

Speech given to the Dallas Chamber of Commerce

THE IMPACT OF THE MEDIA ON ELECTIONS this was what I was asked to speak on...so after some pondering on the subject I decided to re-title my remarks “**THE IMPACT OF THE MEDIA ON ELECTIONS AND VICE/VERSA.**

It has been a long time since I actually did some research for a speech...since I am usually asked for my views on current happenings and also to add humor which is not difficult unless you have been living on another planet during election season. So after thinking about my comments today I decided that this subject deserved more than me just throwing together some observations about the process.

I began to read some books on the subject and determined very quickly that the body politic has had a profound affect on the media and that the media coverage of the political has forever changed the system.

Let me get some disclaimers out of the way quickly.... many of the ideas that I am going to talk about today are my own; many are from two books in particular.... **Amusing Ourselves to Death and The Media and Morality.** I wanted to set this out in the beginning since I have no intention of citing an author's idea every time I steal one. Those ideas that you find very informative, thought provoking or witty are mine.... those that are tedious and longwinded are from one of these books.

At different times in our history, different cities have been the focal point of our political discourse and radiated the American Spirit.

For instance, **Boston was the center of political radicalism that ignited the shot heard around the world.** All Americans, including those living in Virginia became Bostonians at heart.

In the mid-nineteenth century, **New York became the symbol of the melting-pot America as the** wretched refuse from all over the world disembarked at Ellis Island and spread over the land their strange languages and even stranger ways.

In the early twentieth century, **Chicago, the city of big shoulders and heavy winds came to symbolize the industrial energy of America.**

Today, we must look to the city of Las Vegas, Nevada, as a metaphor of our national character and aspiration, its symbol a thirty-foot cardboard picture of a slot machine and a chorus girl.

For Las Vegas is a city entirely devoted to the idea of entertainment, and as such proclaims the spirit of a culture in which all public discourse increasingly takes the form of entertainment.

Our politics, religion, news, athletics, education, and commerce have been transformed into adjuncts of show business largely without protest or even much popular notice.

I have been quoted as saying **“POLITICS IS SHOW BUSINESS FOR UGLY PEOPLE”** and the only thing anyone has ever argued with me about is whether you can be ugly today and still win an election.

Now I know you are sitting there thinking, “What in the world does this have to do with the affect of the media on elections?”

It is my sincere belief that if you don't understand how we got where we are and why we are here you will never have a true understanding of the devastating affect it has had on the political debate in this country and the impact it has had on all thoughtful debate about current events and issues that change our world.

Former President Ronald Reagan was a former Hollywood movie actor.

One of his principal challengers in 1984 was once a featured player on television's most glamorous shows of the 1960's that is to say, an astronaut. And in fact a movie has been made about his extraterrestrial adventure.

Former nominee George McGovern hosted the popular “Saturday Night Live” as has Jesse Jackson.

Former President Clinton brought new meaning to Presidential politics by playing his horn on any show that would have him on and of course we have seen a movie, Primary Colors, that were totally about the race for President.

Senator Hillary Clinton has been on “60 Minutes” with her classic “Stand by Your Man” comment.

Former Senator Dole has plugged Viagra on the Tonight Show and in television ads.

And now it is unheard of for a Presidential candidate not to show up on Leno, Oprah, Letterman and MTV. President Bush and Laura, John Kerry and Teresa did interview show with Dr. Phil

MTV, the same show that our parent’s didn’t want us to watch or those of us my age didn’t want our children to watch.

These examples date back to Richard Nixon when he blamed an election on a bad make-up job for a debate. Bush was panned in the first debate for facial expressions and for looking at his watch not for what he said.

Although the constitution makes no mention of it, it would appear that fat people are excluded from running for higher political office. Indeed, we may have finally reached the point where cosmetics have replaced ideology as the field of expertise of which a politician must have competent control.

The politician as celebrity has changed the way we campaign, has changed the way the media covers the races, has changed the way we discuss ideas and probably has made the need for political parties irrevelevant.

America’s journalists, television newscasters, have not missed the point. **MOST SPEND MORE TIME WITH THEIR BLOWDRYERS THAN WITH THEIR SCRIPTS.** And no one writes their own material. With the result that they comprise the most glamorous group of people this side of Las Vegas.

It is almost implausible to imagine that anyone like our twenty-seventh President, the multi-chinned, three hundred pound William Taft, could be put forward as a presidential candidate in today’s world. **THE SHAPE OF A PERSON’S BODY IS LARGELY IRRELEVENT TO THE SHAPE OF HIS IDEAS WHEN HE IS ADDRESSING THE PUPLIC IN WRITING OR ON THE RADIO. BUT IT IS QUITE RELEVANT ON TELEVISION.**

For on television, discourse is conducted largely through visual imagery, which is to say that television gives us a conversation in images, not words.

The emergence of the image-manager in the political arena and the decline of the speechwriter attest to the fact that television demands a different kind of content from other media.

YOU CANNOT DO POLITICAL PHILOSOPHY ON TELEVISION. IT'S FORM WORKS AGAINST THE CONTENT. ASK JOHN KERRY

To give you another example: The information, the content, or, if you will, the “stuff” that makes up what is called “the news of the day” did not exist—could not exist—in a world that lacked the media to give it expression.

I do not mean that fires, wars, murders and infidelity did not happen in places all over the world. I mean that lacking the technology to advertise them, people could not include them in their daily business or lives. Such information would not exist as part of the culture if we were unaware of them.

If the media had not saturated us with footage of O.J. Simpson it would never have become a part of the national culture. Who would have ever cared beyond the fact that he was a football player who was accused of a crime. BIG DEAL.

So not only would the “News of the Day” cease to exist without television but also the incredible influence on the culture would cease to exist.

I remember when I saw the movie “Wag the Dog” and I thought how absurd. Well most of us will agree that since Bill Clinton, 911, the invasion of Iraq and other major news stories that it is not near as implausible as it once seemed.

At the heart of what I am trying to get at is that a relevant, intelligent, thoughtful and rational discourse of issues and political philosophy is dead and will never be resurrected because of the diminished use of the written word and the invention of television.

I would go one step further and suggest that a great media-metaphor shift has taken place in America, with the result that much of our public discourse has become dangerous nonsense.

This speech is a perfect example. If I were writing an article on this subject there is no way I could steal other people's ideas without citing the source. That is to say, the written word endures, the spoken word disappears; and that is why writing is closer to the truth than speaking.

When our primary way to communicate was the printing press discourse was generally coherent, serious, and rational; and now, under television, it has become shriveled and absurd.

Just look at our political ads...fact checks show that all claims on both sides are exaggerated and often just dead wrong. Can you imagine what it must be like to be in a battleground state?

Now let's go back to the whole process becoming one of entertainment. In the "Last Hurrah" the novel about politics in Boston, Mayor Skeffington tries to instruct his young nephew in the realities of political machinery. **POLITICS, HE TELLS HIM, IS THE GREATEST SPECTATOR SPORT IN AMERICA.**

IN 1966, RONALD REAGAN USES A DIFFERENT METAPHOR, "POLITICS IS JUST LIKE SHOW BUSINESS."

Although sports has become a major branch of show business the equating of politics to sports is much more encouraging than show business.

The reason is that sports still strive for excellence and an athlete's ability is hard to fake. Spectators at a sporting event are also well versed on the rules of the game and the meaning of each piece of the action.

There is no way for a batter who strikes out with the bases loaded to argue the spectators into believing that he has done a useful thing for his team.

The difference between hits and strikeouts, touchdowns and fumbles, aces and double faults cannot be blurred.

If politics were like a sporting event, there would be several virtues to attach to its name: clarity, honesty and excellence.

Show business is not entirely without an idea of excellence, but its main business is to please a crowd. If politics is like show business, than the idea is not to pursue excellence, clarity or honesty but to appeal.

The ultimate show for politics is the run for the Presidency.

The selling of a President is an astonishing and degrading thing. In America, the fundamental metaphor for political discourse is the television commercial.

The television commercial is the most peculiar and pervasive form of communication in our country today. An American who has reached the age of forty will have seen well over one million television commercials and has well over another million to see before receiving their first social security check. If you are in a battle ground state you can double that number.

THE TELEVISION COMMERCIAL HAS PROFOUNDLY INFLUENCED AMERICAN HABITS OF THOUGHT. AND HAS DEVASTATED POLITICAL DISCOURSE.

The distance between rationality and advertising is now so wide that it is difficult to remember that there once was a connection between the two. Today, the discussion of issues in a rational, thoughtful way is about as scarce as unattractive people.

The television commercial has become the chief instrument in creating the modern methods of presenting political ideas. It has accomplished this in several ways.

The first is by requiring its form to be used in political campaigns.

Everyone has noticed and worried in varying degrees about how to change this with some going to far as to suggest we should prohibit them. Television stations count on the political ad for a huge share of their income....so this is not likely.

Part of the problem is that the political ad insists on brevity of message with most at 30 seconds. And since it always addresses itself to the viewer it becomes almost like therapy, instant therapy.

The commercial asks us to believe that all our problems are solvable and that they are solvable fast.

Now I think that you can see how we have gotten where we are with the political campaign and the pervasive communication through the political television ad.

Now let's take a look at the press and the way they are covering these races and issues.

First, numerous surveys in recent years have shown that the public has little faith in or respect for the press.

The numbers are not much better for the politician. But we have the ability to scream at and beat up the politician any day of the week. The press has it much easier since they pretty much control the medium for letting them know how we feel.

Part of the problem is that we are very inconsistent with our views versus our actions. We say one thing and than we do another. To suggest that we want a more intelligent debate in our country and than show numbers that Reality TV beats out every other show on the tube this year is insulting. The numbers of people watching the debate is encouraging.

Political discussion, issues, governance all reflects the culture. There seem to be four reasons for the credibility gap between the press and the public.

INSENSITIVITY, ARROGANCE AND GENERALLY BAD BEHAVIOR

INACCURACIES, IMCOMPLETENESS AND GENERALLY POOR PROFESSIONAL PRACTICES

DISAGREEMENT OVER THE KIND OF NEWS USED AND OVER NEWS JUDGMENT

DISAGREEMENTS OVER THE TASK OF THE NEWS IN THE LIVES OF READERS

The common theme with all the criticism of the media is that the concept of freedom has gotten out of hand and that media push all sorts of irresponsible information in the name of freedom of the press.

Added to this is the weakness of the television medium, especially its distorted image of reality, which is called the world through a keyhole.

The image of the press as a helpful institution seems to be dissolving everywhere in the world. Television seems to be responsible for most of it.

Leslie Stahl on the subject has reasoned that journalism has not caught up with the technology. We throw a guy on television that we know nothing about, have done no research on, haven't checked anything out and then something sensational comes out of his mouth. Now we have to cover it, it's news!

Jim Lehrer says he knows of no time in American history in which journalism has been practiced so poorly.

So, what is fair game? In my opinion...

Office seekers who parade their families in print ads and stump speeches, proclaiming family values when their personal standards do not measure up.

Office seekers who loudly pronounce to run government on sound business practices but their own record shows that they have none.

Office seekers who pound their chests about moral values and then we find out they are more like Bill Clinton.

So, in other words...

When private behavior contradicts public statements.

When a position is relevant to an office holder's position that he is seeking and responsibilities.

When there is a clear potential impact on ones ability to the job.

Today our media world consists of talk radio, cable television and the traditional media. Talk radio and cable television have allowed the candidate to bypass the establishment press.

To some this is great news and to others the most devastating news.

It all depends on what side of the issue you are on at the time.

The good news is this.....we have created a more diverse national conversation, even if it is a conversation without depth.