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In Their Own Words: Newspaper Soundbite Lengths in the 1956 and 1996 Presidential Elections

By Brian Blake

Lamar Alexander, an unsuccessful candidate in the 1996 Republican presidential primaries, recently complained about the media's coverage of presidential campaigns:

Voters complain about negative campaigns devoid of issues. [The media] might be surprised to learn that one way to make campaigns more positive and issue-oriented would be to let the candidates speak for themselves. (Alexander 1997, 1)

Alexander's gripe is a common one among candidates; presidential candidates are tired of the media not allowing them to explain their policies in their own words, and they have some valid complaints.

Alexander argues that the journalists, not the candidates, are the ones doing all of the talking. He substantiates this accusation with a report produced by the Center for Media and Public Affairs. According to the study, from January 1 through February 19, the nine Republican candidates spoke on the television networks for only 79 minutes of the 453 minutes of total story time, less than one fifth of the total (Markle Presidential Watch 1996, 2). The study also found that only one out of every six of these news stories included a

specific detail about the candidate's policy proposals. When the candidates were quoted in their own words in a story, the media didn't let them talk for very long; the report found that the average candidate soundbite was a mere eight seconds long, hardly enough time for the candidate to explain his or her position on an issue (Markle Presidential Watch 1996, 1).

Of all of the statistics that Alexander cites, perhaps the last is the most shocking. The soundbite, a staple of the American media's television campaign coverage, has withered away to nothing. This phenomenon is evidence of the changing role the media has gradually been adopting in increasing numbers since the 1960s: that of public advocate instead of mere "conduits of official information" (Davis 1996, 72). This "new journalism" was born during the social upheaval of the 1960s. During this time, many reporters were faced with subjects and news events whose significance lay in their experience. These journalists found that conventional reporting only made subjects such as Woodstock or the black power movement seem stranger (Hellman 1981, 3).

As Hellman says, new journalism "rejected conventional journalism's assumed perspective of 'objectivity' and its reliance on official, often concealed sources. Instead, [new journalists] sought



new forms and frankly asserted their personal perspectives" (1981, 3). But if this attitude change has occurred, wouldn't it also be reflected in the print media? The Center for Media and Public Affairs study, and others to be mentioned shortly, have only looked at the length of soundbites on network television news. This void in the research offers an interesting research question: is the trend towards shrinking soundbites in television presidential campaign coverage also occurring in the print media, specifically newspapers?

To answer this research question, I will do the following: First, through the literature, I will prove that there is a trend toward shrinking soundbites in television network news campaign coverage. Then, I will present the results of original research which compares the soundbite content of Associated Press presidential campaign articles from both the 1956 and 1996 presidential campaigns.

THE TREND TOWARD SHRINKING SOUNDBITES

What American doesn't remember George Bush saying, "read my lips, no new taxes," or Lloyd Bentsen's infamous jab at Dan Quayle: "Jack Kennedy was a friend of mine; Senator, you're no Jack Kennedy"? Like it or not, soundbites are a part of American political culture. The term soundbite originally came from radio where it referred to a film or tape segment in a news story which showed someone actually speaking (Hallin 1992, 5). This definition still holds true today, although print media also consider quotations as soundbites. The modern campaign soundbite, claims journalism professor Sig Mickelson, was created by the television news industry, "not in the fertile brain of a candidate handler." However, once these handlers learned what television wanted, they eagerly supplied television with it in a way that met their own ends. The handlers wanted to create appealing programming that the news would want to cover, while "simultaneously building insurance that the candidate would avoid any gaffs that would damage his standing in the polls" (1989, 167).

Two independent studies released in 1992 have demonstrated the tremendous decline in the length of the television soundbite. Daniel Hallin of the University of San Diego and Kiku Adatto, a Sociologist at Harvard, both did separate studies on the difference between soundbite lengths in the 1968 and 1988 presidential elections (Adatto 1993, 2). Due to the fact that Hallin also included the presidential election years between 1968 and 1988, I will focus primarily on his study.

Hallin's study was very conclusive in its findings. His methodology consisted of watching stories from network news broadcasts and timing the length of the actual speaking time of candidates in these stories. For the six election years beginning with 1968, his sample sizes were: 113, 123, 119, 201, 179, and 284.

Hallin found a consistent and steady decline in the length of soundbites. In 1968, the average soundbite was 43.1 seconds. By 1988, that number had declined to 8.9 seconds (see Appendix figure 1). Of the soundbites in 1988, only 4 percent of those in the sample were 20 seconds or longer (Hallin 1992, 6). More recent studies have shown that soundbites have continued their decline in subsequent elections by dropping to 8.4 seconds in 1992 and 8.2 seconds in last year's election (Center for Media and Public Affairs 1996, 1). Hallin's findings are confirmed by Adatto. She reported the average soundbite as being 42.3 seconds in 1968, and 9.8 seconds in 1988 (Adatto 1993, 2).

As the length of soundbites has been getting shorter, so has the percentage of television time soundbites take up in election stories. In 1968, 17.6 percent of the time in election stories was taken up by soundbites; by 1988 this had dropped to 5.7 percent. So if the election stories are now 94.3 percent soundbite free, who is filling up all of the time? According to Hallin, reporters' use of "outside material" has greatly increased in recent years. Journalists bring in information to put the "statements and actions" of the candidate into perspective. The use of "experts" to comment on the campaign is one of the most popular forms of outside material. In 1968 an "expert" appeared in only one of all the sampled stories. However, in 1988, there were 37 appearances by "experts" in the sampled stories (Hallin 1992, 10). Although there are no data available, it would be safe to assume that this number is much higher now.

Hallin cites numerous reasons for the decline in soundbites. (Although the scope of this paper does not include the reason for the decline in soundbites, I will mention a few here.) The conventional wisdom is that the public's attention span is shrinking in the age of MTV. This forces anyone in search of an audience to deliver shorter, sharper quotes. Media executives and politicians try to find soundbites that are as short and as witty as possible (Tierney 1992, A18).

Although "experts" have replaced candidate soundbites in the media's stories, they have not completely filled the void left as soundbite length declines. The remainder of the void has been filled

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in by reporters. Obviously, the reporter has to fill in the rest since they are writing the story, but, the tone and content of the reporter's comments have changed dramatically since 1968. "New journalism" is the main culprit. As Hellman states, many journalists have "rejected conventional journalism's assumed perspective of 'objectivity' and its reliance on official, often concealed, sources. Instead, they sought new forms and frankly asserted their personal perspectives" (1981, 3).

New journalism's tendency to mix commentary with reporting is a development of the last thirty years, and coincides exactly with the decline of soundbites. Journalists have seen their role as changing to advocates of the people and adversaries of the candidates instead of impartial reporters of events (Hulteng 1976, 197). New journalism journalists see no problem in challenging what a candidate has said. They feel that the public is "in less need of facts than of an understanding of the facts already available" (Hellman 1981, 3).

A recent survey of journalists shows the differing schools of thought do indeed exist. When reporters were asked whether there was too much commentary in reporting, only 35 percent of journalist under 35 agreed. Journalists who were between 35 and 49 agreed at a rate of 48 percent, while those between 50 and 59 agreed at a rate of 56 percent. Sixty percent of journalists over 60 agreed with the statement, demonstrating the stark generational differences between the traditional impartial reporter, and the strong tendency of the modern reporter to be a new journalist (Glass 1995, 13).

Hallin claims that modern TV news is much more "mediated" than news just a few years ago. He states that before the 1960s, the journalist's role as a communicator was relatively passive. The reporter would simply do little more than set the scene for the candidate whose speech would then dominate the report. In today's media however, the strong tendency to mix commentary with reporting has resulted in less space available to quote the candidate. With only a limited amount of print space available, something has to be taken out to make room for quotes from experts and the reporter's analysis; not surprisingly, the candidate has been losing out.

SOUNDBITES IN NEWSPAPER COVERAGE

My research question, once again, was to see if the print media has followed the trend of the television media; has there been a significant decline in the length of soundbites in newspapers? (Although direct quotation of candidates in the print media is

not technically the same as a television soundbite, I use the term soundbite because they are in essence the same: they allow the candidate to speak in his or her own words.) Due to the lack of literature on this specific topic, I had to conduct my own research.

Methodology. To see if there was a difference in coverage, I chose to examine the election years of 1956 and 1996. I chose the 1956 election because it offered coverage before the media began to be influenced by the advent of "new journalism" in the 1960s. I chose the 1996 election because it gave the most up-to-date information on how the media cover presidential elections.

The purpose of my study was to see exactly how much the media allowed candidates to speak in their own words. The 1956 race was between Dwight D. Eisenhower and Adlai Stevenson, and the 1996 race was between Ross Perot, Bob Dole, and Bill Clinton. From each election year, I randomly chose fifty newspaper articles from the months of September, October, and the pre-election days of November. I employed a systematic random sample where I looked only at the newspapers on every third day (ie., the first, fourth, seventh, tenth, and so on). I chose to look at articles from the Salt Lake Tribune, and I made the stipulation that these articles must be from the Associated Press or a similar national news wire service. I felt that this would give an somewhat accurate representation of the media nationally, not just in the Salt Lake area.

I then read each of these articles and looked for statements within quotation marks. I had three criteria as I read each article. First, I was looking to see how many quotes were by candidates and how many quotes were by analysts. I do not mean "analyst" in the traditional sense of the word. I define analyst as anyone, excluding the candidate, who makes a value judgement about the candidates. This includes anyone from the political pundit to the average citizen. Examples of actual comments which were coded "analytical" include one by political scientist Steven Schier: "It was a rare moment in political courage" (Thomma 1996, A30), and citizen Gary Overturf: "He came through for us" (Associated Press 1996, A24).

The second thing which I was looking for was quote length. The simplest way to do this was to count the words in each set of quotation marks. Although this process was time consuming, it was the most accurate.

The final thing which I was looking at was the content of the candidate's quotes. I developed three categories that a quote could be coded as. The first was a "policy quote." In this type of quote, the

candidate had to discuss a specific policy proposal or position on an issue. In other words, the quote had to in some way inform the voter as to how the candidate stands on a particular issue. An example of this category can be seen in a statement by Adlai Stevenson: "I subscribe with all of my heart to ending the military draft" (Associated Press 1956, 4A).

The second category was an "attacking quote". In this type of quote, the candidate needed to make a disparaging or critical remark about his opponent. I only counted a quote as "attacking" if it had no reference to policy; otherwise, attacking quotes which related to the opponent's policy were coded as "policy quotes." I included character attacks as "attacking quotes" because they don't relate to specific policy positions. An example of an attacking quote is this statement by Adlai Stevenson: "Their attitude toward America is that of the big boss toward the boys" (Associated Press 1956, 1A).

The third category of quote I coded as a "neutral quote." This was any quote that was neither "attacking" nor "policy." The "neutral quote" usually had something to do with campaign strategy, the horse race, or tactics. It also could be any trivial statement, such as a joke, made by the candidate. Self-supportive statements such as "America has a friend in Bob Dole" were also coded as "neutral." An example of a "neutral quote" can be seen in this statement by Ross Perot: "Do I intend to campaign to the bitter end? Yes. You'll be stuck with me for a long time" (Combined News Services 1996, A1).

Results. The results of my study confirms that the print media has exhibited the same behavior that Adatto and Hallin identified amongst the broadcast media. To begin with, I found that there has not been a dramatic change in the amount of quotes per article. In 1956, the average article contained 4.92 quotes. In 1996, the average article contained 5.06 quotes. However, the ratio of candidate quotes to analyst quotes has changed dramatically. In 1956, there were only 3 quotes out of 246 total quotes in the 50 articles which were made by someone other than the candidates. This means that 98.8 percent of the quotations in all articles were the candidate speaking in his own words (see Appendix figure 2). In 1996 this ratio had dropped dramatically. Only 41.5 percent (105) of the 253 total quotes were attributed to the candidates, while 58.49 percent (148) of the 253 quotes were attributed to analysts (see Appendix figure 2).

My analysis of quote length also yielded some dramatic differences between 1956 and 1996.

In 1956, the average candidate quote was 36.21 words long. By 1996, this length had been cut by more than half. The 1996 average candidate quote was 15.6 words long. The 1996 average quote for an analyst, however, was nearly 11 words longer at 26.51 (see Appendix figure 3).

The content analysis of candidate quotes also shows a marked difference between 1956 and 1996. In 1956, 72.35 percent (178) of the 246 total quotes were "policy quotes." These quotes, although containing some attacks on the opposition, gave some statement as to the stance a candidate took on an issue. I coded 15.85 percent (39) of the 246 quotes as "attacking quotes." The majority of these quotes were personal attacks on the opponent which made no specific mention of policy positions. Those quotes coded as "neutral" accounted for 11.78 percent (29) of the 246 total quotes. In the 1956 study, these quotes were mainly jokes, asides, and generic "we're going win in November" statements (see Appendix figure 4).

My content analysis of 1996 candidate quotes yielded vastly different results. Quotes coded as "neutral" more than doubled in frequency to 31.42 percent (33). These quotes differed from the 1956 "neutral quotes" because they primarily discussed campaign strategy. The majority of all quotes were coded as "attacking quotes." A hefty 42.85 percent (45) of the quotes were direct attacks on the opponent. This increase is primarily due to the character issue which has become such a topic of discussion in modern campaigning. "Policy quotes" were the rarest of the three types. Only 25.71 percent (27) of the 253 quotes had anything to do with a policy position (see Appendix figure 4). However, when the media did quote a candidate on an issue, the quote usually did not contain an attack on the opponent. Only 18.5 percent (5) of the policy quotes also contained an attack.

Analysis. There has definitely been a change in the way that newspaper reporters cover presidential campaigns. The candidates are allowed to speak in their own words less often, while the media and analysts are speaking more. And, when the media does quote the candidates, the majority of the time they like to quote them attacking their opponent rather than discussing their policies. I do not claim that this is the media's fault. Perhaps the candidates themselves are more negative. Regardless, the public is not hearing the candidates discuss their policies in their own words.

As I conducted my research, I noticed that the general format for covering campaigns has changed. The stories from 1956 followed a set pat-

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tern. Each day the paper followed a set format. Each candidate had one article written about what they had done on the campaign trail the day before. These articles were almost always side by side, and they generally were about a speech the candidate had given. The reporter merely described the location and then quoted the candidate's speech, giving minor background and clarification throughout. There was no analysis by the reporter or any analysts. The reporter never challenged what the candidate said, he/she merely reported it. The reader was able to just read what the candidate had said in the candidate's own words.

The first thing I noticed about the 1996 stories was the lack of any set format from day to day. Surprisingly, there were many days when there was no story at all. Granted, the Dole/Perot/Clinton race may not have been as newsworthy as the Stevenson/Eisenhower race, but the lack of coverage on some days was noticeable. For example, from October 1 to October 4 there were no stories on any of the presidential candidates. One story appeared on the 5th, but the 6th and 7th were also devoid of coverage. I never encountered this in the 1956 newspapers. There was always at least one story about the candidates, even if they hadn't campaigned the previous day.

Another difference I noticed was placement of quotes in the articles. The 1956 stories usually had a candidate quotation lead the article. In 1996, the majority of the candidate quotes appeared well into the article, oftentimes after three or four quotes by analysts. These analyst quotes often discredited what the candidate was going to say before the reader had a chance to read it.

The general tone of coverage was vastly different between the two years. The 1996 media is much more skeptical and critical of what the candidate says. Most times, the reporter would find experts to refute the candidates' policy proposals and claims. A classic example of this type of journalism is seen in an article entitled, "Dole & Clinton: How Facts Compare with Their Claims." In this article, the reporter took statements made by the candidates in the previous night's debate and

researched them for accuracy. A typical statement from the article reads:

Dole alleged that under Clinton, wages had stagnated and that families now pay 40 percent of what they earn to pay federal, state, and local taxes But two government studies challenge those claims. (Associated Press 1996, A4)

This type of journalism did not exist in the 1956 campaign. Although I did encounter some analysis stories in the 1956 newspapers, they were always in stories separate from candidate coverage stories, and they were labeled as analysis. Most of the time they were on the editorial page. Modern newspapers have blurred the line where analysis begins and where impartial reporting ends. I am not saying that this type of journalism is right or wrong. In fact many would see it as informative and helpful, but the fact remains that the media has changed its style of campaign coverage dramatically.

CONCLUSION

Lamar Alexander's criticism was legitimate; candidates are receiving fewer and fewer opportunities to get their messages out in their own words. Both the television media and, as this paper has shown, the print media, have followed a trend of shrinking the size of soundbites for candidates, while simultaneously increasing the amount of coverage given to their own analysis and the analysis of others.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Brian Blake is a senior in political science from San Jose, California. His interest in media began with his five-year stint as a morning paperboy for the San Jose Mercury News. Upon graduation, he will attend graduate school in public relations. He enjoys surfing, cycling, backpacking, and wood-working.

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APPENDIX: Figures 1 through 4

figure 1. Average soundbite length in television coverage of elections, 1968-1988, in seconds

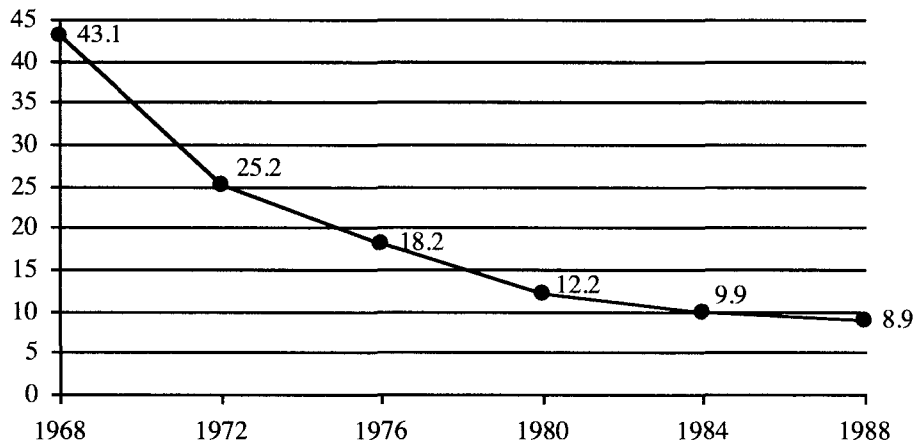


figure 2. Quote ratio, 1956 and 1996, by percent

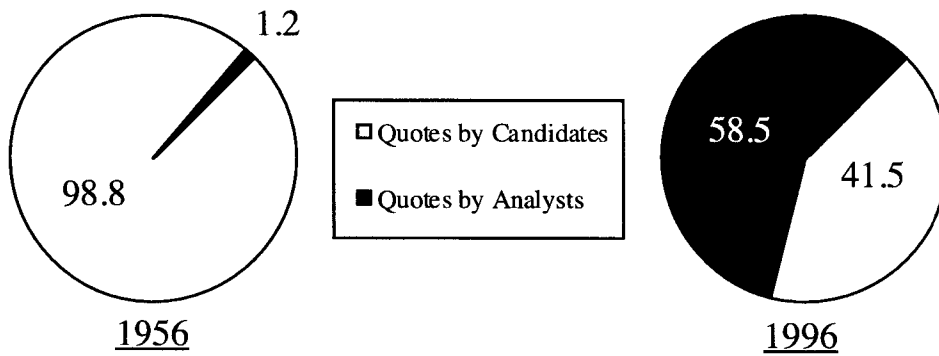


figure 3. Comparison of candidate quote with analyst quote, 1956 and 1996, in number of words

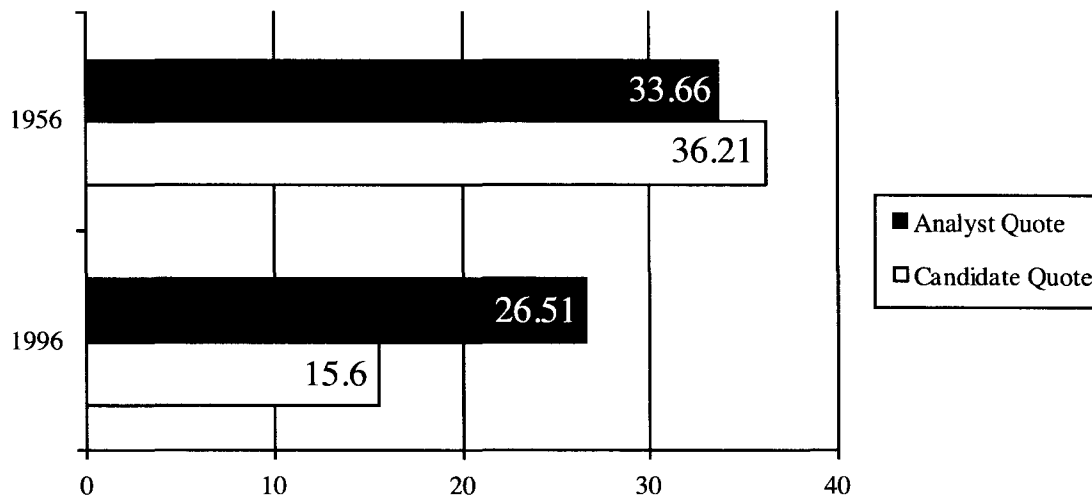


figure 4. Content of candidate quotes, 1956 and 1996, by percent

