

Propaganda, Spin & Soundbite Politics

Overview

This lesson explores political propaganda, spin and soundbite politics in campaigning. Students will view television advertisements and analyze the types of propaganda in each one. They will also learn how Twitter is becoming a new version of soundbite politics as candidates seek to encapsulate their main ideas in short, 140 character messages. Students will also discuss how to become educated voters in a world of seemingly dominated by propaganda, spin, and soundbite politics.

Materials

- Elements of Propaganda Handout, attached
- CBS News video with John Dickerson “Behind the Scenes: Obama 2012,” embedded in teacher PowerPoint or available at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IW8Rw9TENIY>
- POLITICO article “How Clinton aims to trump Trump on Twitter,” attached or available at <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/06/hillary-clinton-trump-twitter-224197>
- Twitter samples, attached

Duration

60-90 minutes (time will vary depending which of the optional activities are utilized)

Procedure

An Introduction to Propaganda

1. As a warm-up, ask students to spend a few moments brainstorming all of the ways political candidate’s campaign. How do they spread their message and encourage people to vote for them? (Responses include speeches and rallies, appearing on news shows, interviews, social media posts, flyers and signs, television and radio advertisements, town halls, small group meetings, etc.) Further discuss:
 - What is propaganda and how does propaganda play a role in these techniques?
 - Propaganda refers to a type of message aimed at influencing opinions and/or the behavior of people. Propaganda may provide only partial information or be deliberately misleading. Propaganda techniques are often found on television and radio, as well as magazines and newspapers.
 - Why is it important to be aware of propaganda and be able to identify it when it is being used to sway your opinion? How can you sort through biased or false information to understand what is true?
 - Why is it specifically important to be an educated voter who is aware of such strategies? How can you educate yourself as a voter? (Discuss strategies such as double checking statements and sources, rather than taking any advertisement or shared information at face value.)
2. Ask students if they can name any specific forms of propaganda. Distribute the Elements of Propaganda handout and go over it with students. Further discuss:
 - Why should we examine advertisements, campaigns, and various media forms in general for propaganda? Is propaganda a negative tactic in your opinion? Explain.
 - Discuss how persuasive techniques are regularly applied by politicians, advertisers, editorialists, radio personalities, and others who are interested in influencing human behavior. While propagandistic messages can be used to accomplish positive social ends, as in campaigns to reduce drunk driving, they are also used to win elections and to sell products. As technology increases, people are receiving hundreds of messages daily via Internet, TV, radio, news, etc. Thus, it is important we take the time to analyze what we are hearing/seeing to ensure we are finding the kernel of truth.

- Out of the types of propaganda from the worksheet, which do you think is most effective and why? Which do you think may be used to disguise truth the easiest?

Examining Examples of Political Propaganda: Television Advertisements

3. Watch the video “Behind the Scenes: Obama 2012” at <https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=IW8Rw9TENIY>. In this short video Slate and CBS News political analyst John Dickerson explains why President Obama announced his 2012 re-election bid with a video that he barely showed up in. Yet, Republicans were splicing Obama throughout their campaign videos. After viewing the video, discuss:
 - What types of political propaganda do you see in the President Obama’s announcement video, as well as in Governor Pawlenty’s superhero and secret agent video?
 - President Obama: just plain folks, bandwagon
 - Governor Pawlenty: transfer, name calling, card stacking, glittering generalities
 - Keeping in mind that you saw only short pieces of each ad, what do you think are the most effective elements of propaganda? Would you vote for that candidate?
4. Prior to class, use the Internet to search for recent television advertisements for major 2016 state or federal political candidates (remember to explore third party and down-ballot races as well). Find two or three short videos to play at this point in the lesson and discuss the following questions with your students:
 - What examples of political propaganda do you see?
 - Which elements of propaganda are most effective?

OPTIONAL: Utilize a Propaganda Technique to Create an Advertisement

5. Next, assign each group one of the propaganda techniques from the handout. Then, tell the groups to complete the following assignment:
 - You have been assigned a particular propaganda technique. As a group, create an ad to present to class using this propaganda technique. You may create an ad for TV, an ad for the radio, or a visual ad (i.e. poster).
 - The purpose of the ad is to recruit votes for Jerimiah Jacobs, who is running for the North Carolina State Senate.
 - You may be creative in the content you provide about Jerimiah, but it must be presented in a way that utilizes your propaganda technique.
 - Be prepared to present your ad to the remainder of class in 15 minutes!

➤ **Teacher note:** Another option is to assign students real political figures running for federal, state, and/or local offices to create an ad for. Students would then need to research facts about that figure and his/her political values and agenda so that their ad is realistic to the candidate, while still utilizing the assigned propaganda technique.
6. Once students are finished, have them present their ad to the remainder of class without sharing the propaganda technique they were assigned. After each presentation, instruct the rest of class to identify which technique the group utilized. Discuss:
 - How did the ads for Jerimiah differ?
 - Of all the ads you heard/saw today from classmates, which ad would make you most want to vote for Jerimiah and why?
 - When politicians are campaigning during elections, in what ways do they utilize the techniques that you just used in your own ads? How do these propaganda techniques affect the election process?

Exploring “Spin”

7. Next, ask students to define “political spin.” Explain to students that when newsworthy events occur, politicians often utilize “spin”, which is a heavily biased portrayal in one’s own favor of an event or situation. Politicians will provide their point of view or interpretation of the event in a way that is

compatible with their own agenda in an effort to sway public opinion. While traditional public relations may also rely on creative presentation of the facts, "spin" often, though not always, implies disingenuous, deceptive and/or highly manipulative tactics. Politicians are often accused of spin by commentators and political opponents, when they produce a counter argument or position.

8. **Optional Activity:** Allow students to practice spin and see it in action. Write the following on the board:
 - As of next month, all snack machines are being removed from school premises.
9. Divide students into small groups and provide them with one of the following perspective assignments. Tell them to write a short blurb announcing this news in the school newspaper from their assigned perspective. (Group assignments can be repeated if you have a larger class):
 - Group 1: School administrators who are tired of the snack machines getting knocked over and vandalized
 - Group 2: Student health advocacy group called "Making Better Choices"
 - Group 3: Student athletes, who raid the snack machines daily when starving after practice
 - Group 4: 12th graders who can't leave campus for lunch and despise the cafeteria food
 - Group 5: Cheerleaders who have been advocating for low calorie and fat-free snacks to be put in the vending machines
 - Group 6: The Booster Club, who has relied on the proceeds from the vending machine to fund athletics (i.e. new uniforms, improved football field, etc.)
10. Give students 5 minutes to compile their news blurb then have each group share their blurb with class. Discuss:
 - In what ways did our blurbs differ?
 - Even though we were all responding to the same topic, why did our blurbs differ? (They were told from people with differing perspectives and agendas)
 - In what ways does spin like this happen in the media today?
 - How does spin play a large roll in election cycles?
 - Is it ethical to spin a situation in one's favor, or towards one's own agenda?
 - When dealing with politics, do you think it is possible to say something neutral about a political situation?
 - Again, how do we make sure we are educated voters? How do we find a way to see through all the propaganda and spin?

Examining Soundbite Politics in the Digital Age: Twitter

11. Next, ask students if they have heard the phrase "soundbite politics" and ask them to share what they know about it or think it is. Explain that this refers to when a very short part of a speech or statement, especially one made by a politician, is excerpted then broadcast or quoted. This is often done in a way that is misleading. In recent years, soundbite politics has also become associated with technology platforms such as Twitter. Limited to 140 characters and perhaps a picture or website link, politicians must craft succinct yet effective messages that can quickly appeal to the electorate.
12. Project some examples of popular tweets from the 2016 presidential election cycle such as those attached, or you may also wish to search the Internet for new tweets since this lesson was written. For each tweet, discuss the following questions:
 - Which candidate is this tweet from? To which party does that candidate belong, and what are some of the candidate's key themes/stances?
 - Which example(s) of political propaganda do you see in this tweet?
 - What is the main message in this tweet?
 - What are the positive and negative aspects of this tweet?
 - Overall, do you think this is an effective way to campaign? Explain.

- Do you think communication via social media outlets, such as Twitter or FaceBook, are affecting the way we communicate as society? Explain.
13. Read the POLITICO article “How Clinton aims to trump Trump on Twitter” and have students discuss the following questions in pairs or small groups
- How are Clinton and Trump’s social media strategies similar and different?
 - Which of the tweets referenced in this article do you think best represents soundbite politics? Why?
 - Do you think Clinton and Trump have used social media effectively?
 - How do multimedia such as video clips and GIFs affect political tweets?
 - In a world of sometimes one-sided soundbites, how can you make sure you are an educated consumer of information, as well as an educated voter?
14. As a culminating activity, instruct students to create their own soundbite tweets on behalf of candidates. Depending on your class size and time available, you may want to divide students into small groups and assign them each a candidate (remember to include third party and down ballot candidates). You could also assign each group a key issue and have them create a Twitter dialogue between candidates (i.e. Governor McCrory and Attorney General Cooper fire back and forth on public education funding). Distribute markers and printer or chart paper to each group.
15. Here are some suggested guidelines for each Tweet. Students should try to encapsulate soundbite politics in each tweet:
- Limit your tweet to 140 characters.
 - Use at least two elements of political propaganda.
 - Create at least one original hashtag for each tweet.
 - Create a new Twitter biography for your candidate that encapsulates their key attributes.
 - Include a graphic or picture with the tweet

Elements of Propaganda Handout

- **Emotional appeal:** Appealing to the emotions of your audience. For example, when a propagandist warns members of her audience that disaster will result if they do not follow a particular course of action, she is using fear appeal.
- **Glittering generalities:** A glittering generality device seeks to make us approve and accept without examining the evidence. Glittering generalities include phrases such as “We believe in”, “fight for”, and “live by virtue”. They also include words about which we have deep-set ideas, such as civilization, Christianity, good, proper, right, democracy, patriotism, motherhood, fatherhood, science, medicine, health, and love.
- **Testimonials:** Famous people or figures who will appear trustworthy speak to the audience.
- **Bandwagon:** The basic theme of the band wagon appeal is that "everyone else is doing it, and so should you."
- **Plain-folks:** By using the plain-folks technique, speakers attempt to convince their audience that they, and their ideas, are "of the people."
- **Scientific approach:** Using scientific jargon (i.e. numbers, statistics, data, etc.) to convince your audience.
- **Snob appeal:** Giving the impression that people of wealth and prestige are on board.
- **Card stacking:** Only presenting one side of the issue/situation.
- **Transfer:** Transfer is a device by which the propagandist carries over the authority, sanction, and prestige of something we respect and revere to something he would have us accept.
- **Name-calling:** The name-calling technique links a person, or idea, to a negative symbol. The propagandist who uses this technique hopes that the audience will reject the person or the idea on the basis of the negative symbol, instead of looking at the available evidence.
- **Euphemisms:** The propagandist attempts to pacify the audience in order to make an unpleasant reality more palatable. This is accomplished by using words that are bland and euphemistic. An example is during war time, since war is particularly unpleasant, military discourse is full of euphemisms. In the 1940's, America changed the name of the War Department to the Department of Defense.



How Clinton aims to trump Trump on Twitter

By Nancy Scola

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Source: <http://www.politico.com/story/2016/06/hillary-clinton-trump-twitter-224197>

Hillary Clinton's "delete your account" moment was no fluke: Her tweet heard round the world was just the most viral example of her newly aggressive effort to take the 2016 fight directly to Donald Trump on his favorite social-media turf.

After a long primary campaign in which Trump has used Twitter to pump out an endless stream of taunts at rivals and gobble up news coverage, Clinton's campaign has rolled out a strategy in recent weeks to turn the presumptive GOP nominee's own words against him — with some sly sarcasm and snark. Her barbs may appear off the cuff but are sometimes planned and edited well in advance, making the Clinton-Trump war on Twitter an extension of the contrast between their distinct political styles: staff-driven and tightly scripted versus shoot-from-the-hip, aggressive and biting.

Thursday's skirmish represented the peak Twitter moment of the 2016 campaign so far. When Trump tweeted out an attack on President Barack Obama's endorsement of "Crooked Hillary," her campaign responded five minutes later with "Delete your account" — a time-honored social media jibe that quickly became her most popular tweet ever, with more than 420,000 retweets and over half a million likes by Friday afternoon. (That far surpassed the traffic of Trump's infamous "Taco Bowl" tweet from Cinco de Mayo.)

Trump waited more than two hours to tweet a response to Clinton: "How long did it take your staff of 823 people to think that up — and where are your 33,000 emails that you deleted?"

Clinton's team also prepared a Twitter trap for her rival last week, when she delivered a blistering speech in San Diego that denounced Trump's worldview as a series of "bizarre rants, personal feuds, and outright lies." When Trump tweeted that she was telling tall tales — "She made up things that I said or believe but have no basis in fact. Not honest!" — her account dryly responded, "You literally said all those things," linking to a page that listed dozens of Trump's statements on topics like torture, terrorism, Mexico, Russia and the pope.

According to the Clinton campaign, her tweet was viewed more than 2 million times.

The Clinton campaign says it teed up that tweet hours before her speech, assuming — correctly — that Trump would take the bait. And that's actually a strategy that Twitter advises the campaigns to follow: gaming out future events and storing up especially savvy tweets, including GIFs and video, that might match those situations.

"The Clinton campaign is particularly good at planning to be spontaneous," says Twitter spokesman Nick Pacilio.

Her campaign also recently began tweeting short clips, set to "Hail to the Chief," featuring Trump in his own words on topics like pregnancy ("an inconvenience for a business") and prisoners of war ("I like people who weren't captured"). It tweeted out a chart slamming Trump on his claims of foreign policy experience: "Donald Trump has never negotiated a ceasefire, but he can throw a mean pageant!"

“There are two ways to get compelling content out on social media,” Clinton campaign spokesman Jesse Ferguson said in an interview. “One is to be over the top, insulting and saying outrageous things — otherwise known as the Trump strategy. And one is to be fair, accurate, targeted and informative. That’s very much what we’re doing.”

Many allies see Clinton treading a path spearheaded by Massachusetts Sen. Elizabeth Warren, a favorite among progressive Democrats who has made sport of going after Trump on Twitter.

“Elizabeth Warren has shown it’s possible to both be strong on substance and throw strong punches,” says Adam Green, co-founder of the Progressive Change Campaign Committee. “Clinton’s joining Warren in the sandbox, punching the bully in the face, and pivoting to substantive ideas along the way.”

The Trump campaign did not respond to a request for comment.

Clinton still faces a tall order to match Trump’s intensity on Twitter, which he has used relentlessly to promote himself and attack his enemies since signing on in 2009. He has amassed 8.8 million followers — some 2 million more than Clinton, who didn’t join until 2013 — and has compiled a large body of work: about 32,000 tweets, compared with Clinton’s 5,900.

Trump’s posts, too, regularly get tens of thousands of “likes,” such as when he wrote on Monday that “Crooked Hillary Clinton has not held a news conference in more than 7 months. Her record is so bad she is unable to answer tough questions!”

The candidates' personalities find echoes in their Twitter accounts. Trump’s tweeting style seems to match the candidate, and his tweets are often unorthodox in grammar and spelling — including his misspellings of “teleprompter” [sic] and the defense he offered for the size of his campaign staff: “Small is good, flexible, save money, and number one!” Clinton’s tweets, in contrast, appear much more scripted and deliberate.

Trump has talked about his appreciation for Twitter as a tool to confront his critics. “For years, if somebody did bad stuff to me, I couldn’t fight back,” Trump told Fox News’ Sean Hannity last year. “Now I have @realDonaldTrump and I can sort of tweet some bad stuff about them, and if people like it, it’s all over the world.”

He’s taken that approach into the campaign, including his earlier battle with GOP rivals Marco Rubio and Ted Cruz. “Leighweight [sic] chocker [sic] Marco Rubio looks like a little boy on stage,” he tweeted in February, before replacing that post with a correctly spelled version. “Be careful, Lyin’ Ted, or I will spill the beans on your wife!” he tweeted to Cruz the following month, inspiring a frenzy of media speculation about what information he was threatening to reveal.

Trump was still fully at it Friday, blasting out counterattacks on “Goofy Elizabeth Warren.”

Clinton, meanwhile, has had a famously fraught relationship with technology. She struggled to work a fax machine, according to emails released in the ongoing investigation of her use of a private server as secretary of State. Her staff, at the time, noted that she wasn’t comfortable checking messages on a desktop computer.

Obama joked at this year's White House Correspondents' Association Dinner that Clinton's pitch to young voters was "a little bit like your relative who just signed up for Facebook: 'Dear America, did you get my poke?' ... Love, Aunt Hillary."

Still, she is not entirely new to wielding Twitter as a 2016 weapon. As Trump and his GOP opponents went at it during a shout-filled March debate, her campaign tweeted an animated GIF showing herself looking bored, head in hand, an image provocatively plucked from her daylong Capitol Hill testimony on the Benghazi attacks. Her post was retweeted 25,000 times, making it the most popular tweet of the Republicans' debate night.

As her campaign looks past Bernie Sanders to a general election face-off with Trump, it's increasingly trying to use the real estate mogul's voluminous statements against him in a kind of social media jujitsu.

Take Trump's now-infamous tweet showing himself and a taco bowl with the phrase "I love Hispanics!" When he later suggested that a federal judge couldn't act fairly in a case involving Trump University because of his Mexican heritage, the Clinton campaign took to Twitter to declare: "So much for the taco bowls."

The Clinton camp is hoping her boosted Twitter presence finds a ready audience in a press that is increasingly challenging Trump's utterances. In that way, Clinton is able to inject her take into news stories even as she has gone months without holding a news conference.

"It's the quickest way to make sure the media has the facts Trump likes to ignore," says Ferguson, the Clinton campaign spokesman.

In many ways, rapid response has been a feature of Clinton's political toolbox for decades. She came up with the name for the "war room" made famous by George Stephanopoulos, Paul Begala and James Carville during her husband's 1992 presidential campaign. The tech weapons of choice back then were fax machines and early mobile phones, but the aim was much the same — using speed and aggression to try to outfox the George H.W. Bush campaign.

Even Clinton allies say she has to take care in how she responds to Trump in real time. In March, former Obama campaign manager David Plouffe fretted that her challenge would be to respond to Trump's often colorful and controversial commentary without engaging in the sort of name-calling that seemed to damage Rubio's prospects near the end of his candidacy.

"You're literally never going to sleep, because you do not know what's going to come out of this guy's mouth," Plouffe said of Trump. "How do you compete with that? Do you be more crazy? Do you say more insulting things? That's not really going to be Hillary Clinton's M.O., but somehow you've got to deal with that."

Clinton, though, has lately indicated she's not above provoking Trump into a social media clash.

"We all know the tools Donald Trump brings to the table: bragging, mocking, composing nasty tweets," she said in her California speech on the Republican's qualifications in global statecraft. She added, grinning, "I'm willing to bet he's writing a few right now."