

Ethics of Quote Approval: Journalists' Contribution to Message Control

In *The Boys on the Bus*, Timothy Crouse documented the give-and-take of candidate operatives and reporters covering the 1972 presidential campaign. More recently, Elizabeth Skewes observed how relationships between campaign strategists and reporters had evolved during the 2000 and 2004 election cycles, in *Message Control: How News is Made on the Presidential Campaign Trail*. Reporters complain about limited access to candidates and the demise of authentic, spontaneous interviews. Campaign strategists grumble about a gaffe-obsessed media fixated on stray messages that become fodder for de-contextualized sound bites. Damaging quotes are recycled for days in the cable news shows, or much longer, as evident in Eric Fehrstrom's "Etch A Sketch" comment on CNN. Such comments go viral, of course, and show up in negative campaign ads.

As the *New York Times* recently observed, "The push and pull over what is on the record is one of journalism's perennial battles" (Peters, 2012). However, "with a millisecond Twitter news cycle and an unforgiving, gaffe-obsessed media culture, politicians and their advisers are routinely demanding that reporters allow them final editing power over any published quotations." On the campaign trail and back in DC, quote approval has become commonplace.

Implementation

- Ask students to read the *New York Times* story on quote approval; see the reference below.
- Show NBC's interview with Mitt Romney on the summer 2012 London Olympics. First, show only the response itself, when Romney questions the readiness of London for the games. Then, show MSNBC or ABC's packaged segments, which frame the response as a gaffe. An instructor might add that even Fox News pundits described Romney's comments as a gaffe.
- Ask students whether they appreciate candidates when they offer spontaneous and authentic responses, especially when statements are provocative rather than simply predictable.
- Next, ask students to debate the following premise:

In light of US news media's fixation on identifying and exploiting provocative candidate statements, requirements for quote approval are ethically valid as they cut down on "gaffes" driving the news cycle.

Impact

In a shift of perspectives, this exercise encourages students to consider whether journalism itself is at least partly to blame for the message-control strategies that campaign operatives increasingly deploy. An implicit assumption in journalism education is the notion that reporting practices that serve the Fourth Estate are also beneficial for electoral democracy. From a political science view, however, the mediatization of the modern campaign arguable entails dysfunctional outcomes, as Thomas Pattern argued in *Out of Order*. Voters are ill served when

candidates approach campaigning as strategic communication rather than an authentic debate over policies and platforms.

References

- Crouse, T. (1973). *The boys on the bus*. New York: Ballantine Books.
- Patterson, T. (1993). *Out of order*. New York: Alfred A. Knopf.
- Peters, J. W. (2012, July 15). Latest word on the trail? I take it back. *New York Times*. Retrieved from <http://www.nytimes.com>
- Skewes, E. A. (2007). *Message control: How news is made on the presidential campaign trail*. Lanham, MD: Rowman & Littlefield.