

TELEVISION COVERAGE OF THE CAMPAIGN: "WE'VE GOT TO DO THIS DIFFERENTLY!"

By Steve Friedman

It's the fall of 1991, and all through the corridors of journalism the debate begins anew. How are we going to cover the upcoming campaign? To many, in this era of perceived network news cutbacks, the debate centers on economics. That is certainly a component, but it's by no means the only one. The debate on how to cover politics on TV is not new. And the changing nature of politics, which has made the political conventions a non-news story and not worthy of gavel to gavel coverage, must be taken into account.

My first experience with network coverage came in 1972. After the disaster in Chicago for the Democrats and Hubert Humphrey in 1968, and the shrewd way the Republican strategists used the idea that if the Democrats couldn't manage a convention they could hardly manage the country, it was clear that the political wave of the future was well manicured conventions. The parties would use them as a four day prime time commercial on the three networks and 80% of America would be forced to watch. That message didn't get to George McGovern and his crowd, though, and his acceptance speech in 1972 was turned into midnight mass. But, the Nixon crowd took Miami with well mannered precision.

By the mid-1970s film was on the way out. Live minicams and quick tape turnaround was in. The party's candidate was determined long before the conventions. By 1976 journalists said, "it's a new world out there and we will do politics differently." But that was talk—there was no action. So, the three networks did as they always did—the floor reporters went off to New York and Kansas City and did their marathon coverage and made big hits out of *Citizen Kane* and *Casablanca* run on the independent stations. Television, the greatest democracy in the world, with people voting with their clickers, showed the TV executives the light: No one wanted to watch these political orgies. With plunging ratings, the word went out—never again. Well, in 1980, the "again" happened—the "never" didn't. It was off to Detroit for Ronald Reagan and Madison Square Garden for Jimmy Carter. Oh yes, Roone Arledge tried. There was a special edition of *20/20* on the first Monday of the first convention followed by some entertainment and a promise of a wrap-up at 10 pm. That lasted one day; the pressure from within and without drove ABC back to the fold of complete coverage.

Conventions weren't the only case where everyone followed the perceived leader. During the primaries, each network assigned crews, reporters and producers to each of the ten or twelve major candidates. Then on the evening news with our best crews, reporters and producers assigned to the candidates,

we presented story after story featuring carefully planned campaign events. Again, the clicker ruled and network newscasts suffered a drop in viewership. And, again the moaning was heard, "We've got to do this differently."

By 1984, CNN was alive and kicking. Network shares and profits were dropping, and surely all would change. At NBC, where I was doing the *TODAY Show*, there were meetings upon meetings where all agreed it was time to change. But, the anchor booths were in place in San Francisco and Dallas. Even though *Citizen Kane* and *Casablanca* were older and shown a few times more, the networks were wiped out by these movies of yesteryear, as one of Hollywood's favorite sons was ready to wipe out Mr. Mondale. And again on the campaign trail there were endless reports from airport campaign stops—and weren't all those balloons pretty.

Flash forward to 1988—a year I was away from the network fray preparing to premier *USA Today* on TV. Then we saw the start of a real change. The conventions were still no story, and now NBC and ABC said they would start later and not turn over all of prime time automatically to cover the conventions. But, cutting to a half hour here and a half hour there really didn't transform coverage. And, alas, on TV the campaign of 1988 looked pretty much like all the others.

While I've concentrated here on the conventions and primaries, the network news television nightmare continues after the parties have chosen their nominees. The candidates have taken a page out of movie publicity campaigns. Instead of letting the "Big Boys" on the network have the only access, they do what I call the interview-thon. They go to a major city of the state, usually at the airport, invite the local media to do "one-on-one" interviews or even better set up a satellite link with local stations during their early evening newscast where the candidate is interviewed live at five. Since there is a five minute rotation and really no personal contact, it becomes more important for the candidate to have a canned pitch which is repeated over and over and over again. Spontaneity again has left the political process; neither TV nor the voter is well-served by the politics which has evolved in the satellite age.

That brings us to where we are today. No one feels 1992 will be like the others. In July, NBC announced an agreement with PBS to let PBS do the brunt of convention coverage with help from NBC. NBC will go on with what I expect will be an hour a night of coverage. That is but one of many changes we will see in 1992. I would not be surprised to see one of the big three anchors cover the New York or Houston conventions from the election studio in New York. I am not planning to cover the campaign in the traditional way, but for competitive reasons do not want to divulge my plans here. I expect, if not in 1992 then by 1996, to see a real debate between the candidates and not these stiff, formal round robins the League of Women Voters and the candidates have stuck us with in the past. For the campaign junkies, there is always CNN and C-

Looking to the '92 Elections/Friedman continued

SPAN. By certainly no later than 1996 you will see Republican TV and Democratic TV. One station for each can be dialed up on your 100 station multiplex box.

To survive and thrive in the last decade of the 20th century the three commercial networks must find a way to present their political coverage in the context of this ever changing television landscape. Business as usual won't do. It won't do because of the weakened financial position in which we find ourselves, but it won't do also for artistic and informational reasons. The NBC Nightly News and ABC's World News

Tonight use the "what" happened of the day as a jumping off point to cover the "why" and the "what it means" aspects of the news. This works. This is our place. Nowhere is this interpretation and analysis more important than in covering politics in a national election year. We can leave the comings and goings to CNN or the proposed Republican or Democratic Channel. The context of the day—that's the job for ABC, NBC, and CBS.

Steve Friedman is executive producer, NBC Nightly News

The Viewing Record: The Networks' Declining TV Ratings and Shares for Broadcasts of Republican and Democratic Conventions 1956 through 1988

Year	Network	Prime Time		Democratic	
		Republican Rating	Share	Rating	Share
1956	NBC	11.9	32	8.7	32
	CBS	14.1	38	12.0	42
	ABC	4.1	11	3.3	11
1960	NBC	14.4	43	14.1	40
	CBS	10.1	30	10.6	31
	ABC	3.0	9	3.6	1
1964	NBC	13.6	37	15.3	36
	CBS	8.4	23	11.0	26
	ABC	3.4	9	4.4	10
1968	NBC	13.8	33	15.1	35
	CBS	9.7	23	13.7	32
	ABC	7.8	18	9.8	23
1972	NBC	8.9	24	9.5	23
	CBS	9.6	21	9.0	22
	ABC	9.2	20	7.6	18
1976	NBC	10.9	22	8.1	18
	CBS	11.0	22	8.9	19
	ABC	8.8	17	8.0	17
1980	NBC	7.2	15	9.0	18
	CBS	7.8	17	9.1	19
	ABC	6.7	14	8.3	16
1984	NBC	6.2	11	7.2	13
	CBS	6.3	12	8.5	16
	ABC	6.8	13	7.5	14
1988	NBC	6.2	12	7.0	13
	CBS	5.7	11	6.1	12
	ABC	6.7	13	6.5	12

Note: Rating = percentage of all homes with TVs that are watching a program during an average minute. Share = percentage of those homes which have a TV turned on that are watching a program during an average minute.

Source: A.C. Nielsen (provided by NBC).