

The Ethics of Political Advertising

Living in the United States, it is safe to assume that you are constantly wading in an ocean of political advertisements which often populates the public sphere via mediums of print, radio, television, and even social media. While political advertising can be a useful tool to reach the public in order to inform them on political topics and candidates, these types of advertisements are often saturated in controversy.

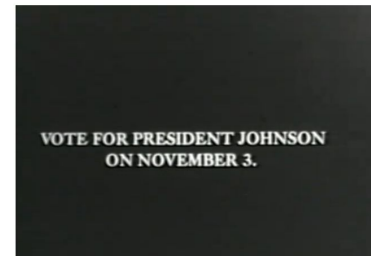
It is essential to understand that advertising as a whole usually uses the audience's psychology to make the advertisement more appealing. For example, using color and shape theory as well as rhetorical appeals such as logos (logic), ethos (ethics), and pathos (emotion) can determine the effectiveness of an advertisement towards a particular audience. While many people find this practice normalized in the field of Communications Media, other people consider using these techniques to be manipulative and ethically wrong.

In terms of politics, on one hand there is positive political campaigning, which uses several different techniques in order to make a particular candidate look the best among the rest. Most of these techniques include boosting the candidates ethical and emotional appeal. Examples of these include: footage of the candidate shaking hands with civilians, people of high status endorsing said candidate, and emphasizing the services the candidate has done order to help support their community.

On the other hand, negative campaigning focuses on making the competition look bad by attempting to ruin their public image. A specific example of this type of campaigning is the infamous *Daisy Girl* commercial (shots provided) that was created with intent to persuade viewers to harbor distaste for Johnson's opposition, Barry Goldwater. More often than not, these types of campaigns purposefully leave information out, or even twist the truth, in order to persuade the audience to think a particular way about the opposition.



President Johnson's voiceover: "We must either love each other or we must die!"



Discussion Questions

1. Do you feel political advertisements have a lot in common with standard commercial advertising? If not, how are they different?
2. Would you consider using psychology and rhetoric in advertising as a form of manipulation? Why or why not?
3. If so, do you consider it ethical to use these tactics in general advertising? Does this opinion change in terms of political advertising? Why or why not?
4. Does the type of campaign impact how you feel about a candidate? For example, would you consider a candidate that uses positive campaigning more ethically sound than one that uses negative campaigning?
5. Has a political advertisement impacted your vote? If so, what types of tactics were used and how do you feel these techniques impacted your vote?

Mini-Prompt

1. PACs and SuperPACs

One of the many things needed for a campaign is financial support. The two more popular types of support come in the forms of PACs and SuperPACs. PACs, also known as Political Action Committees, are groups organized to raise money to either elect or defeat a particular candidate. The difference between a PAC and SuperPAC is how each of them are able to contribute to a campaign and how much money they can contribute. On one hand, a PAC can contribute up to \$5,000 to a candidate per election and \$15,000 to a national party per year. On the other hand, SuperPACs cannot contribute directly to or exchange moneys directly with a politician or political party. However, SuperPACs can spend money independently to campaign for or against politicians and political parties. As a result, they are not legally considered a Political Action Committee, and therefore have their own set of rule and essentially no spending limitations.

Questions:

- What kind of influence do SuperPACs have in our country's politics and how do they influence fairness and equality in our campaigns?
- How do you feel PACs may be silencing the voice of the individual campaign supporter/donator?
- Do you feel that the unlimited spending on of SuperPACs make the donations of PACs and the individual donor irrelevant? Why or why not?
- Should SuperPACs have similar rules and spending limitations to those of smaller PACs? Are they exempt from these regulations since they are not endorsing a specific politician or political party? Why or why not?

2. Microtargeting and Data Mining

The goal of microtargeting, also known as "cluster marketing" and "tailored advertising," is to generate support from voters by crafting specific adverts. In other words, these adverts are edited with the intention to appeal to individuals or small groups of people with similar backgrounds or beliefs. The way this information is gathered is through "data mining," a process that tracks someone's personal activities, online and off, in order to know their opinions on a variety of topics. Companies, organization and political parties then can buy and use this gathered information to create messages, products and advertisements that appeal to that specific individual.

Questions:

- In terms of ethics, do you feel as though using microtargeting and data mining in the context of political advertising differs from using these techniques for traditional advertising? How do they differ, how are they similar?
- What ways do you think SuperPACs influence microtargeting and data mining? Would you say that political campaigns with the ability to microtarget individuals have an unfair advantage versus other campaigns? Why or why not?
- Should a campaign be required to inform microtargeted individuals on how their information and preferences were gained and used by the campaign? Why or why not?

This one-sheet was created for the SOPHIA of Worcester County chapter by students in the Communication Law and Ethics course at Fitchburg State University and edited by Dr. J.J. Sylvia IV and Dr. Kyle Moody. Its creation was supported by SOPHIA and the Douglas and Isabelle Crocker Center for Civic Engagement. Students included Lindsey Ogden, Kenneth Howell, Martin Heffler, Skyler Sadow, Edgar Mutebi, Harrison Svihla