CHAPTER 1

GOING BEYOND THE ANECDOTE: THE C-SPAN ARCHIVES AND UNCOVERING THE RITUAL OF PRESIDENTIAL DEBATES IN THE AGE OF CABLE NEWS

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On January 13, 1992, Janet Brown, the executive director of the Commission on Presidential Debates, led a discussion of the history of presidential debates with students at the Washington Center for Internships and Academic Seminars Symposium on “Campaign ’92: In Pursuit of the Presidency.” The broader symposium offered participants an insider look at multiple facets and pressures surrounding the planning of the upcoming presidential debates. Pointing to polling data and research in political science on the impact of the debates on voter support of a particular presidential candidate, William Burke, the president of the Washington Center argued that “the majority of people make their decision based on these debates” (C-SPAN, 1992a). The symposium that followed brought in campaign strategists, political party leaders, journalists, and organizers of the debates to discuss with students and the broader viewing public the centrality of the event to the democratic process.
And yet, while Janet Brown shared her experiences in organizing the 1988 debates and the negotiations underway for the time, format, and structure of the 1992 debates, she left out a significant change that had taken place. Committed to providing a forum for voter education, the League of Woman Voters had sponsored the 1976, 1980, and 1984 debates but gave up sponsorship in 1988. Angry that by 1988 the Republican and Democratic Parties had formed a new commission to reach agreements on the debate ground rules, format, and moderators without consulting with the League of Women Voters, its president, Nancy M. Neuman, withdrew sponsorship a week before the scheduled vice-presidential debate. Neuman articulated a strong critique of these pre-debate arrangements, as she declared. “We have no intention of becoming an accessory to the hoodwinking of the American public” (Rosenbaum, 1988). Refusing to give its “stamp of approval on a shoddy product,” the League argued that agreement between the two parties to permit only short answers and brief rebuttals without “follow-up questioning” made the debates merely another campaign event that was good for the candidates, but not for informing the electorate about the issues at hand.¹

In the aftermath of the 1988 election, a national “debates over the debates” occurred as the Commission on Presidential Debates moved to institutionalize the event in presidential campaigns. Did presidential debates “hoodwink” or inform the American public? While these campaign events drew high ratings, what role did they play in the democratic process? For more than half a century, political pundits and journalists have grappled with this question. And yet, as the historian David Greenberg (2011) argues, expecting the “debates to be grandly edifying” and then “berating them for not rising to such a lofty standard,” misses the point (p. 138). Rather, Greenberg views the debates as important political rituals which “thicken our commitments to political life” (p. 153). In this capacity, debate anecdotes about presidential success and failure reveal shared assumptions about the presidency and political power. Analyzing their origins and trajectory illuminates how and why certain practices and values have become ingrained in American electoral politics, especially in making on-camera performances a central qualification for holding a public office while also heightening the power of media consultants, pollsters, and “spin doctors” in American political life (Brownell, 2014).

Though beginning in 1960 (remember the famed Lincoln–Douglas debates pitted two would-be senators, not presidents, against one another),
The resurrection of presidential debates in 1976 coincided with the dramatic changes in electoral politics and media structures. Party reforms following the 1968 election moved the nomination process from backrooms of convention halls, where party bosses negotiated with one another, to the primary trail (Brownell, 2014). Though any candidate could make a presidential run and the selection process was opened, successful contenders for the nomination needed media publicity, which frequently involved hiring professional consultants to navigate an increasingly expansive media terrain. At the same time, television programming expanded. Cities were wired for cable television, a fourth broadcast network, FOX, appeared in 1986, and satellite technology increased viewers’ access to coverage of live events. The 1980s brought new cable networks, particularly the Cable-Satellite Public Affairs Network (C-SPAN), which opened to viewers the proceedings of the House of Representatives in 1979 and then the Senate in 1986, offering unprecedented coverage of political events. The Cable News Network (CNN) followed in 1980 to offer 24/7 news coverage and expanded political commentary on the news that had begun to reshape network news programs in the post-Watergate era.

These changes raise an important research question for historians: What was the political and cultural influence of these transformations in the media landscape? In the age of broadcast television, the U.S. Federal Communications Commission (FCC) required news programs to uphold the public interest by covering political contenders and public policy issues in an “equal” and “fair” presentation. Not only did the FCC overturn the Fairness Doctrine in 1987, but also the expansion of cable television and satellite technology held the promise to promote diversity, the free market, and individual choice through the expanding dial. But, did it promote democracy, fashion new opportunities for political professionals to hoodwink the public, or, perhaps, create alternative political rituals?

The C-SPAN Archives’ online Video Library can help answer these questions. The Video Library includes not only presidential speeches, debates, and congressional activities but also analyses of electoral trends and panel discussions on shifting campaign strategies. Even educational events like the Pursuit of the Presidency symposium offer an unparalleled window into how candidates, journalists, consultants, public officials, and the public experienced, discussed, and understood the dramatic changes in the media environment that took shape around them. Whether through viewer call-in programs, televised
conferences of the professional political consultants, or programs about recent political history, the Video Library offers a range of political commentary from this rapidly changing media environment. During these discussions, professional campaign operatives frequently set the parameters and terms of discussion in ways that media scholars have called an “echo chamber”—a cultural environment in which anecdotes of Washington politics “gives a special resonance” to particular political practices to make them more powerful than they in fact are (Schudson, 1995, p. 141). The threat, argues media historian Michael Schudson, is that this self-enclosed world can taint objective journalism and popular history narratives, especially as they circulate on television.

Historians have often neglected television programming in their historical analysis because of both a proclivity to prioritize written documents and the difficulty of accessing video material (Greenberg, 2012). As such, few have examined the origins and the implications of “the echo chamber,” a concept about which media scholars and political scientists frequently reference and theorize (Jamieson & Capella, 2010). Since Neil Postman (2004) famously wrote in 1985 of the dire situation facing American democracy as Americans choose entertainment over information in his landmark book, *Amusing Ourselves to Death*, political analysts and scholars have sought to quantify how the decreasing size of the sound bite, the increase of negative advertisements, and the distraction offered by more programming choices have contributed to voter apathy and disenchantment with the electoral process (Iyengar, 1994; Iyengar & Kinder, 1989; Mann & Ornstein, 2013). Television debates, argues Postman, reflect how Americans consume the image rather than engage with the substance of policy discussions.

And yet, this notion that style and substance are mutually exclusive binaries overlooks deeper cultural, economic, and political changes during the 1980s. Journalism ethics and corporate media structures changed during that decade. Gary Hart’s failed bid for the presidency in 1988 showed how personal sex scandals became fodder for news coverage. That same year CNN’s Bernard Shaw shocked the Democratic candidate, Michael Dukakis, during a debate by asking how the Massachusetts governor would respond to his wife, Kitty, being raped (Bai, 2014). While scholars have begun to examine the output of changing electoral strategies, political rhetoric, media coverage, and professional standards, how these new practices resonate among viewers, the origins of these shifts, and their impact on American civic life
and the presidency more broadly remain unclear (Jamieson, 1996; Ponce de Leon, 2015, Troy 1991).

The C-SPAN Video Library holds a wealth of material to help historians fill this void and ascertain how Americans grappled with these dramatic political changes during the age of cable television. It provides an opportunity to go beyond the popular anecdote about John F. Kennedy’s 1960 campaign or Ronald Reagan’s communication skills to place presidential history within the broader cultural context. By focusing on media discussions of presidential debates in particular, this chapter will provide an initial exploration into these broader questions while offering examples of how to use new sources to recapture a more nuanced history of the American presidency by using an interdisciplinary framework. During the 1992 symposium about presidential debates, Janet Brown used two specific historical anecdotes to justify the organization, assumptions, and actions of the debate commission as it prepared for upcoming campaigns: the Kennedy–Nixon debates in 1960 and Ford’s comment about Eastern Europe not being under the Soviet Union’s control during the 1976 election. Brown contended that Kennedy’s superior television performance in 1960 and Ford’s “gaffe” in 1976 proved how the debates had contributed to the development of a modern political environment in which entertainment had transformed the nature and content of news because “we are used to being enlivened” (C-SPAN, 1992a).

But, the debates alone did not simply create this environment, as Brown’s anecdote implied. The same strategists who shaped campaign tactics—from Nixon to Clinton—by putting a premium on entertainment and television appearances, also generated the norms of political analysis and commentary on cable news programming. In doing so, they created a political echo chamber about the importance of performative politics—a restrictive “style versus substance” analysis of politics—that eventually alienated many voters from the entire process. Though promoting a flawed history, political actors, from Janet Brown to Roger Ailes and George Stephanopoulos, the latter political operatives, reiterated iconic moments from presidential debates that further enhanced their political power. Beginning with the perceived devastating blow of Nixon’s sweaty brow in the 1960 election, political consultants convinced political contenders that televised debate performances won or lost elections. The expansion of political commentary with around-the-clock news shows further brought these consultants and pollsters into the public eye as
they then reshaped public dialogue. With its extensive programming collection, the C-SPAN Video Library illuminates how and why the “debate over the debates” became a way for the public to grapple with, and frequently critique, the implications of a changing 24/7 news cycle and the emergence of the presidency as the “entertainer-in-chief.”

THE KENNEDY TAN VERSUS THE NIXON SHADOW: MYTH, FACT, OR SOMETHING ELSE?

After declaring the 1988 debates “successful” (C-SPAN, 1992a), Janet Brown worked diligently over the next four years to institutionalize the key points of success that she, scholars, journalists, candidates, and other experts deemed essential to a fair format for the next presidential election. In its pursuit of an unbiased programming format, before, during and after the debates, the Commission on Presidential Elections reminded the public of the central importance of the debates in American elections. No one anecdote better sums up the power of format and image in helping turn an election than the story of the first televised debate between Nixon and Kennedy. The 1960 election, many journalists and political pundits contend, stood as a revolutionary moment in which television transformed the electoral process and created the modern celebrity presidency in which Kennedy’s television image and style precluded the substance of the Nixon campaign effort (Donaldson, 2007; Gould, 1996). During the symposium about the organization of the 1992 debates, this interpretation came up not from Brown but from a younger audience member. The forum showed how the crowd accepted this story as a fundamental truth.

A young woman raised her hand during the event and asked, “With the Kennedy–Nixon debates isn’t it a fact that anyone who watched it on TV when polled said that they thought that Kennedy was a stronger candidate, but the people listening to it on radio thought that Nixon was a stronger candidate” ultimately showing that the debates were all about optics not issues(C-SPAN, 1992a). Janet Brown responded that the questioner was “absolutely right about 1960, and this was one of the very interesting aspects of that election” (C-SPAN, 1992a). This story of Kennedy’s victory on television and Nixon’s alleged victory on radio reaffirmed the notion that the formatting of the debate and the visual image presented on television
changed the way the public received the electoral messages. As a result, it clearly highlighted that the medium of television distinguished style from substance in that election.

Despite the power and longevity of this interpretation, scholars have argued that this story is more a myth than a reality (Brownell, 2014; Greenberg, 2011; Schudson, 1995; Vancil & Pendell, 1987). The “public opinion poll” that showed Nixon winning on radio and Kennedy on television came from a survey taken by a small Philadelphia research firm; it was not a nationally recognized or scientifically sound poll. Moreover, this narrative assumes that radio listeners were influenced only by the content of each candidate’s statements and not by inflections of voice or Kennedy’s prominent Boston accent, both stylistic factors (Schudson, 1995). Nevertheless, this interpretation continues to pervade popular history, especially as it has played out on television, so the question emerges: Why has it had such resonance? This narrative reflects an interpretation and memory of the event that started to take root in the 1960s as political contenders, like Nixon himself, came to believe that media mattered more than any other component of the electoral process (Brownell, 2014). This is not necessarily what happened in the 1960 debates, but rather, what political experts came to believe happened, and this perception has shaped the growth and trajectory of presidential debates, particularly when cable programming provided an opportunity for the expansion of such political commentary during the 1980s.

Expectations were high for the presidential debates in 1960. In his coverage of the campaign, Theodore White called them “a revolution in American presidential politics.” He penned with excitement how “American genius in technology” promised to allow “the simultaneous gathering of all tribes of America to ponder their choice between two chieftains in the largest political convocation in the history of man” (White, 2009, p. 279). Media coverage at the time proved to be very evenhanded, and actually focused more on the content of debate itself, as well. One headline read: “Nixon, Kennedy Clash in TV Debate over Ways to Spur Economic Growth, Finance Medical Care, Aid Schools” as the story discussed the nuances of the policy discussions. Perhaps a more compelling observation emerged with the article’s statement, “The all important question of ‘who won’ may never be conclusively answered even on Election Day…but there was nothing in the show to indicate clearly it would overwhelm other phases of the campaign” (Staff Reporter, 1960).
Originally published in 1961, Theodore White’s account, *The Making of the President 1960*, concludes that despite the “revolutionary” democratic potential, the debates were “an opportunity missed” for an in-depth discussion of the issues at hand during the election, a popular analysis during the election year. White emphasizes how both mediums that broadcast the debates, television and radio, missed this opportunity. According to White, this came from not merely the difficulties that Nixon had with the debate—from his makeup problem to his adherence to the suggestion of his running partner, Henry Cabot Lodge, that he use the opportunity to “erase the ‘assassin image’”—but rather the structure of the debates, which allowed only “two-and-a-half-minute answers back and forth” (White, 2009, pp. 285–292). The *New York Times* published an array of editorials from newspapers across the country to highlight the diversity of opinions American television viewers held. Responses ranged from “it was a weak and wish-washy piece of history” to it was a successful “experiment that demonstrated that politics may be waged intelligently, even urbanely” (Excerpts From Editorials, 1960).

After the election, scholars immediately started researching the impact of the televised debates in a more statistical manner, hoping to offer concrete evidence of how they may or may not have influenced the election. One study of 95 New York voters observed that Kennedy may have had a stronger performance that resulted in an “improvement of the Kennedy image” but that “this improvement was not accompanied by shifts in the voting intentions” (Lang & Lang, 1961, p. 278). The debates, this study argued, crystallized and confirmed voter decisions rather than changing them. Moreover, many participants in the study—both Kennedy and Nixon supporters—reported a “deep-seated distrust about the spontaneity of [Kennedy’s] performance” (Lang & Lang, 1961, p. 286).

Though television mattered during the 1960 campaign, it remained a controversial tool—one that could incite as much criticism as it could support. Daniel Boorstin’s (1962) landmark book *The Image: A Guide to Pseudo-Events in America* framed Kennedy’s television strategy, with its emphasis on “pseudo-events” and use of image, as a threat to the future of representative government. The son of a former Hollywood studio executive, John F. Kennedy understood the potential of television performances to create excitement and enthusiasm about his candidacy. He approached the television debates not as a contest against a political opponent but as media events where, such as during
his appearances on the Jack Paar Show or Meet the Press, he sold his personality, appealing to voters as “media consumers” first and foremost. Because he had personally hired the film producer Jack Denove to follow him on the campaign trail and capture his performances to later use in advertisements, Kennedy appeared vibrant as he was taking action and communicating with the large crowds his campaign had built. Kennedy embraced an innovative yet controversial media strategy, a “showbiz politics” rooted in California politics, and the motion picture industry in particular, as his campaign prioritized the media and used his celebrity status to win votes (Brownell, 2014).

And yet, on the primary trail and during the national campaign, Kennedy faced constant criticism from his reliance on television performances, frequently undergoing attacks that he had style but lacked experience and leadership. As he pursued a media-driven primary campaign, prominent Democrats critiqued his reliance on money and celebrity to gain fame. Hubert Humphrey referred to the candidate as “Jack who has Jack” (Wehrwein, 1960), while Eleanor Roosevelt (1958) publicly admonished the senator for trying to “influence through money.” During the national campaign, Vice President Nixon continued to advance this critique as his campaign warned against the use of “cheap publicity” to gain political points (Buchwald, 1960). Instead, Nixon used the camera to promote his experience as a statesman, a “New Nixon” who was a respectable and deserving public servant capable of succeeding President Eisenhower.4

Both candidates approached the debates in ways that reflected their broader campaign strategies. Kennedy saw the event as another opportunity to get viewers “interested in his personality,” a tactic which had helped him win the Democratic nomination against the powerful Senate majority leader in the party, Lyndon Johnson (Reinsch, 1960). On the other hand, Nixon viewed the debates as an opportunity to show his intimate knowledge of world affairs, and, thus his executive capability. As the lesser known candidate, Kennedy had to assert constantly his credibility, and the debates provided a national stage to present himself as an equal to the man who had occupied the office of the vice presidency over the past eight years and had already proved his ability to negotiate before cameras on the world stage.

And yet, despite this more complicated historical reality, the simplistic narrative that the debates “changed everything” has persisted. Many of the tropes that shape popular memory—Kennedy’s confidence and tan, Nixon’s...
poor health and five o’clock shadow—first appeared in White’s *Making of the President*. Presidential scholar Robert Dallek argues that White’s book provided a window into America in 1960. He also notes how White was known for not just covering events but attempting to influence them (Dallek, 2009). This first analysis of the debates did both. It reflected a post-WWII hope for the democratic potential of television that existed alongside a concern that image consciousness would undermine democratic discussions (Greenberg, 2004). Though only 16 pages of the 384-page book, this section has become its most famous, promoting an easy interpretation of the 1960 election that not only overlooks the broader narrative of the election but simplifies the ways in which journalists like White, citizens, and politicians grapple with and discuss the opportunities and limitations of television in politics. Almost 50 years later, the producer of the television debates, Don Hewitt, remembered that the night of the first debate was the moment when politicians looked at television and declared, “That’s the only way to campaign.” The evening, he recalled, was a “great night for John Kennedy, and the worst night that ever happened in American politics” (Daitch, 2009, p. 31).

Hewitt’s memory, like subsequent news coverage that remembered Kennedy’s victory during the 1980s, conveys the notion that the deep-seated apprehensions that Americans had toward a new political style that prioritized media messaging and political performances faded away overnight (Brownell, 2014). This skewed memory of the debates even influenced historical discussions by scholars in programs C-SPAN aired in the middle of the 1992 election from the series *Road to the White House*. The program replayed the 1960 debates (see C-SPAN, 1992b, 1992c, and 1992e) and offered historical lessons and analyses of them for viewers to use the past as insight into the contemporary election. It featured interviews with two guests: Joel Swerdlow, an author of a new book about presidential debates, and Stephen Wayne, a Georgetown political science professor who made clear what instruction the debates provided for modern politics. Swerdlow emphasized the impact of Nixon’s “shifty eyes” as he kept shifting his view from the clock that counted down his time allotted for answering questions and the camera. Swerdlow argued that though Nixon’s “shifty eyes” may seem “shallow” when “you get into a big mass media phenomenon; those are the type of things that become important.” Swerdlow agreed with Wayne’s narrative, as he reiterated the story about how television viewers believed Kennedy had won the first debate with
his “smooth appearance and his matter of fact answers,” but those who “did not have to look at Nixon” and instead simply heard his “smooth voice” on the radio, perceived Nixon as the winner (C-SPAN, 1992b).

A range of programming in the C-SPAN Video Library reveals that by the 1992 election, journalists, scholars, students, and politicians had all accepted this simplified narrative as a fundamental fact of American history in ways that heightened the public’s perception of the media’s power in American politics. Since 1960, this memory has validated a new multimillion dollar industry—political consulting—by reinforcing the message that candidates needed to hire expensive consultants, pollsters, and media advisers to craft messages and help them navigate the media terrain if they wanted any real chance at winning an election. During the 1960s, newcomers to the political scene—figures such as Roger Ailes and Pat Buchanan—convinced Richard Nixon that his political defeats came at the hands of the television debates. These media consultants first shaped political strategies behind the scenes in the 1968 election, and then set the parameters of political commentary over the next two decades.

**LIBERATING POLAND AND LAUNCHING THE “SPIN” INDUSTRY**

As Nixon planned his presidential comeback eight years later, he surrounded himself with campaign advisers and professional media men who reinforced this specific memory of the 1960 election. As a result, not only did the former vice president revamp his campaign to follow in Kennedy’s footsteps by making media and advertising central to his campaign, but he also refused to debate his opponents in 1968 (Bernstein, 1968) and in 1972. By the time the unelected president, Gerald Ford, agreed to a series of debates in 1976 with the Democratic challenger, Jimmy Carter, this legacy of 1960 shaped the candidates’ approaches. Each side prepared texts, discussed images, and even introduced real-time focus groups to chart the strengths and weaknesses of each moment during the debates for post-debate analysis. Fearful that any unscripted moment of the debate could cost the incumbent the election as it had Nixon in 1960, Ford’s and Carter’s teams prepared thoroughly.

If the memory of the 1960 debates validated the centrality of television performances to win presidential elections, the legacy of one moment in the
Chapter 1

1976 debates would continue to accentuate the perceived power of the media in American politics and, as a result, influence political practices and even an entire new media profession in the 1980s: the spin doctor. During the second debate in 1976 against Jimmy Carter, Gerald Ford made the statement, “There is no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe and there never will be under a Ford administration.” This comment, or “gaffe,” by the president has become another infamous moment in presidential debate history, and its memory, as told especially by Janet Brown during the 1992 symposium and by journalists since then, has come to validate the importance of media spin, and the post-debate production process.

Media analysis of Ford’s statement, contended Janet Brown (C-SPAN, 1992a), lost the debate and possibly the election for Ford. The public did not care about the statement, Brown explained, until reporters made it an issue and declared Carter the winner. This interpretation has had a profound impact on political strategy. Throughout the 1980s, campaign professionals saw debates as especially important electoral events that were open to interpretation, and this example from the 1976 debate helped to make the case for the importance of spin. When Gerald Ford made the statement that Eastern Europe was not dominated by the Soviet Union, it did not influence the polls until the next day. This, Brown asserted, is evidence of the effective way in which the media influenced the post-debate spin process by setting the news agenda (C-SPAN, 1992a). Television viewers did not respond to the statement as Ford made it, but they did the following day when reporters told them of this misstatement and exaggerated its implications.

Over the next decade Ford’s misstep in the second debate became fodder for understanding the incumbent’s defeat by Jimmy Carter that year, resulting in a debate anecdote in which massaging of the media message among reporters became as important as the message itself. According to one 1992 story from the Wall Street Journal on the “debatable debates,” Ford’s gaffe “established the enduring principle that media interpretation of the debates can prove every bit as important as the encounters themselves” (Harwood, 1992).

That same year, as the C-SPAN series Road to the White House historicized the impact of the 1960 elections, it also replayed the three debates from the 1976 campaign. In the first one, aired on October 20, 1992 (see C-SPAN, 1992f), the program noted the date and the moderators of the debate before airing the footage. The third debate, aired on October 21, 1992 (see C-SPAN,
1992g), followed the same format. The second debate, however, not only aired first on October 16, 1992 (see C-SPAN, 1992d), but also included an introduction with Joel Swerdlow, who outlined why Johnson and Nixon had not debated since 1960, and Professor Stephen Wayne’s argument about Ford’s Eastern European comment. Wayne contended that Carter did not call out the president after his misstatement, but the media did in the aftermath of the debate, ultimately influencing voter perceptions of Ford’s competency in foreign policy matters. With the interpretation of the performance as central to the debate itself, subsequent campaigns and presidential administrations hired media consultants to influence reporter perceptions so they would not lose the spin battle as Ford had.

“Spin,” as it became known during Reagan’s administration (Greenberg, 2016), had been a part of presidential administrations over the previous century, as figures from Theodore Roosevelt, Herbert Hoover, Franklin Roosevelt, and John F. Kennedy worked assiduously to nurture relationships with the press to ensure favorable coverage of their presidential administrations and to set the news agenda. The Vietnam War and Watergate scandal revealed the willingness of presidents to lie to the press, resulting in the emergence of investigative reporting that transformed the nature of press–presidential relationships (Greenberg, 2016). And yet, as reporters searched beyond official statements and even into the personal lives of candidates for stories, Reagan’s administration employed an effective news operation to institutionalize lessons learned from Ford’s mistake. In fact, each White House press announcement took on the characteristics of the post-debate spin analysis that Ford had allegedly neglected. Larry Speakes, a press spokesman for Reagan, proudly displayed a sign on his desk stating, “You don’t tell us how to stage the news, and we don’t tell you how to cover it” (Kurtz, 1998, p. xxii). By the 1988 election, journalists unabashedly referenced the activities of “spin alley,” a behind-the-scenes hallway where staff- ers from each campaign argued why their candidate won the debate to reporters (Greenberg, 2011).

By focusing on the art and power of spin during the 1980s, political commentary accentuated the power of these spin doctors. Though critics again pointed to their existence as style triumphing over substance—proof of what Walter Cronkite called the “unconscionable fraud that our political campaigns have become”—the story of the 1976 debate deemed them a necessary part
but this media anecdote also overlooks two other components of the debate. First, despite the popular narrative, Jimmy Carter capitalized on the issue during and after the debate by stating, “I would like to see Mr. Ford convince the Polish-Americans and the Czech-Americans, and the Hungarian-Americans that those countries don’t live under the domination and supervision of the Soviet Union behind the Iron Curtain” (C-SPAN, 1992d). During the debate and later on the stump, it was the Democratic presidential candidate who paved the way for the broader media criticism. Carter linked this statement to broader concerns at the time about Ford’s competence as an international leader and his unwillingness to speak openly with the American people about his foreign policies. On October 8, two days after the debate, the New York Times noted that Carter, “choosing to ignore the Ford, Kissinger, and Scowcroft attempts to clarify, called the President’s statement ‘ridiculous.’” According to Carter, the statement reflected Ford’s “confusion about our people, about the aspirations of human beings, about human rights, about liberty, about simple justice” (King, 1976).

Moreover, both Carter and Ford competed for a demographic group very much at play for both the Democratic and Republican Parties during the era of dramatic political realignment for both parties: White, blue collar ethnic voters. Carter’s Protestantism had alienated many Roman Catholic voters, and this issue became another way to keep this traditional voting bloc in the Democratic Party, despite their earlier allegiance to Nixon as part of his appeal to the “silent majority.” Moreover, grassroots organizations, including chapters of the Polish American Congress, used this moment as opportunity to gain leverage in the national political conversation. During a campaign in which Ford’s own campaign had acknowledged “foreign policy and national defense are low priority issues,” Polish Americans used this misstatement as an opportunity to inject their voices into the national dialogue (Chanoc, 1974). Following the debate, both Ford and Carter took to the campaign trail to speak to White ethnic organizations. Ford argued that “his policy had been too literally constructed and that he had meant to say that such domination existed in much of Eastern Europe but that his policy was not to acquiesce in it” (Mohr, 1976). In a foreign policy speech, Henry Kissinger (1976) reinforced the message, and overwhelmingly the press paid substantial attention to Ford’s clarification. By the final debate, the Ford campaign continued to
relish in the “large advantage” the president had over Carter because of “the perception that [Ford is] experienced in foreign policy and that [he] will keep America strong enough to maintain peace.” Though a setback, his misstatement is not what cost Ford the election.

**POLITICAL COMMENTARY IN THE AGE OF 24/7 NEWS**

This narrow legacy of both the importance of television performance in the 1960 debates and the role of spin in 1976 permeated media narratives of the debates and electoral strategies during the 1980s with very dramatic implications for shifting the realities of campaign structures and organizations by 1992. A New York Times article asked what the presidential debates actually had accomplished over the previous 40 years and argued that they did not inform people about the candidates or the issues at play, but rather that “these glitzy confrontations have converted the choice of a President into a Hollywood high-noon shootout” (Wicker, 1991). After the 1988 election—during which Gary Hart withdrew from the Democratic primary because of accusations of an extramarital affair and Michael Dukakis had to answer questions about the hypothetical rape of his wife—the superficiality of the political process ran high. The debates, which allowed for such personalized discussions to occur, underwent intensive criticism for “including more grandstanding than substance,” and Janet Brown explained that she had worked with the Commission on Presidential Debates to restructure the format to allow moderators to ask candidates harder, more penetrating questions (Ayres, 1991). In her discussion with students in January of 1992 at the Washington Center, Brown asked the students for their feedback and ideas on how to make the debates more about the issues at stake and less about the image of the candidate.

But, as the 1992 election played out, media images, “sound bites”—a term coined during the 1988 campaign—and political punditry on news shows centered on the candidate’s personality while emphasizing the importance of the spin team to political success. Democratic consultant James Carville and Clinton staffer George Stephanopoulos became media celebrities themselves for their ability to shape the news for the Democratic contender, the Arkansas governor Bill Clinton. Before Clinton’s first debate with President
George H. W. Bush was even over, Stephanopoulos raced through Clinton’s war room headquarters to put out press announcements about how “Bush was on the defensive” (Cutler, Ettinger, Pennebaker, Hegedus, & Pennebaker, 1993). As D. A. Pennebaker filmed the campaign team for his documentary film *The War Room*, it became clear that if the Clinton campaign won the spin competition—slogans, advertisements, and most importantly interpretation of events—it would win the election. As the film documents, the team accomplished both feats and cemented the place of spin in presidential campaigns and even in the daily function of the White House.

By the 1992 campaign, the debates had become a certain type of ritual: a media-driven form of entertainment with its own history that reinforced the power of the media and its practitioners in American politics. But this popular history of presidential debates, similar to popular history of the American presidency more broadly, depends on anecdotes that promote a superficial understanding of deeper changes in American culture. Iconic moments—Nixon’s sweaty brow, Ford’s liberation of Poland, or Ronald Reagan’s humor—became reduced to clichés that simplified broader changes in campaign trends and American history while also creating an echo chamber in which stories of success or failure are constantly recirculated, but seldom understood (Hess, 1981; Jamieson & Capella, 2010; Sabato, 1991; Schudson, 1995).

Programming from the C-SPAN Video Library provides sources to study the American presidency from an alternative lens that goes beyond the anecdote. Studying the concerns debates have generated provides a window into how journalists, viewers, and politicos themselves have grappled with broader changes in civic life as new media technology has altered the political terrain. During the 1980s, the emergence of 24/7 cable news facilitated opportunities for a deeper exploration of the candidates and issues but did not necessarily produce more informed voters. In many cases 24/7 coverage heightened the power of consultants themselves, validated their expertise, and in the process deepened the skepticism of Americans, many of whom felt frustrated and powerless in a political process that seemed tied to media productions and reliant on staging of events for media consumption rather than generating discussions of how to govern (C-SPAN, 1992a).6

Consider, for example, the trajectory of one man in particular: Roger Ailes. The successful producer of the *Mike Douglas Show*, Ailes met Richard Nixon in 1967 as the presidential hopeful prepared to go on the show as a
guest. As Nixon chatted with the producer, he sighed with frustration that “gimmicks like this” were required to be elected. Understanding the potential of television to reach voters and communicate through images, Ailes shook his head and told Nixon, “Television is not a gimmick” (McGinniss, 1969, p. 63). Determined to have a new approach toward the medium that haunted his memories of the 1960 election, Nixon hired Ailes to round out the media strategy team that had convinced Nixon that he lost in 1960 in part because of his poor performance during television debates.

When Nixon won the 1968 election, Ailes launched his career as a political consultant. By the 1980s Ailes had founded Ailes Communications Inc., and he ran George H. W. Bush’s media campaign in 1988. He also appeared as a commentator on C-SPAN programs, from a panel that examined news, politics, and ethics in November 1987 (C-SPAN, 1987) to one in 1989 that discussed the connections between the entertainment industry and the political process (C-SPAN, 1989).

In 1968 Ailes contended that politicians forever more “would have to be performers” (McGinniss, 1969, p. 155). Two decades later, after organizing Bush’s successful media campaign, he became known as “a political celebrity himself” with his public commentary on electoral strategies in the 24/7 news era in the aftermath of that election (C-SPAN, 1989). Ailes justified media scrutiny and performances as central to American political traditions where “candidates have to run a gauntlet…which requires a degree of physical and emotional stamina” (C-SPAN, 1989). In this environment, argued Ailes, debate performances were even more important as content for political advertisement and to shape the media narrative around the presidential contenders (both of which Ailes Communications Inc. was hired to create and monitor). A decade later as the president of Fox News, Ailes became a new type of Republican Party boss—his support has become essential for conservative presidential hopefuls, many of whom use electoral campaigns to try out for not just the presidency but a place as a political commentator on his programs (Hemmer, in press; Sherman, 2014).

The C-SPAN Video Library provides a wealth of sources for scholars to understand this echo chamber and thoroughly explore how and why campaign professionals such as Roger Ailes gained power, authority, and influence in both constructing electoral campaigns and justifying new media strategies behind the scenes and in the public eye.
NOTES

1. For a broader exploration of the 1988 election, see Germond and Witcover (1988) and Bai (2014).


3. The term *media consumers* as a definition of this outreach objective originally appeared in Kelley (1956), *Professional Public Relations and Political Power*, on p. 50.

4. Discussion of the various stages of the “New Nixon” can be found in Greenberg (2004), *Nixon’s Shadow*. His look specifically at the New Nixon of the 1950s during Nixon’s vice-presidential career can be found on pp. 36–72.

5. For criticism of the 1988 election and its superficiality, see also Troy (1991), *See How They Ran: The Changing Role of the Presidential Candidate*.

6. In the discussion with college students on the history of presidential debates for the Pursuit of the Presidency forum (C-SPAN, 1992a; http://www.c-span.org/video/?23775-1/history-presidential-debates), students ended the symposium by expressing deep frustrations with this modern media landscape.

7. This interaction between Nixon and Ailes is described by McGinniss (1969) in *The Selling of the President, 1968*, on p. 63.

REFERENCES


