Golson and Peter Ross Range, “Wotta Year,” TV Guide, 7-13 November 1992, 16.

¹⁷Denis McQuail and Sven Windahl, Communication Models For the Study of Mass Communication, (Essex, England: Longman House, 1989), 75.

¹⁸McQuail and Windahl, 84.

The uses and effects model is perhaps the most appropriate, for it blends aspects of uses and gratifications theory with effects theory and takes into account various types of outcomes. The analysis of the role of non-traditional news sources in the 1992 presidential campaign can best be considered in terms of a model in which media content and media use processes are considered to be operating at once, leading to an outcome that is part effect and part consequence. McQuail and Windahl call this "consequence effects."¹⁹ The outcome can be attributed, in part, to media content that fosters learning, which is defined as the effect portion of the result. Also, the outcome is caused, in part, by the particular ways in which media are used and not used, which is considered the consequence portion of the result. For this study, the uses and effects model is best because it takes into account the specific messages communicated by non-traditional news sources as well as choices, habits and motivations that determine how individuals use non-traditional news sources.

The mountain of evidence drawn from campaign observations and popular press reports does not provide a measure of the impact of non-traditional news sources. But if non-traditional news sources were in fact an important element in the 1992 presidential campaign, then it should be possible to observe the outcomes - either effects or consequences - by measuring the political knowledge, efficacy and voting intentions of the individuals who paid attention to these media.

Research Question 1. Did individuals who paid more attention to non-traditional news sources such as MTV, talk shows and late-night comedy

¹⁹McQuail and Windahl, 82.

shows differ from those who paid less attention on questions of political knowledge, political efficacy and voting intentions.

IV. METHOD

The answers were sought in analysis of 1992 Carolina Poll data. In the survey, a statewide telephone poll of 841 North Carolina adults conducted Oct. 26 - 29, 1992, respondents were asked how much attention they paid to "voting and election discussions" on three specific types of non-traditional news sources: the MTV network; talk shows such as "Larry King Live," "Donahue" and "Rush Limbaugh"; and late night comedy shows such as "Arsenio," "The Tonight Show With Jay Leno" and "Late Night With David Letterman."

The three measures of non-traditional news sources were not combined into a single scale measure because of low correlations. Attention paid to MTV and late-night shows correlated at .24; attention paid to MTV and talk shows correlated at .14; attention paid to late-night comedy shows and talk shows correlated at .24. The three types of non-traditional news sources targeted different audiences and delivered different content, thus combining them into a single scale could suppress effects unique to each specific genre.

The analysis compared differences between two key groups. Respondents who said they paid "no attention" or "only a little attention" to discussions of voting and elections on the non-traditional news sources were placed in the low attention group. The respondents who said they paid "some attention" or "a lot of attention" to discussions of voting and elections on the non-traditional news sources were placed in the high attention group. In addition, respondents were grouped according to their

newspaper reading habits to provide a control measure of usage of a traditional news source. Those who reported reading a newspaper zero through five days out of the last seven (49.7 percent) were grouped together in the low readership category. Those who reported reading six or seven days (50.3 percent) were grouped together in the high readership category. The descriptive statistics are presented in Table 5.

-insert Table 5 about here-

The analysis compared mean scores on questions of political knowledge, political efficacy and voting intentions.²⁰ Two-tailed t-tests were carried out to test for significance at the .05 level.

The political knowledge variable was a composite measure of four questions in which respondents were read a specific policy position and asked to name the presidential candidate - Bush, Clinton or Perot - who supported that position. Respondents received one point for each correct answer; possible scores on the combined knowledge variable ranged from zero to four. The analysis employed regression to control for the education level of the respondents and used the residual scores in the analysis. The overall mean score on the knowledge variable, 2.461 (standard deviation = 1.219), was added to the residual scores to return the variable to a scale that had intuitive meaning when considered in terms of the original four-point scale. Adding the constant did not affect the outcome of the analysis.

The political efficacy variable was based on a measure in which respondents were asked whether they agreed or disagreed with the

²⁰Carolina Poll questions on which the analysis is based are presented in full in an appendix.

Table 5. Percentage of respondents in the high and low categories on newspaper readership and attention paid to discussions of voting and elections on MTV, talk shows and late-night shows.

	Percentage	N =
Low Newspaper Usage	49.7	n=415
High Newspaper Usage	50.3	n=421
Low Attention to MTV	79.1	n=656
High Attention to MTV	20.9	n=173
Low Attention to Talk Shows	56.7	n=477
High Attention to Talk Shows	43.2	n=363
Low Attention to Late Shows	84.8	n=711
High Attention to Late Shows	15.2	n=128

statement: "People like me don't have any say about what the government does." The efficacy variable was measured on a four-point scale: 1 = strongly agree, 2 = agree, 3 = disagree and 4 = strongly disagree. The overall mean was 2.583 (standard deviation = .904). A higher mean score indicated a greater degree of disagreement and a higher efficacy score. The efficacy scores were compared for individuals who paid high and low amounts of attention to discussions of voting and elections on non-traditional news sources.

The voting intention variable was drawn from a willingness to vote survey question and also was measured on a four-point scale. Registered voters were asked how "likely is it that you will vote in this year's presidential election." Individuals who said they would "definitely not vote" were coded 1. Those who said they would "probably not vote" were coded 2. Those who said they would "probably vote" were coded 3. Those who said they would "definitely vote" were coded 4. The overall mean was 3.894 (standard deviation = .394). Again, a higher mean score indicated a greater intention to vote. The scores were compared for individuals who paid high and low amounts of attention to discussions of voting and elections on non-traditional news sources.

V. RESULTS

The results presented in table 5 show the mean scores on political knowledge, efficacy and voting intentions for viewers of the MTV network. There were no significant relationships with respect to attention paid to MTV.

Table 6 shows the mean scores on political knowledge, efficacy and voting intentions for viewers of talk shows, and Table 7 shows the same

scores for viewers of late-night talk shows. Each table was divided into high and low newspaper readership groups; the t-tests compared groups who paid low attention and high attention to non-traditional news sources.

-insert Tables 6, 7, and 8 about here-

Table 6 shows that individuals who paid more attention to discussions of voting and elections on talk shows such as "Larry King Live," "Donahue" and "'Rush Limbaugh'" scored significantly higher on the political knowledge scale than the respondents who paid less attention. This held for both the low newspaper readership group and the high newspaper readership group. In fact, low newspaper readers who paid more attention to talk shows knew as much about the policy positions of presidential candidates as high newspaper readers who tuned out talk shows²¹

Also in Table 6, low newspaper readers who paid more attention to discussions of voting and elections on talk shows were significantly more likely to vote than those who paid less attention.

Table 7 shows that high newspaper readers who paid more attention to discussions of voting and elections on late-night comedy shows knew significantly less about the policy positions of presidential candidates than those who paid less attention to talk shows.

VI. CONCLUSIONS

²¹Low newspaper readers who paid a more attention to talk shows had higher raw scores on the political knowledge measure than high newspaper readers who paid little attention to talk shows, but the difference was not significant at the .05 level.

Table 6. Results of 2-tailed t-tests comparing low and high MTV groups on mean scores of political knowledge, efficacy and willingness to vote.

		Low Attention paid to discussions of voting and elections on MTV		High Attention paid to discussions of voting and elections on MTV	
Low Newspaper	Knowledge	n = 332	2.444	n = 70	2.312
	Efficacy	n = 322	2.549	n = 72	2.638
	Vote	n = 259	3.853	n = 58	3.859
High Newspaper	Knowledge	n = 319	2.495	n = 98	2.317
	Efficacy	n = 309	2.611	n = 96	2.552
	Vote	n = 289	3.952	n = 94	3.868
(no significant relationships)					

Table 7. Results of 2-tailed t-tests comparing low and high talk show groups on mean scores of political knowledge, efficacy and willingness to vote.

		Low Attention paid to discussions of voting and elections on talk shows such as Larry King Live, Donahue and Rush Limbaugh		High Attention paid to discussions of voting and elections on talk shows such as Larry King Live, Donahue and Rush Limbaugh	
Low Newspaper	Knowledge *	n = 239	2.315	n = 170	2.580
	Efficacy	n = 232	2.535	n = 167	2.623
	Vote *	n = 176	3.802	n = 145	3.922
High Newspaper	Knowledge *	n = 232	2.353	n = 189	2.586
	Efficacy	n = 225	2.584	n = 184	2.629
	Vote	n = 207	3.925	n = 180	3.941

* significant at $p < .05$

Table 8. Results of 2-tailed t-tests comparing low and high late show groups on mean scores of political knowledge, efficacy and willingness to change.

		Low Attention paid to discussions of voting and elections on late shows such as Arsenio, The Tonight Show and Late Night With David Letterman		High Attention paid to discussions of voting and elections on late shows such as Arsenio, The Tonight Show and Late Night With David Letterman	
Low Newspaper	Knowledge	n = 339	2.444	n = 69	2.308
	Efficacy	n = 330	2.583	n = 68	2.554
	Vote	n = 267	3.843	n = 54	3.923
High Newspaper	Knowledge *	n = 362	2.510	n = 59	2.170
	Efficacy	n = 354	2.632	n = 55	2.466
	Vote	n = 337	3.936	n = 50	3.902

* significant at $p < .05$

Considering the hope of Mickelson and many others that television could lead to a more active and informed electorate, the contribution of talk shows to political knowledge and voter behavior is the most important finding. Controlling for education, attention paid to talk shows increased political knowledge for survey respondents in both the high and low newspaper readership groups. Also, low newspapers readers who paid more attention to talk shows were more likely to say they intended to vote.

The talk show analysis also produced an unexpected revelation: In 1992, people who devoted less time to their daily newspaper and paid more attention to discussions of voting and elections on talk shows such as "Larry King Live", "Donahue" and "Rush Limbaugh" knew as much about the issue positions of presidential candidates as their neighbors who buried themselves in their newspapers and turned off their television sets. This runs counter to the conventional wisdom that newspapers are best at informing readers about public affairs.

The finding illustrates how dramatically the media marketplace has changed in recent years. Daily newspaper readership has continued to decline, but the percentage of U.S. television households that subscribe to cable services has risen rapidly, from 18 percent in 1980 to 61 percent in 1992. In 1980, the typical U.S. television household received an average of 10.2 channels. By 1991, it was 32.5 channels and rising.²²

As television has become more deeply ingrained in the American lifestyle, the public has become more adept at using the medium and more comfortable with the structure of certain types of television messages. As

²²Ed Papazian, ed., TV Dimensions '92, (New York: Media Dynamics Inc., 1992), 14.

the public's television usage skills have improved, the content of particular types of television programming has had a greater impact. In short, talk shows have become more efficient at communicating public affairs information to viewers. This finding is supported by the uses and effects model in which usage of media and media content work simultaneously to produce consequences and effects, or "consequences." In the same way, late-night comedy shows, at least for high newspaper readers, proved to be an extraordinarily inefficient way of informing viewers.

That talk shows such as "Larry King Live," "Donahue" and "Rush Limbaugh" educated viewers as efficiently as newspapers educated readers may be seen as a "consequence" of two developments: the desire of voters to watch compelling television shows and the ability of talk shows to deliver information in a digestible manner. Talk shows, for instance, allow for interactive communication between voters and candidates, with little or no interference by journalists. Talk shows are conversational in structure, as opposed to the inverted-pyramid structure of traditional newspaper stories.²³ Further research may reveal that these techniques assist viewers in processing information. If so, static media such as newspapers may choose to give readers greater opportunities for participatory, interactive experiences, and nightly network news programs may experiment with conversational formats.

If an effective democracy does indeed depend on an informed electorate, and if talk shows have in fact discovered popular and effective methods of communicating information to the public, the non-traditional

²³Current research shows that readers do not prefer the traditional inverted-pyramid style of newswriting. A narrative, story-telling structure is more appealing to readers. See Ways With Words, A Research Report of the Literacy Committee of the American Society of Newspaper Editors, 1993.

news sources will continue to play an increasingly important role in future political campaigns.

APPENDIX

Survey Questions From the Fall 1992 Carolina Poll

Q. Please tell me how you feel about the statement "People like me don't have any say about what the government does." Do you strongly agree, agree, disagree, or strongly disagree with that statement.

1. Strongly Agree
2. Agree
3. Disagree
4. Strongly disagree
9. DK/NA/Refused

Q. How likely is it that you will vote in this year's presidential election: Would you say that you will definitely vote, probably vote, probably not vote, or definitely not vote in the election for president?

1. Definitely not vote
2. Probably not vote
3. Probably vote
4. Definitely vote
9. DK/NA/Refused

Q. We're interested in knowing whether or not the candidates are doing a good job of telling voters what they stand for. Which candidate, George Bush, Bill Clinton or Ross Perot, is more likely to favor the following statements? The first statement is:

A Constitutional Amendment should ban abortions except in cases where a mother's life is in danger. Who is more likely to favor that statement: George Bush, Bill Clinton or Ross Perot?

1. Bush
2. Clinton
3. Perot
4. None of them
5. All three
9. DK/No answer

The nation should have universal health care paid for by employers. Who is more likely to favor that statement: George Bush, Bill Clinton or Ross Perot?

1. Bush
2. Clinton
3. Perot
4. None of them
5. All three
9. DK/No answer

The government should pay college costs for young people who are willing to repay the debt with public service. Who is more likely to favor that statement: George Bush, Bill Clinton or Ross Perot?

1. Bush
2. Clinton
3. Perot
4. None of them
5. All three
9. DK/No answer

The federal budget deficit should be reduced by imposing a 50 cents per gallon increase in the gasoline tax over five years. Who is more likely to favor that statement: George Bush, Bill Clinton or Ross Perot?

1. Bush
2. Clinton
3. Perot
4. None of them
5. All three
9. DK/No answer

Q. Lots of different kinds of TV programs have discussed voting and elections this year. Please tell me how much attention you have paid to political discussions on these types of programs:

What about voting and election discussions on MTV? Have you paid a lot of attention, some attention, only a little attention, or no attention at all?

1. A lot of attention
2. Some attention
3. Only a little attention
4. No attention at all
9. DK/NA

What about talk shows, like Donahue, Larry King Live or Rush Limbaugh? How much attention have you paid to voting and election discussions on those programs? A lot of attention, some attention, only a little attention, or no attention at all?

1. A lot of attention
2. Some attention
3. Only a little attention
4. No attention at all
9. DK/NA

How much attention have you paid to voting and election discussions on late-night talk shows, like Arsenio, The Tonight Show with Jay Leno or David Letterman? A lot of attention, some attention, only a little attention, or no attention at all?

1. A lot of attention
2. Some attention
3. Only a little attention
4. No attention at all
9. DK/NA