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IMAGE BITE NEWS:

THE VISUAL COVERAGE OF ELECTIONS ON U.S. TELEVISION, 1968–1992

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Abstract

Presidential election reports have grown faster-paced and more visual: journalists appeared more frequently and dramatically on screen, and other images and video clips multiplied. This transformation of network visual practices parallels the shift to sound bite content, emphasizing journalists over the political process, with implications for the public interest.

American television is widely thought to have become faster paced and more visual in the past few decades (Gitlin 1987). The pattern also turned up in news. In Graber's (1990) research on network political news during 1985, three of four stories showed visual scenes that appeared on screen for less than twenty seconds. In studies of the shrinking sound bite, both Hallin (1992) and Adatto (1993) noted the faster pacing of news and suggested anecdotally that it had acquired a more-visual character. Based on a close reading, Griffin (1992) observed that "image bites" now far outnumber the sound bites that have received so much attention.

These scholars and others suggest that the faster pacing and visibility of news have more than aesthetic consequences. The new form of reporting may affect the content of newscasts (Altheide 1987), the emphasis on particular actors (Steele & Barnhurst, 1996), the roles of other institutions besides the media (Patterson, 1993), as well as the substance and quality of political information understood by the American public.

Since journalists first identified the changes in news (Menaker, 1972), scholars have called repeatedly for analysis of television visuals. Griffin cites numerous non-visual studies, beginning with Adams and Schreiberman's (1978) edited volume on the state of television news research, that call for "visual analysis," and he observes that "the visual aspects of TV news presentations . . . remain the least scrutinized and the least understood" (Griffin, 1992:122). Scholars began the process of measuring news visuals in the 1980s, but no previously published data document the long-term trends. So we set out to examine and describe the visual side of news over time.

We asked two research questions: First, did the faster pacing measured in the verbal side of election news really extend to the visual side, as previous researchers assert? To answer this question, we measured images shot by shot, using as a model the sound-bite research, which measured the pacing of speech. Second, have television reports on U.S. presidential campaigns become more visual, as journalists and critics aver? To answer this question, we took visual measures of the full reports of election news.

To observe visual regularities, scholars from art, design, and media production use a system of formal elements. Theorists have advanced several slightly different lists of elements, but the most widely used in television comes from Zettl (1990). He lists six: light, color, the two dimensional area within the frame, the third dimension (on the z-axis) suggesting depth and volume, the time and motion continuum, and lastly, sound. Following this scheme, faster-paced, more visual news would have certain formal properties. Faster pacing would be seen in the use of time, as newswriters show more imagery of shorter duration, possibly with increased motion. A more visual news report would have more imagery of all sorts, that is, more elements shown in greater variety and arrayed for greater impact (in a larger relative size, for example).

The formal approach of Zettl and others recognizes that television builds images on the two dimensional surface of the screen, constructing a vision of other dimensions to convey meaning. Several theories help interpret the meanings of these elements. Gestaltists read the way elements form groups, and semioticians analyze the elements as signs (Hartley, 1982). Aesthetic theory suggests that the attributes (such as the scale or color) of the elements establish a hierarchy of meaning, assigning power and weight through visual emphasis (e.g. Bowman, 1968, Dondis, 1973, Barnhurst, 1994). Thus spatial displays of form communicate prestige by assigning greater importance to certain forms. This system of applied media aesthetics — the formal elements such as time, scale, z-axis, and motion and their social meanings — guided our analysis of network political news.

Methods

We examined the coverage of campaigns from 1968 to 1992, selecting twenty weekdays at random during the months of September and October. We sampled newscasts with equal probability from the ABC, CBS, and NBC networks and included all presidential election coverage. For these parameters we closely followed the plan of Hallin's sound bite study,¹ so that our visual results would parallel existing verbal data.

To capture the element of time, we coded the length that any journalist appeared on screen. We used these shots as one unit of analysis ($n = 1,064$). For each shot, we noted whether the person was an anchor or correspondent and coded other formal elements: the journalist's relative size, any motion (of journalist, camera, or environment), and the background (plain, studio set, technical equipment, full-screen chroma key, or on-location). To assess the size of journalists on screen, coders employed the terms from television production: extreme close-up (face only), close-up (head and shoulders), medium shot (from the waist up), long shot (entire person), and extreme long shot. The extreme cases were rare. When coders indicated that the image fell between these prototypical sizes, we assigned the closest category.

We also used the report as a unit of analysis ($n = 365$). From the beginning to end of each campaign story, coders counted the number of other images journalists inserted: film or video clips (b-roll), graphics (such as charts and illustrations), and captions (words used as labels or nominations). Every uninterrupted segment of b-roll was identified by each edit or cut and counted separately. In addition, we counted the number of times journalists appeared on screen and totaled the seconds in these shots for each report.

Two coders viewed the videotapes and coded the elements independently. We compared their decisions for a systematic selection of 8 percent of the sample reports. Reliability coefficients (Scott's pi) between coders ranged from .94 for simple tasks (identifying the background) to .85 for the most complex task (estimating the journalist's screen size), a good level of consistency.

Because our research questions concerned the long-term direction of change, we analyzed the data initially by looking for overall changes, controlling for differences among networks. For ratio measures (length and frequency of images) we used hierarchical multiple regression, and we collapsed nominal measures (scale, motion, and background) into binary variables for logistic regression analysis.² As our results demonstrate, most of the major findings in the study represent significant changes over time. We also subjected each of the yearly differences to tests of significance, in order to identify important moments of change, which we report in the context of evolving network news practices. These statistics tracked consistently with the historical record.

Results

Overall, we found that shots of journalists did appear more frequently and for shorter periods. The scale of a journalist's image also grew larger or more imposing, before more impressive backdrops on the screen. There was very little motion during journalist appearances (and no significant change over time). We did find more frequent and varied use of film clips, nominations, and graphics. Some differences also emerged between anchors and correspondents.

Table 1

Length

Length of journalist shots in seconds

	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992
Mean	32.7	29.2	21.2	15.0	15.6	15.4	13.7
Mode	18	10	13	16	15	15	3
Std deviation	33.0	23.0	15.4	10.1	10.6	11.8	13.9
Shots (n)	142	123	140	184	152	139	184

The length of the shots of journalists got shorter. Journalists shrank how long they appeared on screen by more than half. As the duration of images dropped overall, a plateau emerged. During the 1980s the journalist's average shot lasted about fifteen seconds, for both the mean and the mode. The low variability of the data indicates this practice was fairly standard from 1976 until 1992, when shots got even more brief.

Table 2

Frequency

Frequency of journalist shots per political report

	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992
Mean	1.6	2.4	3.1	3.7	4.4	2.0	4.8
Std deviation	1.0	1.5	2.4	2.8	3.4	1.7	3.6
Reports (n)	84	50	45	49	34	67	36

As the shots got shorter, viewers saw journalists more often. Journalist appearances increased continually and, despite a decline in 1988, became three times as frequent over the period. This represents a significant change ($p < .001$). Greater standard deviations show that how often journalists appeared also became more variable.

Table 3

Scale

Scale of journalist shots by percentage

	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992
Long	0.7	0.0	0.0	3.3	2.7 ^a	0.0	9.2
Medium	47.9	29.3	22.1	42.6	18.4	9.4	19.0
Close-up ^b	51.4	70.7	77.8	54.1	79.0	90.6	71.7

^a Includes extreme long shots, 0.7.

^b Includes extreme close-ups, 0.7 in 1968, 2.1 in 1976, and 0.7 in 1984.

Journalist images became larger, more dramatic elements on the screen. A decline in medium shots (which are found, for example, in the understated framing of British news readers) made room for more drama and intimacy. The share of long shots, in which journalists take to the scene of action, was quite small and increased over a saw-tooth path. Close-ups, which are highly intimate, grew more common, to become the predominant shot. These were all significant trends ($p < .01$). Generally, the increases in long shots and emotive close-ups tended to call attention to journalists.

Table 4

BackgroundBackground of journalist shots by percentage ^a

	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992
Plain	43.7	13.8	42.9	3.8	5.9	0.7	0.5
Studio set, mural	36.6	55.3	25.0	30.1	21.1	30.2	29.9
Studio technology	0.7	0.0	0.0	18.6	34.9	20.1	33.7
Location	16.9	30.9	32.1	47.5	38.2	46.0	35.3

^a Full-screen motion accounts for 2.1 percent in 1968, 2.9 in 1988, and 0.5 in 1992.

Backgrounds behind the journalists also changed, becoming more impressive. The 1968 election reports used a plain background most often, studio sets and location shots less commonly (and almost no technology). By 1992, newscasts included a mix of more complex backgrounds, while the studied neutrality of plain backgrounds almost vanished. The use of studio equipment and technology as a background, suggesting technical competence, knowledge, and currency, increased. Making room for these changes, studio sets and murals declined. In general, all backgrounds from the studio maintained a majority but gradually lost ground to those from on-the-scene reporting. The greatest growth occurred in the use of locations, which lend journalists the authority of the eyewitness. All these changes were significant ($p < .01$).

Table 5

Motion

Motion during journalist shots by percentage

	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992
None	85.9	68.1	80.7	75.7	66.2	80.6	85.1
Journalist	1.4	0.0	0.0	0.0	2.7	1.4	1.1
Camera	9.9	16.8	7.4	10.7	19.6	16.5	10.5
Environment	2.8	15.1	11.9	13.6	11.5	1.4	3.3
Shots (n)	142	119	135	177	148	139	181

Contrary to our initial expectations, we found no significant trends in motion during journalist shots. The camera, journalist, and background showed no movement about three-quarters of the time. What movement we did find was variable, and the camera and environment accounted for most of it. Journalists themselves hardly ever moved but remained like rock-solid figures on the screen, depicted in stable settings with little surrounding motion throughout the period.

Table 6

Images

Other images journalists inserted per report

	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992
Film or video (M)	5.4	13.7	15.5	21.0	22.8	14.9	26.5
(Std deviation)	8.2	12.1	14.2	13.7	15.5	12.1	20.7
Graphics (M)	0.5	1.6	1.0	3.1	3.8	1.9	6.3
(Std deviation)	0.9	1.8	1.3	2.4	2.9	2.5	5.6
Captions (M)	0.7	3.1	2.4	2.5	4.0	1.8	6.0
(Std deviation)	1.1	3.7	5.0	2.1	2.7	2.1	5.5

Besides shots of journalists, other visual images on screen during election reports grew in number (significant changes in each case, $p < .001$). Film or video clips quadrupled before a 1988 dip and, by 1992, ended up almost five times their starting frequency. Many of these were edits, cutting away pauses and extraneous moments from the videotape. Graphics followed the same pattern and increased even more than any other type of visuals, at 18 percent of variance. The variability of graphics also increased, as indicated by standard deviations. Captions followed an uneven path, but ended up many more times as common in the typical report filed in 1992 than they were at the beginning of the period.

Anchors & Correspondents

For every shot of a journalist, we coded whether the person on screen was an anchor or correspondent, which yielded data about the length and frequency of their images, their relative screen size, and the accompanying background.

Table 7

Shot Length

Length of anchor or correspondent shots in seconds

	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992
Anchor	29.2	27.5	18.9	15.5	14.6	15.7	13.5
Shots (n)	93	76	86	111	84	92	105
Correspondent	39.2	32.1	24.8	14.1	16.8	15.0	14.0
Shots (n)	49	47	54	73	68	47	79

The length of both anchor and correspondent shots went down as the pacing of the newscast picked up, but the decline for correspondents was much sharper than for anchors. While correspondent appearances shrunk by more than two-thirds their 1968 length, anchors lost only about half.

Table 8

Shot Frequency

Mean frequency of anchor or correspondent shots per report

	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992
Anchor	1.1	1.5	1.9	2.2	2.4	1.3	2.6
Correspondent	0.5	0.9	1.2	1.4	2.0	0.7	2.1

The frequency of showing their own images went up for both groups, but especially for correspondents. Correspondents appeared four times as often by 1992 (anchor shots doubled).

Table 9

Shot Scale

Scale of anchor or correspondent shots by percentage

	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992
Anchor							
Long	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.8	2.4 ^a	0.0	9.5
Medium	59.1	21.1	12.8	50.0	14.3	6.5	12.4
Close-up	40.9	78.9	87.2	48.2	83.3	93.5	78.1
Correspondents							
Long	2.0	0.0	0.0	5.5	2.9	0.0	8.9
Medium	26.5	42.6	37.0	31.5	23.5	14.9	27.8
Close-up	71.4 ^b	57.4	63.0	63.0	73.6	85.1	63.3

^a Includes extreme long shots, 1.2. ^b Includes extreme close ups, 2.0.

Anchors had more swings in the size of their images on screen. In 1968 and 1980, they appeared most often in neutral medium shots, but in some years they appeared almost always in close-ups. Close-ups increased for both the anchors and correspondents in the last two elections of the 1980s, but the increases were more pronounced for anchors. In 1992, both categories of journalists took to the field in more long-shots. Still the most common shot was a close-up. Anchors received more emphasis, in the frequency of long shots and close-ups (with fewer medium shots), than correspondents did that year.

Table 10

Shot Background

Background of anchor or correspondent shots by percentage

	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992
Anchor ^a							
Plain	45.2	18.4	62.8	6.4	10.7	1.1	0.0
Set, mural	50.5	81.6	36.0	49.1	32.1	43.5	39.0
Technology	1.1	0.0	0.0	24.5	48.8	17.4	43.8
Location	0.0	0.0	1.2	20.0	8.3	33.7	17.1
Correspondent							
Plain	40.8	6.4	11.1	0.0	0.0	0.0	1.3
Set, mural	10.2	12.8	7.4	1.4	7.4	4.3	17.7
Technology	0.0	0.0	0.0	9.6	17.6	25.5	20.3
Location	49.9	80.9	81.5	89.0	75.0	70.2	59.5

^a Full-screen chroma-key accounts for 3.2 percent in 1968, 4.3 in 1988, and 1.3 in 1992.

Changes in the background on screen also differed according to the journalists' roles. In 1968 correspondents divided their appearances roughly equally between locations and the studio, and most of their studio images appeared on a plain background. In each year since then, correspondents stayed mostly on location, although the share peaked in 1980 and has declined since then. When they appeared in the studio, their appearances in front of technical equipment increased rapidly after 1980, doubling from that year to 1992.

Anchors, like correspondents, appeared more rarely before a plain background (which vanished in 1992) as images of technology increased. In each year, anchors appeared predominantly in the studio setting, but they also began to turn up on location in 1976, a pattern that increased irregularly, over the same period that correspondent location shots began falling slightly. The authoritative background of technical equipment became the most common for anchors in 1992.

Discussion

Our first question was, Did the visual side of election news become faster paced? Clearly it did. The length of time journalists lingered on screen shrunk, while the frequency of these shots increased. Moreover, journalists inserted a much larger number of video clips, graphics, and captions in each report.

If the reports had lengthened considerably, the multiplying images might have kept a steady pace over the period. However, other research found that election reports actually shrunk in length on average (Hallin, 1992) and the total for election coverage in each season also dropped off (Steele & Barnhurst, 1996). That means shots not only grew briefer but the increasing flow of images squeezed into a shorter time span. We consider the conclusion inescapable: the pacing increased.

Table 11

Images per Report

Summary of mean images per election report

	1968	1972	1976	1980	1984	1988	1992
Journalists	1.6	2.4	3.1	3.7	4.4	2.0	4.8
Other images	6.6	18.4	18.9	26.6	30.6	18.6	38.8
Grand mean	8.2	20.8	22.0	30.3	35.0	20.6	43.6

Our second question asked whether the coverage became more visual. Once again the pattern is clear: The sum of all images in the average report jumped in 1972, then climbed steadily through 1984, when it reached a level four times as high as it began. After dropping off in 1988, the number of images again climbed, to a peak more than five times the 1968 level.

The imagery grew in variety as well as number. Journalists showed themselves in a greater mix of shots, more often from various locations. They used video clips showing a wide variety of scenes. Besides these images, they inserted a range of other visuals, from simple captions to highly designed logos and complex information graphics.

The items inserted got stronger in visual impact as well. The scale of faces grew to fill more of the screen. Studio backgrounds shifted from plain solids to sets replete with technology. Our coders noted that some recent graphics moved dramatically. Amid this crescendo in the number, variety, and impact of visual images, journalists steadily appeared in shots without motion. Our analysis supports what journalists and scholars asserted: the news became more visual.

The data also reveal some shifts in the visual roles among journalists. In several respects, correspondents lost ground to anchors. Correspondent shots declined more in length and frequency, a pattern similar to what happened to politicians, whose shrinking sound bites Hallin (1992) documented.

In contrast, anchors grew in relative emphasis and visual activity. Their close-ups provided more drama, especially as they lost less time on screen than correspondents did. Anchors' visual activity increased as they took to the field, doing stand-ups on location and varying the frequency of their appearances. This shift was noted by Griffin (1992).

The Historical Context

The data reveal dramatic shifts from year to year, and some of these seem to fall into a pattern, most obviously the declines in several measures for 1988. We subjected each yearly difference to statistical tests³ and compared the significant changes to the historical record. Several scholars have written histories of television news, but they consider visual change only in passing. Practitioner handbooks for television producers provide insight into contemporary technical thinking. We gleaned from these sources and from general histories of journalism, press coverage during the period, and our own observations of the videotapes.

The structure of television news stories emerged as reporters adapted the practices of print journalists and documentary filmmakers to the new medium (Hammond, 1981, Schudson, 1982).

Initially, reporters on television acted as narrators, an approach long common in print. The newscasters read their reports live, in the manner of radio with the added interest of film segments. Expensive and cumbersome to use, film (when available) tended to get shown without tight editing.

Through the 1960s, visual news style amounted to a series of moderate shots of talking heads on a bland background. Film was inserted in the visual equivalent of lengthy textual quotation. Reports were patterned as a string of mostly hard-news actualities. However, by 1968 ABC News began to make changes.

Several conditions encouraged visual change. In 1967, ABC matched the other networks by expanding the evening news from fifteen to thirty minutes. ABC then began to experiment with graphics and backgrounds in part to become more competitive. The FCC was pushing to enhance public service programming, and the networks found that a longer evening news program could increase advertising revenues. Local affiliates had few options in dealing with the powerful networks and saw the longer film stories, called "features," as a desirable type of coverage they couldn't otherwise afford (Epstein, 1973).

By the end of the 1960s, network news was positioned to become in effect an extension of prime time, driven by entertainment, profits, and ratings. Videotape proved essential in transforming the news. Networks had used videotape since the 1950s to archive and distribute programs, and the first electronic editing devices appeared early in the 1960s. Late in the decade, networks began developing the practice of electronic editing, as a flexible alternative to mechanical processes (Mathias and Patterson, 1985). Journalists, who argued that images tend to attract viewers' attention, looked to technology to make imagery more accessible.

These conditions provide the context for the dramatic changes in the initial interval, between the 1968 and 1972 elections. The significant increases in the frequency of journalist shots ($p < .01$) and in video clips, graphics, and captions (for all three, $p < .001$) occurred in an environment of stiffer competition and more flexible technology, with politicians pressuring the networks to emphasize news programming. The violence and emotion of contemporary events, such as the protests during the 1968 Chicago convention, revealed the power inherent in television news to present arresting, moving visual imagery.

Between 1972 and 1976, significant changes occurred in the pace of election reports, as newscasters shortened their appearances on screen ($p < .01$). In the mid-1970s, electronic news gathering became the rule. Using video recorders, reporters could compile a story from a larger number of "takes" gathered in the field. They then used video editing liberally to eliminate any technically inferior "visual noise" (Epstein, 1973).

Where previously they acted as news readers on the air, journalists now rejected the old structure based on radio-news-with-pictures and developed something unique to television: a chain of images overlaid onto a fast-paced narrative. This accounts for the significant change we measured. Journalists shortened their appearances again between the 1976 and 1980 elections ($p < .001$) to accommodate more video clips, as they cut in more frequently to move the narrative along. One consequence of these changes was a subtle shift in the emphasis of the news report, giving greater precedence to images, with words providing the narrative bond (Hammond, 1981). The new structure emerged first for anchors, who account for the preponderance of change by 1976 ($p < .05$), and then for correspondents, who shortened their stand-ups by 1980 ($p < .001$).

The mid-1970s saw the rise of the bankable celebrity journalist, another trend anticipated in print journalism. Newspaper reporters throughout the century had become more self-conscious in crafting events into narrative form under a byline (Schudson, 1995). The practice transferred

readily to television. Walter Cronkite acquired status through longevity, building trust in CBS over a decade. Other networks considered a strong personality indispensable to compete with CBS. In 1976 John Chancellor went solo on NBC, and ABC hired Barbara Walters at a record \$1 million salary.

The networks then began to inject publicity “bumpers” into regular programming to promote their news stars (Postman and Powers, 1992). They also redesigned the sets for anchors, filling backgrounds with technology, and began showing anchors on location (see Foote, 1992). Location shots built authority by making anchors a more active presence, associating them with hands-on reporting, which carries weight as visual evidence (Griffin, 1992). In shot length, close-ups, and on-location roles, anchors gained visual credibility.

Another significant increase between the 1976 and 1980 elections occurred in graphics ($p < .001$). After taking over ABC News, Roone Arledge raided other networks for talent, added satellite feeds to move anchors onto location, and introduced other sports reporting techniques, such as slow motion and freeze-frames. He then pushed to add computer-generated graphics to news (Bliss, 1991). Other networks, flush with advertising revenues, which doubled between 1975 and 1979, followed Arledge’s lead, and the use of graphics jumped (Williams, 1989).

In the early 1980s character generators arrived. Previously, artists lettered captions by hand on a card, shot the image separately, and superimposed it on the screen. The painstaking process discouraged unwarranted use of nominations. Captions increased significantly between 1980 and 1984 ($p < .01$), once the procedure automated. Shortly thereafter, digital video effects units made it possible to combine captions with other images and move them both around screen (Wurtzel, 1983).

That these technical and visual changes coincided does not mean technology drove the process. In each case, the machinery would not have emerged without a clearly perceived need — a market. Networks increased expenditures on the means to produce more (and more elaborate) visuals to compete with ABC, the trendsetter. Comparing the networks in a 1981 TV View column, John O’Connor wrote, “ABC makes a point of being more ‘visual,’ of being livelier in ways more oriented to television itself.” (p. 2/29)

In 1982 CBS responded by revamping the “Evening News With Dan Rather.” Based on his local news background, Van Gordon Sauter, the new president of the news division, “shifted coverage . . . to more visual and emotionally gripping images . . . , introduced flashy graphics . . . , and propelled the evening newscast into first place in the audience ratings.” (Smith, 1985:2/25) Sauter hired a producer to help raise Rather’s profile, adding to the increases in close-ups we measured. Rather “was shot at closer range to make his image larger on the screen; the set behind him was spruced up ‘Give me a show without a star, and I’ll give you a failed show,’ says Mr. Sauter.” (Schwartz, 1982:2/1)

By 1984, most of the visual measures we took had reached a high point. Newscasters showed more images at a much faster pace. Video clips, graphics, and captions reached a crest. The length of journalist shots plateaued, and their frequency peaked. American television was completing the decade that Auletta calls a golden era of network dominance:

There were, in early 1976, few commercially available VCRs, few cordless remote-control clickers, no satellite distribution of programs, no backyard dishes, no superstations, no Fox Network Advertisers wishing to reach mass audiences were held hostage by the networks. The revenues of CBS, ABC, and NBC racked up double digit growth every year, swelling by an astonishing 324 percent between 1976 and 1984. (1991:24–25)

Of course, the competition Auletta lists began to take its toll. The share of homes tuned in each evening kept sliding until networks lost almost a third of their news viewers. In 1986 several waves of budget cuts and layoffs began (Bliss, 1991), and the networks could not keep adding visuals to the news. In the 1984 to 1988 interval, the frequencies of journalist appearances ($p < .001$), video clips ($p < .05$), graphics ($p < .01$), and captions ($p < .001$) all dropped significantly. These variables declined to levels of the early 1970s, after visuals had seen their first surge.

Even with budget cuts, the pacing of journalist shots did not slow appreciably. Their length shows no significant changes after 1980, although critics complained of look-alike newscasts, led by executives “terrified . . . that stories longer than ninety seconds will induce drool or render viewers comatose” (Rosenberg, 1986:1). Scholars began to study the trend and published the much-discussed research on sound bites after the 1988 elections.

For the 1992 presidential campaign, all three networks announced changes to avoid using politicians’ visuals to wallpaper reports. They planned to pool footage, buy video stock materials, and draw on a jointly-funded exit poll (Loth, 1992). ABC and NBC cut back on correspondents traveling with the campaign. CBS said it would expand on-location shots (Rosenstiel, 1994), and Rather promised “more substantive coverage” (Mink, 1992:E/5).

By sharing resources and further cutting budgets, the networks created an environment in which all news content looked more alike, and so they attempted to differentiate their products visually in the marketplace, using “cast members, graphics, set, and other ingredients that had more to do with television and less with pure journalism” (Rosenstiel, 1994:15). ABC developed elaborate graphics and captions to distinguish between its reports that covered campaign issues, events, and minor items (Kerbel, 1994).

In the final interval, in time for the 1992 elections, the measures for pacing climbed significantly: journalist images ($p < .001$), video clips ($p < .01$), graphics ($p < .001$), and captions ($p < .001$) reached all-time highs that reversed the declines of 1988. The length of journalist shots did not decrease significantly. Backgrounds became more varied, and for the first time journalists appeared on location more often than on any other backdrop.

This brief recap of the industry setting confirms and provides context for the pattern of change we measured. The key interval came just before the 1972 election, when all types of images jumped significantly. After establishing this more-visual structure, journalists made the changes that we traced to the key moments: pacing picked up in the late 1970s, graphics by 1980 and captions by 1984. Although visuals dipped in 1988, reports did not revert to the pre-1970s structure. The visuality remained, as did the rapid flow. Finally, the numbers of images rebounded by the 1992 election.

Conclusions

In a 1982 article on the increasing numbers of visual journalists, The New York Times explained, “In a society grown more visual and less verbal,” the image takes on “political force” (p. A/20). Our study confirms the visual trend that observers noted, at least in the case of presidential election reports. Were these typical? In a structured comparison of all news content, Hallin (1992) found that campaigns were not treated differently from other topics. Our informal observations of the videotapes lead to the same conclusion for the news form. The visual changes appear general. However, election reports deserve close study because they illustrate how visual styles can affect the political arena.

The histories of presidential elections during the period (beginning with McGinness, 1968) show how network newscasts — indirectly at first, but then with increasing clarity — captured greater influence over the elections. Although he says television news didn't change the outcome, Greenfield maintains that the coverage “both distorted the nature of the 1980 elections and deprived citizens of a sense of connection to the campaign” (1982:15). First acknowledged as early as the 1960s, only later did visual imagery get identified as a principal tool of politics — used consciously by candidates and journalists alike (Adatto, 1993).

Until the advent of network newscasts, campaigns were largely personal — gladhanding, baby-kissing — and discursive, based on the spoken and written word (Witcover, 1977, Schudson, 1982). Newspaper coverage dominated, at least in prestige, but radio had an effect. Through the 1960s, the political parties focused their media efforts on issuing press releases and distributing tape recordings for local radio broadcasts (Bloom, 1973). Radio not only gave words a wider reach but also turned greater attention to the candidate's performance as a public speaker.

Television did much the same to the visual side of campaigning. Candidates had long used the power of the camera to build a public persona. Lincoln is said to have given credit for his election to the widely distributed Mathew Brady portrait, which made him look presidential, countering verbal attacks that painted him as a rube (Carlebach, 1992). By adding intimate motion to the candidate's image, such as the perspiring Nixon of the 1960 debates, television moved the visual dimension beyond the limits of still photography. The history of how television entered into the American political system reads as a series of attempts, by candidates and newscasters, to harness the power of visual performance.

The networks were hungry for visuals to fill the longer newscasts of the late 1960s, and candidates responded by manufacturing images. In 1968 Nixon hired an advertising agency to create his new “image” (McGinness, 1968) and produced a series of “shows,” in which the answers were completely stage-managed (Crouse, 1973) and the questions asked by people “shipped in from campaign headquarters central casting” (Gold, 1977:91).

Television journalists realized of course that the candidates set up visuals to gain coverage, and they responded during the 1972 Nixon-McGovern campaign not by reducing the use of images (which mounted in our sample that year) but instead by distancing themselves from staged events. They branded them “media events” and covered them with what Levy (1981) calls disdain for the news.

The skepticism had little effect on politicians, who continued staging events but at a faster pace to match the network appetite for visuals. During the 1976 election, Ford and Carter went from media event to media event (Witcover, 1977). In 1980, Reagan demonstrated his mastery of issuing pithy made-for-television phrases on eye-catching backdrops. Carter and Anderson could only follow suit. Television news had gained in dominance, not only limiting debate but also deciding who got shown and how their appearances got interpreted (Henry, 1985). The evening news also took on the task of defining and explaining “the issues,” although the segments initiated on NBC fared poorly in the ratings (Schram, 1987).

The candidates in 1984 tried to take more control. Mondale presented documents on that unfilmable subject, the deficit, to which newscasters gave little play in a year when Mondale's most quoted phrase was “Where's the beef?” Reagan took the opposite approach, not only supplying irresistible imagery but also refining the visual equivalent of “no comment”: “For television . . . couldn't show something that wasn't happening. And Reagan was not giving them anything to take a picture of . . . so television covered what Reagan was doing, rather than covering what he wasn't.” (Schram, 1987:303-4)

By 1988, image-consciousness held sway (Adatto, 1993). Bush and Dukakis postured for cameras in media events designed to convey a message through images. Political handlers set up scenes for the media and distributed video press releases, a commonplace by then. The networks, hampered by declining audiences as well as staff and budget, cut back on visuals and used what they could get with skepticism, scoffing for example at the image of Dukakis on a tank, his helmet perched awkwardly on his head. The candidates responded to the visual rhythms of television news: campaigns manufactured images in time for the evening report and newscasters exposed the mechanics of political imagemaking.

In 1992, candidates again tried to circumvent the growing influence of television news (Goldman, et al, 1994). The Bush campaign worked through local news and provided satellite feeds to small groups and individual stations. Perot used “infomercials” and went on “Larry King Live.” The Clinton campaign not only exploited alternatives such as “Arsenio” and “Saturday Night Live” but aggressively analyzed network coverage and set a daily agenda to dominate the “media spin.”

Clearly, the visual changes in network news had implications for American presidential campaigning. Television required a better show, and journalists became important actors in media elections, their own images appearing frequently and with greater impact in news reports. As campaign coverage became more journalism-centered (Hallin, 1992), other institutions may have lost ground. Patterson (1993) argues that the media have come to supplant political parties as the focus of campaign politics in America.

An analysis of visual form must also attend to the spaces or gaps in what gets shown. After examining news formats, Altheide concludes, “The upshot is that news content is limited and influenced by access and opportunity to obtain relevant visuals” (1987:167). Reagan’s strategy demonstrated how a reliance on available images limits content. As one CBS correspondent remarked, “The problem on the broadcast side of the media is that so often, what you want to talk about isn’t there to see.” (quoted in Morgan, 1986:26) Former NBC News chief Reuven Frank confirmed that adding more images and graphics does crowd other things out of the newscast: the thoughtful journalism that Charles Kuralt called “the hard fact, arrived at by hard work” (Schwartz, 1982:2/1).

Further study might reveal how visual change influenced news content. Graphics, for example, can illustrate otherwise invisible campaign issues such as economics (see Morgan, 1986), and measurable changes in content probably accompanied the growth in visual forms in the key years we identified. Other influences of form on content would require study behind the scenes, to view the technology and workplace incentives for visual coverage. After watching television reporters and their impressive equipment, Mike Shamberg, author of *Guerrilla TV*, noted: “Everything they do costs so much that they can’t afford to be patient . . . and pick up on what’s happening” (quoted in Crouse, 1973:183). By the pivotal 1972 election, the system of rewards also was already in place, skewing coverage:

Above all else, TV reporters were trained to search for a good picture. Every night, there was a glut of stories pouring into the newsroom, and the surest way to get on the air was to find interesting visuals. . . . So the test of a good TV correspondent was not primarily whether he [sic] was a great political observer. It was whether he could deal with all of the technical problems, guide his cameraman toward the right shots, and put the film together to form a coherent story. (Crouse, 1973:154)

The rise of evanescent news reports, which are more visual by virtue of their swiftness of pacing and reliance on imagery, can be judged by its consequences for the public. One journalist observed that as society has become “more visual, its images more transient, it has a hard time

learning” (Krauthammer, 1989:74). In her study of political news, Graber (1990) suggests that the number and brevity of scenes raises the issue of how much viewers can learn. From the standpoint of visual form, a faster flow of imagery will favor some kinds of information over others: the simple image over the complex, the emotional over the neutral, the conventional over the contrarian. These are the dimensions of a visual style that, by its very haste, impedes careful thought or calm reflection among viewers.

This visual form of news, while discouraging contemplation, may tacitly promote a view of the political landscape. It personalizes and dramatizes election news by preferring intimate and arresting images. In his study of news and illusion, Lance Bennett (1996) outlines some aspects of the politics this imagery invokes, including an emphasis on surface over substance, a reliance on stereotypes and pseudo-crises, and the focus on journalists as actors, all of which distort viewers’ sense of political consequences. This form of news employs the visual vocabulary of power that historians identified in American arts of the period (Day, 1991). Leaders appear as stable portraits while less important persons appear in fragments. Images of technology foster trust while paying scant attention to functional outcomes. In visual reports of election news, the leaders who emerge are television journalists, whose stable forms appear on a backdrop of technology, revealing a political process increasingly fragmented into video clips.

The repercussions perceived by journalists, critics, and scholars — in the content of election news, the structure of political campaigns, and the substance of what voters understand — suggest that the visual changes matter. Our study establishes a baseline of measurement, placed in the context of the news industry and interpreted by the impact on American politics. The use of visuals appears to have increased in response to their power to attract and hold audiences for television news. The beneficiaries of visual change appear to be the media corporations who profit from higher ratings and the television journalists themselves, who through appearances acquire celebrity and its rewards (Fallows, 1996). And the costs appear to spread broadly, affecting candidates, political parties, and the citizenry at large.

It is not that network political reports have failed to reach their potential in exploiting the visual side of the medium. Quite the contrary. Over the period we studied, national news became much more lively and appealing and drew large audiences. The question that remains is whether the new, visually captivating and entertaining reports can channel their growing influence to serve the public good.

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Notes

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¹Hallin provided his original videotapes for the years 1968 and 1988. For other years, we collected a new sample because the original tapes were unavailable. Hallin's sample included 25 days for the bookend years and 20 for other years. We diverged from Hallin by selecting only 20 for every year, to make all seven elections fully comparable.

²For full statistical tables, please write to Prof. Steele.

³These were two-tailed tests using the report (except for the length variable, which is based on the shot) as the unit of analysis.