

THE LIBERALS REAP WHAT THEY SOW: WHY THEIR NEGATIVE ADS FAILED

Jonathan Rose

In the 2004 election, the Liberal attack ads on Stephen Harper and the hidden Conservative agenda were effective because they were performance-validated by gaffes in the Conservative campaign. In 2006, the Liberals' attack ads blew up in their faces and became an object of comedic ridicule because the scary Stephen Harper depicted in them was nowhere to be seen. Instead, Harper was inoculated against the demonizing effects by his calm, measured demeanour during the Conservative policy rollouts in the first half of the campaign. By the time the Liberals delivered their negative ads to market on January 10, including the infamous "soldiers in the streets" spot, it was too late to portray Harper as scary. He was on television January 9 and 10, winning the debates in a quiet, reasonable tone of voice. Jonathan Rose examines the negative ads of the Liberals, Conservatives and NDP, and explains why some worked and some didn't. He concludes with some recommendations for improving the environment of campaign advertising.



L'argument des intentions cachées de Stephen Harper avait fonctionné en 2004, en raison des impairs de la campagne conservatrice. Mais en 2006, les attaques des libéraux se sont retournées contre eux et les ont ridiculisés parce que le terrible Harper qu'ils dénonçaient brillait par son absence. Le chef conservateur s'est en effet immunisé contre toute diabolisation en manifestant une assurance paisible lors du dévoilement de son programme en première moitié de campagne. Et quand les libéraux ont lancé le 10 janvier leurs publicités négatives, notamment leur dérisoire message montrant des soldats envahissant nos rues, il était trop tard pour le dépeindre sous des traits menaçants. Les 9 et 10 janvier, il remportait les débats télévisés sans se départir de son calme. Jonathan Rose analyse les publicités négatives des libéraux, des conservateurs et des néo-démocrates, explique pourquoi certaines ont mieux fonctionné que d'autres et formule des recommandations pour assainir les pratiques en la matière.

What a difference a year and a half makes. Writing here about the 2004 federal election I argued that the Liberals had successfully planted the seeds of doubt by engaging in negative advertising about Stephen Harper. The campaign was effective in part because it tied together Liberal claims of the Conservatives' "secret agenda" with the public's apprehension about Harper.

In the 2006 election, the Liberals attempted the same strategy of negative advertising. This time the negative ads harvested by the Liberals yielded a very different crop. The differences between the two elections highlight the different campaigns and also demonstrate the limitations of negative advertising. This campaign affords us an opportunity

to scrutinize the usefulness of negative campaigning that was endemic to this election and to explore how campaign communications are conducted elsewhere.

The great cultural theorist Raymond Williams referred to advertising as a "magic system" where an attempt is made by the magic of advertising to relate an object with values to which it has no real reference. Successful ads — whether they are political or commercial — make this illusion work. But if the trick fails, it is exposed as the sham it is. In the 2004 election, the trick of negative advertising worked; this election it did not. What accounts for the change in fortune for the Liberals during this time? The calibre of the campaign, the plausibility of the ads, the timing of the ads and

the role of the media all conspired to dull the impact of the Liberals' advertising campaign.

Only very rarely does advertising work in isolation to other factors. One of the reasons why the Liberals' negative ad campaign was successful in the 2004 election was that their campaign was virtually error free while the Conservatives' error-prone campaign

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reinforced the Liberals' message that Harper could not be trusted. Advertising is almost always an adjunct to campaign communications. The leaders' debates, media reporting about the national campaign and conversations at the proverbial water cooler all shape and reinforce the messages in ads.

The Liberal campaign in 2006 was marked by a series of missteps and communications blunders that affected how the ads were received. Some of them were gaffes that were controllable such as Scott Reid's infamous suggestion that the proposed Conservative child care allowance would be blown on "beer and popcorn." Or Rob Klanders, an Ontario Liberal organizer, whose puerile comment on his website about Olivia Chow was just embarrassing. In the last week of the campaign, CAW leader Buzz Hargrove, campaigning with Paul Martin, likened the National Citizens' Coalition to a "secret society" and implored Quebecers to vote Bloc over the Conservatives. Like the other blunders, that meant Martin was knocked off his message to mop up the damage left by someone else. In Hargrove's case it meant that Martin's sound bite that day was an endorsement of Stephen Harper's patriotism.

While some of these might have been avoidable, other issues that damaged their campaign could not have been foreseen. The RCMP investigation over increased stock-trading activity prior to the government's announcement on income trusts was just a case of bad timing for the Liberals. The Toronto shooting of a young woman on Boxing Day capitalized on the Conservatives' get-tough-

on-crime agenda. All these took attention away from the Liberal claims that a Conservative government would be a scary prospect and directed attention to the Liberals' own failings.

A second reason that the Liberal advertising campaign was ineffective this time had to do with the plausibility of the arguments in the ads. Prior to Christmas, the Liberals ran a low key but positive ad campaign. The Conservatives, on the other hand, aired policy intensive ads on child care, taxes, seniors and crime — all planks laid out in their platform and reinforced by the campaign. The consistency between Harper's smoothly run campaign and policy-centred advertising made Liberal claims of Conservatives' secret agenda less plausible.

The agenda had already been set by the second half when the Liberals began their negative ads in earnest. It was this second half that was most noteworthy.

The now famous series of Liberal attack ads began on January 10, almost two weeks before election day. Each featured the out-of-focus face of Stephen Harper and was narrated by a female voice accompanied by a militaristic drumbeat. The camera pulled back to reveal a tightly cropped, sinis-

ter shot of Harper as the tag line is revealed. A subject of some derision in the press, mocked by political blogs and fodder for comedy programs, one of the infamous tag lines read, "No. We did not make that up. We're not allowed to make stuff up." In all the ads, the audio was reproduced in Courier font on the screen which reinforced the austere simplicity of the production values.

Liberal ads may have been "truthful" in that those that quoted Harper faithfully represented what he said, but they were not credible because of the chasm between the scary Harper in the ads and the cautious Harper in the campaign. Whether Harper had changed since 2004 or

whether in this election he had done a better job of moderating himself, only time will tell. In elections, where image is often a replacement for reality, the reality of Harper did not match the image offered by the Liberals.

The Conservatives responded with negative ads such as "Can We Believe Him?" and "Entitlements," both of which reinforced doubts about Liberal ethics that were driven home by Harper in the pre-Christmas campaign and by the media coverage of the campaign. It wasn't that these two ads were any less negative than the Liberal ads but rather that, like any good ad, they successfully tapped into viewers' already held opinions — however latent — about the Liberal Party. More significantly they pre-empted the Liberal ads that followed and inoculated the Conservatives against the soon-to-be-aired Liberal ads.

The darker of the two, "Entitlements," was a machine gun volley of disparate images and quick shots. It began with Paul Martin saying, "The Liberal Party is not corrupt" — a mantra repeated in the background throughout the ad. Over this mantra was a visual of a front page of *The Globe and Mail* that read "Martin Liberals took illicit cash, probe told"

followed by text and audio quotes from Justice Gomery saying “the heart of an elaborate kickback scheme” and “the culture of entitlement.” The final element that refuted Martin’s claim showed an exasperated David Dingwall appearing before a House of Commons committee saying, “I’m entitled to my entitlements.” The effect of the authoritative claims of a newspaper and a judge, juxtaposed with a politician’s denial, reinforced the primary claim of the ad: namely that voters couldn’t trust the Liberals. The style of quick, rapid-fire shots added to the sense of urgency and chaos that the Conservatives wanted to create.

Because television is an audio-visual medium, it is not a surprise that this ad used both to knit together an argument. The associative logic of advertising is well suited to television where arguments and claims don’t have to be graced with evidence to be plausible. What was “the heart of the kickback scheme” and who represented “the culture of entitlement” stated by Justice Gomery were left unsaid. The inference, however, was clear.

The failure of the Liberal ads may shed some insight into the degree to which Canadians are growing increasingly weary of negative advertising. While it is true that all parties used negative ads to some degree, the Liberals’ flood in the last two weeks reminds us of the tipping point between reinforcement and redundancy. With 12 ads running at the same time on a similar theme of distrust for Harper, it is possible that the Liberal message lost its power.

Communication scholars call the phenomenon of being inured by repeated viewings of provocative images “compassion fatigue.” The lawyers for the LAPD officers charged with the beating of Rodney King showed the tape of their clients’ assault over and over again to inoculate the jury against the horrors of

what they were watching. Arguably, the saturation of provocative ads by the Liberals unwittingly had the same effect. In early January, prior to the Liberal flood of ads, the Conservatives ran an ad called “They’ll Go Negative” which primed viewers to expect the soon-to-be-shown Liberal ads. The claim made by the Tory ad dovetailed well with the substance of what would shortly be broadcast by the Liberals. The Conservatives followed the principle that less is more by using negative ads in a strategic and timely fashion. If elections are warfare, their ads were the precision

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guided bombs to the Liberals’ carpet bombing strategy.

While the advertising data from this election are not yet known, we do know that in the last federal election the Liberals spent over 60 percent of their total campaign expenditures on advertising compared to around 41 percent for the Conservatives and New Democrats. If the proportion is the same for this year, it means that over \$10 million was spent on advertising by the Liberals. In the two previous elections in 2004 and 2000, the Liberals outspent other parties on advertising. There is no reason to think this trend would be halted in this election.

While these may be important reasons to explain the failure of the Liberal negative advertising, a more compelling reason may be found in the media reporting of the leaders themselves. According to the election media study by McGill’s Observatory on Media and Public Policy, Paul Martin was viewed much more negatively by the press than any of the other federal leaders. Some of this negativity was reflected in the media’s coverage of advertising. It also demonstrates the reality that the Liberals and Paul Martin were unable to convert the paid media of their advertising into positive earned media by the press.

The effectiveness of ads can be seen in two ways. First, ads may reinforce, change or affect public opinion by the claims they make. This is the ostensible purpose of advertising: to prime voters and attempt to agenda-set the campaign. Second, and perhaps more significantly, the impact of ads can be measured by media reporting of those ads. This earned media is arguably more significant than the paid media of the ads themselves as it provides context for understanding them. In this election, one of the important media narratives was the depths to which the Liberals descended in their advertising. News stories abounded that examined the Liberals’ advertising strategy. Often those stories were more negative than the earned media on opposition party ads.

When political parties use negative advertising they straddle the fine line between drawing attention to the object of the ad and drawing attention to themselves, the communicator of the ad. If done correctly, the messenger should receive less press than the message. The Liberals got it wrong by making the sponsor of the ad the subject of the story. The earned media which should have been about the



CBC Photo

CBC anchor Peter Mansbridge and Liberal Leader Paul Martin are all smiles in a pre-game photo op before a CBC town hall meeting on January 12. The program itself took a much more serious turn, especially when Martin acknowledged he had approved the Liberal “soldiers in the streets” ad, before adding he hadn’t approved it going to air.

object of the ads was about the party that aired them.

All negative advertising is clearly not created equally. Negative political ads can be comparative and policy focused, personal and ad hominem, or implicitly negative. There are different criteria used by the media and voters to judge each of these kinds of ads. Ads which compare party platforms may be negative by the distinctions they draw between the policy differences. One of the most negative ads in the 2004 election played on the Conservatives’ support for the Iraq war. While this

drew much attention by the media, it was defended by the Liberals as making clear the policy differences between the two parties. Comparative ads that are negative allow parties to claim that the ads are warranted on the basis of drawing distinctions between party platforms. The same cannot be said for personal attack ads. The Liberal campaign relied almost exclusively on ads whose focus was their opponent’s character, motives or actions. The series of closely cropped images of Stephen Harper’s face that dominated the Liberal ads were seen as personal assault ads rather than the more

favourably viewed comparison ads.

Building on the work of Anthony Downs, Samuel Popkin argues that voters use shortcuts to simplify the act of voting. These shortcuts can be dominant symbols found in ads, the opinion of a favourite columnist or a voter’s perception of leadership. The negative ads used by all parties attempted to create these cognitive shortcuts either explicitly or implicitly. For example, the NDP in its ad “Gift” used a lump of coal and a boot to communicate implicitly what the Liberals were giving Canadians and what Canadians should give the Liberals. (It was the first time we’ve seen Christmas

used in a political ad in Canada.) The Liberals, on the other hand, explicitly labelled Stephen Harper as the condensation symbol for leadership and trust. This symbol as a frame failed because for many voters trust and integrity were ballot box questions directed at the Liberals and not the Conservatives.

One of the more common claims about negative advertising is that though no one likes it, parties have no option but to “go negative.” The argument is that in a very tightly scripted race, political parties need to rely on negative advertising to distinguish themselves from other parties, to maintain the interest of voters and to create wedge issues for policy differentiation.

Some have feared that our election campaigns have become more Americanized and cite the increased use of negative ads as evidence of this. They argue that parties in Canadian elections routinely use negative ads, that elections are dominated by party leaders rather than parties and that the increased professionalization of campaigns is proof of this convergence. While there are similarities, the points of departure are perhaps worth mentioning. Much of the negative campaigning in the US is third party advertising and the courts’ decision here to ban third party advertising as a reasonable limit on freedom of expression is a profound difference in our elections. The limit placed on campaign expenses and corporate and individual donations serves as a moderating influence on the always sticky relationship between money and politics. The recent changes to the *Elections Act* guarantee funding to political parties which suggests that in Canada, the state is willing to take a more interventionist role in the life of parties than in the US.

We are, however, like the US in that the state has little to say about campaign advertising. The experiences of other nations suggest that

the state’s involvement in regulating election advertising may go some way in enhancing the public debate that elections afford. An examination of those options might do much to inspire our imagination about what might be done here.

In Britain, election advertising by parties is prohibited. Instead political parties are given free time on national television in proportion to their electoral standing in the previous election. These party election broadcasts (PEBs) are several minutes in length allowing for a more nuanced and thoughtful discussion of a party platform. To be sure, some take the format of a “biopic,” a political biography that extols the leader by glorifying his or her humble roots. Because they are longer they have the potential to be better vehicles than ads for providing information to the electorate.

PEBs do have several advantages over our election spots. First, because they are significantly longer than a 30-second spot, they make detailed arguments on policy areas. Second, because there are so few of them, they are more likely to be seen as credible sources of information. PEBs are based on the principle that less is more — something that our parties might be wise to heed. Third, because their allocation is based on electoral strength, minor parties, who under our system cannot afford network airtime, have access to public airwaves.

The German model is a hybrid of the British and Canadian systems, with a twist. Public television stations give political parties free airtime — similar to the PEBs in Britain. Private stations sell airtime to parties as in Canada but at a lower rate than commercial advertising. The effect of this is to lower entrance barriers for smaller parties and to allow for longer ads, usually upwards of two minutes. In Germany the principle that underlies broadcasting ads is equal opportunity for all parties. If a station accepts ads from one party, it must accept them from all.

Even if we don’t radically restructure our electoral process by banning election ads outright, we could civilize the process by limiting attack ads. Since the Canadian state already contributes campaign funding, it might be time to put on the agenda the regulation of campaign advertising.

Finland and Israel both have restrictions on the content of their ads. In Finland, comparative or critical party ads are allowed but negative ads targeted at a leader are prohibited. Such a rule would eliminate virtually all of the ads now broadcast by the Conservatives and Liberals. Israeli regulations adopted here would eliminate some of the more egregiously offensive ads. The Liberals’ infamous 2004 election ad showing a tank and gun pointed at the camera would not be allowed in Israel where any military images are prohibited in political spots. It’s not just ads that are regulated in Israel. Until a few years ago the very appearance of candidates or leaders was banned in news coverage during the latter part of elections. Imagine an election campaign devoid of the manufactured photo-ops so beloved by our political parties. The impact that this would have on the way leaders campaign and reporters file stories would be significant.

Election advertising performs a number of important campaign functions such as agenda setting, political mobilization, persuasion and, perhaps, changing voting behaviour. In this election, the advertising campaigns of all major national parties reflected the unclear nature of the ballot box question. The Liberal ads failed in part because the Liberal campaign failed. Moreover, this campaign reminds us that negative advertising, if used injudiciously and without the support of a strong campaign or positive media coverage, can fail on all of these counts.

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