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Nonverbal Messages in 2008 Presidential Primary Ads

The year 2008 will feature one of the most intriguing political races in at least a generation. In a race featuring no incumbents, the candidates have had to truly differentiate themselves from each other. Television advertisements have been an important avenue for communication with voters in the primary elections. These ads will likely increase, in quantity and intensity, during the general election. So it is important for viewers, as potential voters, to understand the messages expressed in these ads. While the verbal messages are often straightforward, the nonverbal messages are sometimes more difficult to comprehend.

Indeed, nonverbal messages can relay messages that the candidate cannot successfully verbalize, or may not want to communicate in an obvious fashion for fear of alienating voters. The three remaining Presidential candidates, Hillary Clinton, Barack Obama, and John McCain, have all used television ads to convey their messages to voters. In looking at nonverbal messages in one of each candidate's ads, the viewer obtains a better concept of whom the candidate is and how he or she wishes to be seen.

In their book on political communications, Larry Powell and Joseph Cowart argue that television ads are the most important communications that national candidates do – more

important than debates and stump speeches – with most candidates spending 70 percent of their budgets on television advertising (104). Candidates employ the same advertising agencies that sell Coke, iPods and cars to the public. But the product being sold in political ads is much more important.

It is crucial for viewers, as potential voters, to understand what they are seeing in political ads. As Gary Noggle and Lynda Lee Kaid found in their study on the subject, “... television’s visual imagery may pollute the information needed by voters to make rational decisions” (914). They found that viewers who watched political ads with distortions were likely to favor those candidates who distorted information. And, even more disturbing, they found that the level of media literacy in the viewers did not affect their ability to detect and understand the distortions (923).

In order to better understand the complete messages in televised political ads, three of them, one from each remaining Presidential candidate, will be examined for hidden meanings and ideas.

Hillary Clinton

Hillary Clinton’s television ad, *Freefall*, deals with economic problems facing voters. The ad was aired in Missouri before the primaries there. It features rather serious, orchestral music and a male narrator with a strong, baritone voice. Clinton speaks only the last line. Several nonverbal messages may be inferred from this. The music is meant to be dramatic and grab the voters’ attention. It is not pastoral or upbeat music, but rather solemn, giving the tone of the ad a serious nature. The fact that a male narrator speaks most of the text could indicate that the Clinton campaign believes voters take a man’s

voice more seriously. Or, it could indicate that the campaign believes Clinton's voice may turn voters off.

The opening text of the commercial is, "Our economy could be headed into freefall. For millions of Americans, foreclosures, interest rates, and healthcare costs are spinning out of control" (Hillary for President).

During this narration, the ad shows a person falling through the sky – it is impossible to tell if it is a man or woman. The person is falling very quickly, waving hands and legs. The person is viewed first from below, then from far above, as the person plummets toward a suburban-looking area of Earth. This image is interspersed with pictures of newspaper headlines in bold, black fonts that read, "Recession" and "Unemployment" (Hillary for President).

The nonverbal messages in this part of the ad are rather overt. The person falling from the sky represents the fear and anxiety of many voters regarding the economy. Viewing the person from below, and then from far above throws the viewer off balance, increasing the sense of anxiety. The person's waving of arms and legs portrays a sense of helplessness and being out of control. The fact that the person is falling over a suburban area, rather than a city or farm, may be to appeal to suburban voters.

The narrator then states, "With your job and family security in the balance, the stakes have never been higher in choosing our next President, the person you can depend on to fix the economy and protect our future" (Hillary for President). During this, the image changes to that of a man in a red skydiving jumpsuit. He is looking right into the camera, at a direct angle. The man is smiling and calm. He pulls his parachute cord and a pink parachute releases, then the camera views him from below, soaring through the clouds.

Next, there is an image of a smiling, white, middle-aged woman waving a Clinton sign above her head.

The nonverbal messages here relate to Clinton being the protector. The pink parachute represents Clinton, as the only female candidate. She is saving the strong, happy man.

Then the viewer sees the older woman, who represents Clinton's base supporters.

The final image is a photograph of Clinton speaking into a microphone, wearing a black suit jacket. She is standing in front of a red, white and blue background, faced at an angle (not at the camera) while her voice is saying, "I'm Hillary Clinton and I approved this message" (Hillary for President). The lighting is soft, but bright.

One reason the ad might feature a photograph instead of video of Clinton speaking may be that a photograph appears softer and more appealing to voters. It is easier to make a person attractive in a photo than in moving video images. She is wearing a black suit and appears to be authoritative. But she is looking at a perceived audience, not directly at the camera, which gives her a less confrontational air. This may be a way for the campaign to deal with the gender issue of a woman candidate having to appear strong but not aggressive.

Barack Obama

The Barack Obama ad *Mother* aired in Iowa before the primaries. The ad is about Obama's mother's death from cancer and how that has affected his views on healthcare. The ad uses a soft, orchestral score – rather pastoral and calm. Obama narrates the entire ad. Several nonverbal messages might be inferred here. The music is soft, possibly reflecting a level of empathy and emotion. Obama narrates the ad, which makes it more personal. It also plays on one of his greatest strengths – his oratory skills.

The narration begins, “My mother died of cancer at 53. In those last painful months she was more worried about paying her medical bills than getting well” (Obama for America). During this, the ad shows an old photograph of, presumably, Obama and his mother. His mother is a young, white woman, and he is a small child. His mother is looking at him, and he is looking at the camera and smiling. The ad zooms in on the photograph.

There are many messages in this short passage. As this ad was aimed at Iowa, where there are few minorities, it was important for Obama to remind white voters there that his mother was white. The old photograph lends an air of nostalgia and innocence. Zooming in on the photo makes it appear more personal.

The ad then shows Obama sitting on a screened in porch, with white trim and leafy, green trees in the background. The lighting is soft and even. He is talking directly to the camera, wearing a dark suite, white shirt and red tie. He states, “I hear stories like hers everyday. For 20 years, Washington’s talked about healthcare reform and reformed nothing” (Obama for America).

This part of the ad seeks to portray Obama in an Americana setting, in a rural or suburban area, which makes him seem more approachable. He is wearing a conservative cut and color of suit to appeal to the straightforward style of Iowans, and give him an air of authority and competence.

The ad then cuts to several black and white photos of Obama talking with white, middle-aged people. He is standing very close to them, listening intently. He is wearing an oxford shirt, no jacket. In one image, he has his hand on a woman’s shoulder, and his wedding ring is highly visible. During this section he states, “I’ve got a plan to cut costs

and cover everyone. But unless we stop the bickering and the lobbyists, we'll be in the same place 20 years from now" (Obama for America).

The images in this ad reflect a more accessible candidate. Obama is very close to the people he is talking to, showing an intense level of interest. All the people in the ads are white, to imply that Obama is comfortable in an all-white crowd. He is wearing an oxford shirt, with one button undone – not too stuffy, but not too slick. The photos are black and white, which gives Obama a level of gravitas. And in the photo of him with his hand on a woman's shoulder, it appears likely that the campaign may have doctored the image to highlight Obama's wedding ring, showing the viewer that he is sympathetic to women, but also not a threat.

The ad then moves back to Obama on the screened porch, where he says, "I'm Barack Obama and I approved this message because to fix healthcare we have to fix Washington" (Obama for America). Again, the ad seeks to portray Obama as all-American in this porch setting.

John McCain

John McCain's ad *Protect* was aired in Florida before that state's primary. The ad covers a wider range of issues than most short television ads. This may be due to McCain's lack of budget at the time. McCain talks about terrorists, national security and the economy in this simple ad. It contains a dramatic, orchestral score. McCain speaks all the text, which could also be due to his lack of funding.

It begins with McCain sitting in front of an American flag, talking directly to the camera. The lighting is dark – the flag is deeply shadowed around the edges, and McCain's face is also shadowed. At two points, interspersed with McCain talking to the

camera are the words “John McCain for President” spinning in an unsophisticated graphic through clouds or smoke. He is wearing a gray suit, with a blue shirt and a yellow tie. McCain states,

Floridians are concerned about the threat of radical Islamic extremists and their economic security. There’s no one more qualified to meet our national security threats. I’ve been dealing with these issues my entire adult life. I’ll make the Bush tax cuts permanent, reduce taxes on 25 million middle class families and veto wasteful government spending. There’s no one who will work harder to protect our shores and protect your pocketbooks. I’m John McCain and I approved this message (John McCain 2008).

This ad conveys many nonverbal messages. While the unsophisticated nature of the graphics, and even the simple style of McCain speaking to the camera, may be owing to the campaign’s lack of money, there are deeper messages that can be gleaned. First, McCain is known as a straight-talker, which may be why he chose to run an ad in which he is speaking directly to the viewer. This gives him a level of sincerity and candor.

The dark shadows, especially on the American flag, represent the potential threat of terrorism, as well as economic anxiety. McCain’s name swirling through the smoke implies that he is the one who can break through the dangers America faces. McCain is the only remaining candidate to support the war in Iraq so his campaign may be relying on voters’ fears to elevate their candidate.

The shadows on McCain himself, however, may tell us more about the candidate than the issues. As the oldest candidate by far in the race, he uses shadows and dark lighting to hide the visual effects of his age.

McCain himself is wearing a relatively casual suit. As an older candidate, who was trying to appeal to independent voters in Florida, McCain softens his image slightly with a younger style suit. He is also shown only from the chest up, as he has a rather awkward

stance that might accentuate his age. In this ad, he looks like a strong candidate who can protect the country.

All three ads effectively express their messages to the voters. But it is unclear how well the voters understand all the messages they are receiving. While the text of each ad conveys a clear message, the nonverbal messages about things like gender, race and fear mongering are not as obvious. All voters need to view campaign communications with an attention to detail and an understanding of its motives. It has been said that people usually get the government they deserve. Let us hope that Americans will endeavor to deserve a respected government.

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