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**Political Advertising:  
Why is it so boring?**

by

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## **Political Advertising: why is it so boring?**

### **Abstract**

Most analysis of political advertising questions how it matches up to the normative standard of providing information to voters. It tends to treat advertising as a core, and often debased, resource for deliberation. However, advertising as a form is less suited to complex information and more to engagement of interest. Despite this, political advertising normally is both constructed and analysed as information carriers. While commercial advertising attracts interest through pleasure and popular discourse, political advertising remains wedded to information. The persuasive strategies of political and commercial advertising are marked as much by dissimilarity and similarity, the former aiming at plausibility and the latter at pleasure. The article analyses Party Election Broadcasts in the UK over two general elections, according to a scheme which elicits both the informational content and its aesthetic and emotional appeals. Both the analysis design and the underlying rationale may have application beyond the UK. They help answer the question: why does political advertising seem so dull and so bad to so many people?

**Key words:** election campaigns, emotional intelligence, politics and popular culture, popular genre

## Introduction

This article has three main purposes. The first is to consider political advertising as a stimulant to voter engagement. Following Schumpeter's famous claim that the 'psycho-technics' of campaigning are essential for voter mobilization, there has been a significant, albeit minority, school of thought that the acid test of electoral campaigns is mobilization (Popkin, 1992; Hart, 2000; Richards 2004). This important claim challenges the overwhelmingly predominant view that campaigns should be about the provision of substantive information to enable voters to make rational choices between competing policy platforms. However, it also creates difficulties of evaluation. It is easy enough to distinguish and measure the informational content, but if mobilization is the main democratic function, how should we judge campaigning material as texts; how do we decide which is more likely to mobilize? Ansolabehere and Iyengar's (1992) influential 'going negative' thesis has set the agenda on this point: content analysis of political advertising typically distinguishes between positive and negative appeals, and audience research focuses heavily on testing, and contesting, their thesis that positive content promotes engagement, while negative engenders cynicism (Jamieson, 2000; Norris et al., 1999).

Evaluation is the second purpose of this article. It will be argued that the positive/negative measurement is too blunt an instrument on its own to explain the attractiveness of advertising. We propose a content analysis scheme that, in addition to informational content, identifies the narrative structures, aesthetic and emotional appeals of political advertising. This is developed, in part, from a comparison of commercial and political advertising as persuasive communication. This reveals how strikingly different the two forms are in their persuasive strategies; the former increasingly concerned with audience pleasure, while politics strives for plausibility. Third, we consider the broader, often unspoken, but key question underlying general anxieties about the quality of political communication: what is proper political discourse in a democracy? It has become almost fashionable for scholars to

champion the merits of 'aesthetic politics' (Corner and Pels, 2003, van Zoonen, 2004; Street, 2003); to counter pose the benefits of emotional engagement and aesthetic pleasure against the more orthodox civic virtue of rationality. We are sympathetic to the general point: politics is often dry and dull, if not ugly (Scammell, 2003). It might do political parties a power of good to be more entertaining, more emotionally intelligent. However, we are concerned with what is at stake in this: what happens to normative ideas of the rational voter; how do we distinguish between democratic and undemocratic aesthetics? What is a good popular democratic performance?

### **Political advertising: why it matters**

Television advertising is now the predominant means of campaign communication for parties/candidates in countries where paid spots are permitted, such as the USA. Even where paid political TV advertising is prohibited, as in the UK, the rationed equivalent (Party Election Broadcasts) are by far the single most important direct address to voters, eclipsing traditional forms such as rallies and canvassing, or modern forms of direct communication via direct mail, text messaging and the internet. Regardless of effects on election outcomes, advertising is important political communication: by virtue of its journalistically unmediated nature it offers the clearest evidence of how parties/candidates choose to present themselves to the mass of voters. It is documentary evidence of the state of modern political persuasion.

At the same time, political advertising is the most derided form of political communication. Its form, the highly condensed commercial-type slot, is often said to be trivialising; inevitably butchering complexity and reducing politics to clever tricks (Qualter 1991: 151). It is criticised as deliberately anti-rational, designed to play upon our weaknesses as cognitive misers (Pratkanis and Aronson 1991), with a host of devices to elicit a quick and easy emotional response. It is often disliked by professional advertisers, who claim that politicians abuse their freedom from the normal consumer protections of

honesty in product advertising. For some, politics is giving commercial advertising a bad name. Ironically, given its expected function as 'popular' political discourse, it is not much liked by audiences either. Iyengar and Prior (1999) found US ads were much less well liked than normal commercials; product ads were 'generally truthful and interesting', while political ads were 'dishonest, unappealing and uninformative'. The British PEBs seem hardly to fare better; the standard introduction, 'there now follows a party election broadcast', is commonly greeted by mass channel-hopping (Scammell and Semetko 1995). At the 2001 general election just 35% of respondents in campaign tracking poll claimed to be at all interested in them<sup>1</sup>. This is consistent with previous evidence: a 1979 general survey found that half the viewer sample found PEBs boring, while 1990 survey found that (non-election) party political broadcasts were less believable than virtually any other media source (Scammell and Semetko, 1995:28). Worst of all, negative advertising in particular is said to actively de-motivate voters; to contribute to cynicism about politics altogether (Ansolabehere and Iyengar 1992).

Why is political advertising so disliked? In principle advertising should offer perfect opportunities for politics to engage in popular discourse. After all, commercial advertising is generally well-regarded by consumers; and in the UK there is broad public support for the principle of PEBs: 63% agreeing that it was at least 'quite important' that they be shown on television, according to a post-2001 election survey for the Independent Television Commission (ITC, 2001). Moreover, the great defence of marketed political campaigns is that they facilitate communication between parties/candidates and voters; they produce digestible and eye-catching presentations which facilitate mass participation in politics. However, for all the influx of professional expertise political advertising is spectacularly unpopular, boring at best, off-putting at worst.

One obvious explanatory candidate is audience research, which tells us repeatedly that voters dislike negative advertising especially (Ansolabehere

and Iyengar, 1995; Iyengar and Prior, 1999). Despite mixed evidence of effectiveness (Kaid, 1999;), attack ads have become a staple of US campaigning, accounting for more than half the advertising content from the two major candidates in the last three presidential elections. This reflects campaign wisdom that hard-hitting attacks are the most memorable and credible advertising (Arterton, 1992; Scammell, 1998). However, internationally comparative research suggests that the predominance of negativity is a peculiarly US phenomenon. Kaid et al.'s (2003) analysis of advertising in 13 democracies found that the US was the only country in which negative appeals outweighed positive (55:45%); Korea being the next most negative (45:55%), followed by Israel (42:58%). European countries were overwhelmingly positive, the UK the least so, but still having a negative/positive balance of 31:69%. Voters' distaste for attack ads, then, can not be the complete answer, at least outside the US; nor does it help explain why political advertising appears so boring to so many UK voters.

While ultimately a full answer must include audience research, a necessary first step is the analysis of the ads themselves as particular texts of popular political communication. Our analysis uses a combination of two elements:

1. An examination of political advertisements to determine the type of knowledge conveyed and the balance between issues/image and positive/negative content.
2. A consideration of political ads as persuasive constructs in comparison and contrast to commercial advertising. From this, we analyse the ads according to a scheme which attempts to elicit the aesthetic and emotional appeal of the ads. We look in particular at the range of popular genres and the use and range of emotional strategies. Our analysis is confined to UK PEBs for the three major parties (28 ads in all) in the general elections of 1997 and 2001. However, and while we would readily concede cultural particularities, we will claim that both our design and the underlying rationale have wider significance.

## **Content analysis: substantive information<sup>2</sup>**

This part of our content analysis follows the familiar course of political communication research. Its primary concerns are the provision of 'proper' political knowledge to voters. Are the ads about issues and policies, or about image and personality? What type of evidence is used to support claims? Do they contribute useful information to enable rational choices for voters? What is the balance between positive and negative content?

Research over successive UK elections continues to find that PEBs are, perhaps surprisingly, informative. They provide a reasonable guide to the main parties' key proposals, and to the difference between the party platforms (Scammell and Semetko 1995). Our content analysis shows that in 1997-2001 75% of the three main parties' PEBs emphasised issues, while 43% contained specific policy proposals (see Table One).

Table One about here

This relatively high substantive information content conforms to Kaid et al.'s (2003) results for their multi-national comparative analysis. Typically, issues, as opposed to image, are the dominant focus of advertising in the older western democracies. Additionally, 85.7% of the British ads included logical appeals, the display of evidence and fact to support arguments. Coded for dominant appeal, logic was also the most common (39.3%), closely followed by source credibility (often testimonials) appeals (32.1%), and emotional appeals (28.6%) (see Table Two).

Table Two about here

Moreover, the PEBs were overwhelmingly positive in tone overall, notwithstanding the notable exception of the Conservative Party, which



waged predominantly negative campaigns in both elections (see Table Three).

Table Three about here

Generally, at the level of substantive knowledge, British political ads conform to democratic expectations. They contribute substance to the electoral information environment, enabling rational voter choices. However, at the level of engagement, how did they fare? The evidence thus far is not encouraging. An Independent Television Commission (2001) survey of the 2001 election reported that 57% of respondents turned off or switched channels; only two percent found them persuasive. Pattie and Johnston's (2002) analysis of panel survey data for 1997 election supports the lacklustre verdict. PEBs, they argue, are 'electronic gift horses'; they should be perfect opportunities for parties to close the democratic deficit, to improve their popularity and counter voters' disillusion. Yet, with the significant exception of Labour, the parties did not capitalise on the opportunity. The best that Pattie and Johnston could say was that the PEBs did not actually increase voter cynicism.

### **Political and commercial ads compared**

The commonplace that advertising sells parties/candidates like any commercial product (Franklin, 1995; Qualter 1991) begs the question of how commercial advertising actually does sell its products. Corner's (1995: 105-134) analysis of advertising as a special, and often problematic, form of public address offers valuable insight. He describes advertising as a particular combination of aesthetics and influence, a kind game played across knowledge and pleasure, within cultural ground rules well understood by makers and consumers. Commercials, he argues, must contain some sort of knowledge about the product if they are to work at all, even if minimal

(product name/quality). Equally they must generate some sort of pleasure if they are to attract even the slightest attention. This idea, of the 'knowledge/pleasure game' of advertising, offers some clues to the relative unpopularity of political advertising. We will argue that while political ads are structured substantially by the commercial form they operate within a different, and more limiting, framework of cultural ground rules. In short, pleasure (aesthetics/entertainment) increasingly dominates product commercials, with the knowledge element withering sometimes to virtually nothing. In politics, in the UK at least, the balance is almost the reverse.

Corner describes commercial advertising as in one sense an extraordinary form of television because of the ultra-short time frame, and explicit commitment to sell something to the viewer. In another sense, commercials are a very ordinary form of television; pervasive and drawing from television culture conventions of speech, image and genre, all highly condensed in micro-format. Their positioning, confined to breaks within television schedules, promotes both their ordinariness and extraordinariness; they must flow with regular programming, while at the same time competing for attention with it and other advertisements.

This general description applies as much to politics as to product commercials, notwithstanding some formal differences. Political ads are more extraordinary in that they are not so pervasive, restricted largely to election campaign periods, and therefore are not the same everyday experience. They are also more extraordinary in that they are protected by the principle of freedom of speech, which frees them from the consumer protection content codes applying to commercials. The UK PEB system differs from US paid advertising in that the number of broadcasts is rationed according to criteria of party competitiveness (normally five each for Labour and Conservative, four/five for the Liberal Democrats), and their length is strictly controlled (just under three minutes in 2001). They must be labelled – 'there now follows a party election broadcast on behalf of the...party' - which marks them out as

even more exceptional, selling not just something, but politics. Despite these restrictions, PEBs have moved progressively closer to commercial advertising formally; the length has been successively reduced from 15 minutes in the 1950s to about two-and-a-half minutes in 2001 and proposals for regulatory changes could now mean far more PEBs per party of shorter length (Electoral Commission 2003). Formally, then, PEBs increasingly resemble paid political commercials.

The most significant difference, we suggest, lies less in formal structure than in the cultural ground rules. Corner argues, in respect of product advertising, that audience awareness and literacy in reading ads has led to a move towards aesthetics/pleasure in the commercial form. As audiences, we are acutely conscious of the form and purpose of advertising; its distinctiveness as a persuasive mode of communication, and many of its selling devices; its exaggeration, selective use of information, aligning of the product to desirable qualities (value transfer) and so on. This awareness effectively produces a double-edged discount in viewers. On the one hand it means that we do not believe literally in the 'promise' of the ads. We do not think that the aftershave or beauty cream will transform us into the attractive actors on the screen. Such an idea is so implausible that we are unlikely to regard as fraudulent; it is rather simply a typical manoeuvre of advertising. On the other hand, this audience discount effectively allows ads to claim general and grand goodness for their products without seeming to make any literal promise. The combination of audience awareness and discount, coupled with consumer protection regulatory codes which require honesty in substantive product claims, have propelled advertisers away from 'hard sell' sincerity claims toward aesthetics; to attract consumers attention through the pleasure/entertainment value of advertisements as self-contained texts (Corner 1995: 117-118).

In an extreme defence of advertising, Mica and Orson Nava (1990) suggest that commercials are now so aesthetically innovative that they can be

considered contemporary art. Moreover, they suggest that audiences, especially young people, engage critically with ads as though they were indeed art products. If this seems a step too far, given audience propensity to switch channels at commercial breaks and to block them out of recordings, it is nonetheless a powerful point. The proliferation of programmes about advertising is testimony to the entertainment value of ads, independent of their selling function. Nava and Nava's provocative argument directs our attention to a key point and the polar opposite of the general consensus: that is, how different, rather than how similar, political advertising is to product commercials. In politics the aesthetic/pleasure element remains a poor second to the 'knowledge' function. It may be commonplace for critics to complain that politics is sold like any commercial product. We do not agree: politics is sold with far less regard for audience pleasure. It is 'hard sell' and attempts sincerity, but there is relatively little concern for pleasure.

### **Content analysis: aesthetics and emotional engagement**

Analysis of political ads has become more nuanced in recent years. It is increasingly acknowledged that the standard content analysis (as above) is limited for revealing how advertising impacts on audiences. It cannot begin to tell us how or why Lyndon Johnson's Daisy Spot, George H.W. Bush's 'revolving door', or Reagan's 'Morning in America' achieved immediate and lasting resonance. It can tell us only the bare facts: the issues, the absence of politicians, the use of actors, that they were negative (Johnson and Bush) or positive (Reagan) and so on. Researchers are increasingly interested in how the specific features of the visual medium are manipulated to deliver the message. Diamond and Bates (1988) and Johnson-Cartee and Copland (1991) have created typologies of political advertising; Kern (1989) relates typologies functionally to stages of the campaign; Nelson and Boynton (1997) suggest ads are better viewed as myth-making narratives, rather than information vehicles. Kaid and Johnston's (2000) 'video-style' is probably the most thorough treatment of video production techniques. Our analysis drew much

from this, most especially Kaid and Johnston, and their linking of messages to types of appeal, emotional, logical or ethical.

However, despite the wealth of data produced by these analyses, none offered any real purchase on the pleasure aspect of advertising. Here again the comparison with commercials is the key. Commercial advertising, drawing upon television culture, as Corner suggests, commonly uses popular genre in its narratives. Popular genres, put simply, are constellations of conventions, 'which through repetition and variation, tell familiar stories with familiar characters in familiar situations' (Grant, 2003:xvi); they encourage patterns of expectations and experiences in viewers. They provide readily recognisable story frames, through which advertisers intend to engage viewers' interest and cue emotional responses. Corner (1995:106) lists a wide variety of popular genres at work in product commercials: sitcoms, soaps, thriller, sci-fi, travel and pop music videos to name but a few, plus an increasing tendency to pastiche and parody of cinema, fantasy and other advertising formats themselves. If this is an obvious point about commercial advertising, it is curiously absent in analysis of political advertising. This is curious because it is common to talk of political advertising as itself a type of genre with its own repeated patterns: documentary-style, person-in-the street, biog-ad, attack ad and so on. Equally, it is not unusual for researchers to note the transfer of popular genre conventions and symbols (Johnson-Cartee and Copland, 1991). However, content analysis schemes have not systematically categorised political advertisements according to their use of popular genre.

We coded the UK PEBs to determine the extent to which they drew at all on popular genres, which genres and the range of genres. Although this is by no means definitive proof, the range of genres provides one reasonable indicator of innovation in ads. The broader the range, the more likely we are to see innovative attempts to engage the pleasure of viewers.

Overall, nearly 90% (all but three PEBs) used popular genre to structure their messages. However, and as expected, it was a narrow range.

News/documentary was easily the single most common: 46% of all PEBs. Horror/thriller was the second most common (18%), reflecting the tendency to negative advertising, especially by the Conservative Party. Comedy/spoof ads were the third largest category at 14%; romantic drama 7%, pop video 4% (see table four below).

The predominance of the news/documentary reflects the dominance of knowledge (issue information) in political advertising. It is the most obvious genre for conveying 'fact'; the replication of TV news/documentary styles intended to lend the authority of 'news' to the factual claims of the political advertisement. Equally, of course, and notwithstanding the trends to 'infotainment', it is the least inherently entertaining of the popular genres coded for. At one level the dominance of both knowledge and factual styles of presentation may be comforting. It counteracts the anxiety that advertising elevates image over substance to the detriment of information needed for good citizens to make rational choices. At another level, that of mobilization and of closing the gap between parties and voters, it is less comforting. Political ads are doing little to attract even minimal attention through pleasure. Further, the most common fictional (as opposed to news) genre was horror/thriller, a genre whose object is fear, and whose relation to 'pleasure' depends upon audience invitation/agreement to be scared<sup>3</sup>.

These results are not surprising. They reflect precisely the cultural ground rules as applied to political advertising. The idea of 'proper' political discourse has a powerful hold in these rules. Politics, practiced properly, should be about substantive issues, policy, record, fitness to govern. Indeed, a central claim for the value of democratic elections generally is 'their potential for civic education' (Norris and Sanders, 2003). This idea underpins regulatory support for the allocation of free airtime to parties; party broadcasts 'should provide voters with information to support their voting decisions...' (Electoral

Commission, 2003:12). More broadly, content analysis of election news distinguishes between substance and non-substantive matters; policy and issues versus opinion polls, horse-race stories, emphasis on personality and campaign hoopla (Goddard et al. 1998; Norris et al 1999). The balance of stories between these substantive and non-substantive issues is itself regarded as a (non) quality indicator of political news. Similar coding frames are applied to political advertising: substantive information is distinguished from image, personality and so on. We are content to regard the former as a genuine contribution to the democratic information environment; the latter's claim to contribution is more suspicious.

This might lead to the extraordinary conclusion that the cultural rules of political advertising work to restrict its possibilities of popularity, by comparison with product commercials. One door opens to the prospect of a genuinely popular political discourse, another closes. Politics is limited from being too entertaining; it dare not elevate pleasure over knowledge, if it wishes to be taken seriously. It is not clear to what extent this constraint is actually derived from the audience, but it seems to reflect politicians' perceptions of the audience. The politicians' response to audience scepticism, and the common view that they will say anything to get elected, has tended to be, not entertainment as for commercials, but plausibility; to make specific promises smaller and more credible, to take care not to leave a hostage to fortune, to attack the promises, reputation and record of opponents. Part of the attraction of negative advertising for politicians is precisely its plausibility; it allows specific knowledge/information claims that run with the grain of the audience discount. Of course, these constraints seem valuable from a proper political discourse point of view. They encourage factual information and credible promises. However, from the standpoint of engagement they are less satisfactory; they do little to stimulate pleasure in the political process, and little to attract the attention of the only mildly interested voter. It may be that in their quest to avoid disbelief, politicians are inviting boredom.

## The parties compared

If most PEBs are dull and unattractive, some are duller and less attractive than others. This section compares the parties' use of genre, both by range and by innovation within range. There is not space here for a formal film analysis. However we did consider them according to film analysis critical standards: did we detect unity/disunity, do the pieces have inner logic of structure and style, did they possess variety and richness of contrasts, did they seem imaginative or crude and clichéd? We also examined the emotional appeals. Beyond a standard quantification of their overall presence, we analysed the kind and range of emotions to which each of the parties appealed and examined their function in the narrative structure. Once again, we were interested in how the emotional appeals were developed; were they clichéd, uni-dimensional 'propaganda' appeals, or were they more nuanced?

The analysis shows striking differences between the parties both in the genre and emotional dimensions.

Table Four about here

By popular genre, half of the Conservatives' 10 PEBs were classified horror/crime/thriller. They were the only party to use this genre; it was their standard narrative vehicle for negative ads. Of their others, two were news/documentary style while three did not use any identifiable popular genre at all. The format was that of a ministerial broadcast, with the politician looking and speaking directly to camera. The Liberal Democrats were dominated by news/documentary at 75%, (six of their eight spots). They also used comedy for two broadcasts, although this was to judge by generous standards<sup>4</sup>.



Labour's use of genre stood out for a number of reasons. We suggested, above, that genre range might be one indicator of innovation and on that measure Labour won the contest. Although news/documentary predominated (five of their 10), the remaining five broadcasts were significantly more wide-ranging: two romantic drama/soap opera, two comedy/spoof, and one pop music video. Their experimentation with genre was groundbreaking for Britain in two respects. First, 'Lifted', the opening PEB of the 2001 race, was the first use of pop video by a major party. Formally, the piece scores high on informational content, with a succession of surtitles listing Labour's achievements in government. However, all elements of mise-en-scene, camera work and editing combine to drive the message contained in the Lighthouse Family's pop song, that we (Britain) have been 'lifted from the shadows' of 18 years of Conservative rule. There are neither politicians in the PEB, nor any voice-over until the closing 'vote Labour' credit. A series of celebrities, most notably the ex-Spice Girl Geri Halliwell, appear briefly, woven economically into the narrative structure, rather than is more typical for political testimonials, given starring roles and speaking parts. Second, Labour was the only party to experiment with the romantic drama/soap opera genre. The outstanding example of this was the 'Angel' PEB in the 1997 campaign. This was mini-drama, performed by actors including Peter Postlethwaite (star of the movie Brassed Off), and it was an attack ad with a difference. It tells the story of an anxious father, who after waiting six hours for his young daughter's broken arm to be treated in hospital, is magically whisked back in time by an angelic taxi driver to enable him to cast his vote for Labour. In tone and story construction it was reminiscent of James Stewart's It's a Wonderful Life.

Labour's willingness to develop narratives as micro-dramas also marks them out from the rest. The Liberal Democrats were almost wholly reliant on news documentary. The Conservatives, while they made ample use of the horror/thriller/crime genres, did not develop tight and united stories; rather there was a succession of often unrelated scary sequences, occasionally

awkward changes of gear from crime to horror, and strange use of horror conventions of music to accompany mundane images of, for example, petrol pumps. In short, both in use of popular genre and in construction of mini-stories Labour was noticeably closer than the other parties to the 'ordinary television' style of commercial advertising highlighted by Corner (above). Moreover, Labour tended to be more imaginative within genre types. The typical news/documentary style of PEBs uses actor voice-over, newspaper headlines, news footage and person-in-the-street interviews. Labour hardly used these devices. Its 'Heroes' spot (2001) inverted some of the usual conventions, with Tony Blair off-camera providing the voice-over as a series of real people were seen about their everyday business as community 'heroes', (a teacher, a policeman, a nurse etc), and whose work was being supported (Blair tells us) by Labour investment policies.

The finding of greater genre variety in Labour's ads is clearer still in the use of emotional appeals. We coded for the presence of: fear, happiness, sadness, anger/disgust, hope/utopia and national pride/patriotism. This list was developed from Damasio's (1994) categorisation of 'core' universal emotions and from Dyer's (1992) analysis of standard emotional appeals in entertainment. To these we added the one typical appeal that was missing from their lists: national pride/patriotism. In addition, these appeals were categorised into four broad types, depending upon how they were constructed and by their function in the narrative. The first two types can be associated with classic propaganda appeals: those that try to frighten, not simply by attacking the record and credibility of opponents but more importantly by emphasising through audio-visual cues the devastating consequences of opponents' policies; and second, those that attempt to transmit a sense of enthusiasm through feelings of pride, happiness, hope and utopia. The latter relies on images of happy people, community and families, and national pride to transmit a sense that things have got/will get better. The point of this kind of appeal is less to explain how things will be improved but rather to show how it feels once we have got there. The third

and fourth types refer to whether the emotional appeals were connected to individual human dimensions. The third type attempts to show the 'human' consequences of policies on real people. 'Person-in-the-street' interviews are often used with the same aim. However, whereas they rely on logical evidence, the former shows people experiencing – rather than describing - distress, frustration and vulnerability. The fourth group refers to efforts to 'humanise' the public persona of the candidate, by recounting emotional experiences from his private life to reveal his 'true' self and show him as a human being, as opposed to political leader.

By comparison with international standards, British ads are not highly emotional (Kaid et al 2003). Nonetheless emotional appeals were common in Labour and Conservative broadcasts (see Table 2). By contrast, emotion was not the dominant appeal in any Liberal Democrat spot. Apart from this overall quantitative difference, the three parties were strikingly dissimilar in their use of the range of emotional appeals. The Liberal Democrats ran strongly logical, largely unemotional campaigns. When emotional appeals were present (25% of the ads), they were used almost exclusively to try to personalise Paddy Ashdown, the party leader in 1997. They scarcely used emotion to highlight the human experience of policies, whether positive or negative; and there was no attempt to frighten.

Table 5 about here

The Conservatives, by contrast, relied overwhelmingly on the use of fear (seven of the 10 ads used fear), reinforced with appeals to dystopia, anger, sadness and disgust. They waged outstandingly negative campaigns with a strikingly limited range of emotional appeals, ominous messages rarely leavened by contrasting appeals to hope and happiness. Such emotional light relief as there was was supplied by patriotism and national pride. These were not pretty or uplifting campaigns, and while the production values were

relatively high, their construction sometimes appeared contrived and clumsy. For all that, subjectively at least, the Conservative broadcasts were more memorable and stronger visually than the Liberal Democrats.

Labour, distinctively, took advantage of the full range of emotional appeals, using all four types. They made far greater use of positive emotional appeals: 30% of the ads contain appeals to utopia (none for the other parties), to patriotism and national pride (Labour 50%, while the average for other parties was 27.5%), and happiness (30% versus 6.25%). Significantly, these 'enthusiasm' appeals were linked to the idea that politics can make a positive difference, most outstandingly in their soap opera-style 'Thank you' PEB (2001), where a young couple who had gone half-heartedly to the polling station were then thanked for their vote by families and public services workers. Generally Labour paid greater attention to how these appeals were constructed, both in terms of combining different types of appeals and by avoiding uni-dimensional assumptions of viewers' emotionality. It was, relatively speaking, a more sophisticated attempt to tug at the heartstrings. The biography of Tony Blair ('the home movie'), for example, was a more emotionally nuanced portrayal of the leader, than the Liberal Democrat's biopic for Ashdown. The latter employed standard heroic leader rhetoric, emphasizing his military record, courage and impeccable personal integrity; Blair was the self-reflective family man, committed to bringing about positive change in the self-admitted awful world of politics. Blair's portrayal was not heroic, but still authoritative, personal and ordinary, but still the leader. It was, according to some critics, a relatively refreshing attempt to engage with the 'emotional ambivalence' present in the relationship with leaders (Richards 2004:348-349; Finlayson 2003:54-56).

It is significant to point out that by the orthodox standards of political communication quality tests Labour's are the worst of all three parties; both the Conservatives and the Liberal Democrats were more strongly issue/policy focused and made more use of logical evidence (see Tables 1 and 2). Yet, by

all the measures of genre and emotion Labour was by far the most concerned to at least attempt to gain audience pleasure and inspire the senses. We do not make any great art claims for Labour's ads. The judgement is relative, but certainly by comparison with the other parties, Labour's PEBs were more imaginative, vital and emotionally intelligent.

We are not concerned here with effectiveness of ads in terms of winning votes, marginal in any event for the two major parties. Typically, PEBs are most valuable to the third party (Liberal Democrats) when they can capitalise on rare opportunities for near-equal media exposure. Moreover, their PEBs are not subject to a cancel-out effect since their campaign is mostly ignored by the main parties, whose attacks are directed at each other. The prime concern here is with general engagement with the political process. While we cannot at this point suggest a causal connection, we note that Pattie and Johnston's (2002) study of the 1997 election found that Labour's PEBs (and only Labour's) significantly diminished voter cynicism. 'Voters who had seen a Labour PEB during the campaign were twice as likely...to feel politicians were interested in more than just vote buying as voters who did not see a Labour broadcast' (p354) (italics added). The possibility of a causal connection is certainly worth investigating. Why did Labour PEBs produce this result, and equally important, why did the Liberal Democrats not, when they ran the more positive issue-based campaign, and in other respects they benefited more?

### **Aesthetic politics, emotion, and democracy**

We said at the outset that it might be good for politics if parties produced more aesthetic, entertaining, and emotionally appealing PEBs. The analysis of the last two campaigns suggests that, relatively speaking, Labour was the only party to come close to this goal. However, the analysis also suggests that, just as for commercial advertising, there may be some trade-off between pleasure and knowledge. This opens up the broader questions of

what is at stake in this. What might be gained or lost by a more entertaining, emotionally engaging politics? What happens to the normative idea of the rational voter?

At its extreme end, the 'aesthetization of politics' is associated with totalitarian regimes. The Nazis are the terrifying paradigm, and so powerful that they continue to structure debates about aesthetic politics. The legacy is one of intense suspicion of aesthetic presentation in politics, as though it necessarily displaces or subverts political substance and proper information, and induces anti-rational behaviour (Pels 2003:47). However, amid the familiar concerns at the displacement of the rational are voices seeking to rescue the idea of aesthetic politics from automatic association with totalitarianism, and to find within it new ways of connecting citizens with democratic politics (Ankersmit 2003; Corner 2003; Pels 2003; Richards 2004; Street, 2003). For Pels this requires resistance to the total dominance of 'political objectivism' – exemplified in rational choice models or by Habermasian deliberative democracy: 'this is not to sell out to irrationalism, but favours a redefinition of the domain of political rationality...to encompass the emotional political intelligence of ordinary citizens' (p57). For Street, politics and popular culture have always been entwined; celebrity politics or show-business-style political marketing is merely the modern manifestation. The point is not to lament this trend, rather to find appropriate critical tools with which to distinguish between 'good and bad political performances' in terms of 'fidelity to democratic ideals' (pp97-8).

These points raise key and difficult questions about aesthetics, emotion and the relation between them and proper (rational) democratic discourse. The emotional point, at one level, is relatively more easily dealt with. Emotion, all too frequently, is counter-posed to reason. However, this is not the verdict now commonly seen in political psychology research, which finds that far from being opposed, emotion and reason are intertwined (Goodwin et al 2001; Just et al 2001; Marcus et al 2000; Marcus 2002). The one does not preclude the

other: 'far from being an oppositional dichotomy, the relationship between feeling and reason is one of deep interconnection and complementarity. To invite emotional engagement is to facilitate rational discourse, not to banish it' (Richards 2004:340). Research does not necessarily support the practitioner adage that 'minds follow hearts' in linear sequence; rather that political involvement will almost certainly require both because, if emotional motivation is absent, reason alone is unlikely to drive us to act (Damasio 1994; Marcus 2003:186).

The key point is the necessity of emotional involvement for political mobilization. Marcus (2000, 2004) found that that enthusiasm, expressed by affect-charged terms such as pride, hope and sympathy, has a distinct effect on political involvement. 'When politics drums up enthusiasm, people immerse themselves in the symbolic festival...We may be fairly sure that emotion matters not only in how it colors people's voting choices but also in how it affects the way they regard the electoral contest' (Marcus 2004, 173). Equally emotion, particularly anxiety, is significantly correlated with increased attentiveness to the campaign and policy related learning (Marcus et al 2000, Marcus 2004). Affective investment in politics, then, is a necessary condition for political involvement and participation, and it is not detrimental to the idea of the rational citizen.

This is not to say that emotion is a magical cure for democratic participation. It is obvious that emotions are not always beneficial or harmless although equally, of course, neither are rational/logical appeals. The question of what is it that emotional appeals are motivating us to do must be a key consideration; and just as importantly our capacity to deal intelligently with emotions. Precisely this concern with the double-edged potential of emotion has encouraged interest in the sometimes vague, but valuable, idea of emotional intelligence (Pels, 2003; Richards, 2004). Emotional intelligence is defined as the capacity to access and generate feelings that motivate and facilitate cognitive activities, and the ability to appraise, express and manage

emotions in a way that promotes growth, well-being, and functional social relations (Barrett and Salovey 2002:1). As a concept it is premised on the idea that cognitive and emotional systems intersect, and are mutually reinforcing. Emotion may both help and harm our ability to make sense of the world, or to function effectively. Thus, according to (Gross and John 2002:297) 'it is becoming increasingly clear that the critical question is not whether emotions are good or bad, but what makes a given emotion helpful or unhelpful in a particular context'

Emotional intelligence does not provide a definitive check-list to add to our content analysis schemes, to thereby quantify if one piece of political advertising is emotionally good and another bad. However, it does bring together valuably the concepts of both emotion and intelligence, and this encourages us to judge not just whether emotion is used, but how it is used and to what extent the audience is assumed as emotionally intelligent. This very act forcefully underscores just how unintelligent emotionally most political advertising is. The range of emotion is narrow, and in the case of Liberal Democrats virtually non-existent; and, with the partial exception of Labour, it is mostly clichéd in construction: the mass of flags for patriotism, military trappings for courage and so on. The analysis here has been confined to the UK, but the point generally crosses borders. The 'visual shorthand' , as Green (2004) notes of US advertising, has been remarkably formulaic for 50 years; like fast food 'it is cooked up and served the same way every time'. To confine emotional appeals to weary clichés is to limit the possibilities of emotional engagement.

The aesthetics question is even more difficult. This is less to do with the possibility of aesthetic judgement, more to combine this with some idea conformity with democratic ideals, 'democratic aesthetics'. Notwithstanding some intricate philosophical problems here – what is beauty, are aesthetic values objective or subjective - (Hospers, 1969), there are workable canons of art criticism (unity, complexity, intensity), and agreed great works which



stand as shared reference points. It is probably not difficult to agree at least a limited canon of great political advertising, works that stand out as landmarks of style. This is an important point to make because it suggests the possibilities of aesthetic judgement separate from personal taste and ideological preference. Likeability of ads is not only determined by partisanship. Nevertheless, criteria of aesthetic evaluation are undeveloped in political advertising research generally.

We turned to propaganda research to help unravel the problems of aesthetics and political persuasion. The study of propaganda essentially encompasses two broad strands. One, often employing the craft of art criticism reveals the ancient history and pervasive entwining of art and political knowledge. Propaganda, unlike modern political communication, is analysed precisely as political art. The second strand is more concerned with the deconstruction and identification of persuasive strategies and persuasive devices (glittering generalities, value transfer, bandwagon, name-calling, selective information etc. see e.g. Pratkanis and Aronson 1991) nearly all of which are commonplace in commercial advertising also. Starting with Harold Lasswell's 1927 seminal work on World War I, this latter strand tends to see propaganda as neutral, techniques that are available to all. Value judgements therefore could only be made of the ends, not the means, of political persuasion. Although there is clearly force in this 'neutral' argument, it does not help us with aesthetic judgements. We can only talk about effectiveness (whose techniques worked more successfully and why), and goals (do they conform to democratic standards and aspirations, are they only about power).

The art criticism strand implicitly rejects the neutral propaganda view. Susan Sontag's (1990) essay on 'fascinating fascism' makes the point clear. Leni Riefenstahl's propaganda documentaries for the Nazis (Triumph of the Will and Olympia) are, in Sontag's view, 'thrilling' and beautiful. But they are not neutral art; they are not merely fascinating works of design which might be applied equally to any political project. They are specifically imbued with

'fascist aesthetics': beauty as (male) physical perfection, identity as biology, anti-intellectualism, the dissolution of alienation in community, the cult of the warrior, unity under heroic leadership. These aesthetics have undeniable resonance way beyond totalitarianism, and Sontag points especially to youth culture, and to the popularity of SS regalia in gay male sado-masochist fashion in the 1970s. Nonetheless they are fascist aesthetics, and their popularity in mass fashion was, for her, worrying. She is not talking about modern political campaigns, but it is a logical step to say that the combined use of these aesthetics in political advertising would be prima facie evidence of undemocratic intentions.

We cannot satisfactorily resolve these differences, but they raise key questions. If mobilization is the prime democratic function of political advertising, does it matter what emotions or aesthetics are used, provided they succeed in motivating people to participate? This is both a question of balance and style. How, democratically, would we consider political ads that were only about pleasure, all emotional and virtually no rational core? Equally, should it be a cause of concern if they engage our interest and participation, but through aesthetics that toy with racial intolerance? If one takes the Lasswellian approach perhaps one should not worry much, and reserve judgement for governing performance. From the Sontag perspective, one would scour the pleasure, decoration and emotion for suspicious signs.

We argue precisely for more entertainment, more emotional engagement in British PEBs; but we take both points. The key judgements probably are about what parties and leaders do when they are in government, rather than how they get there. Equally, Sontag is suggestive of the idea that some aesthetics are more (un)democratic than others. It matters what kind of entertainment we are being offered, whether it is one that wants to please our senses and engage our minds, or one that is deliberately mindless, anti-rational, seeks to distract us to death.

## Conclusion

The main aim of this article has been to evaluate political advertising as a stimulant to voter engagement, instead of focusing as do most studies, on their role as information providers. While political advertising is not a particularly appropriate vehicle for complex information, in principle, it should be entirely fit to engage in popular forms of discourse. However, despite the professionalisation of politics, political ads remain remarkably unpopular. We argued that the dislike of political ads maybe less to do with the negative/positive content balance, and more with pleasure/information balance. In stark contrast to commercial advertising, which increasingly uses pleasure/entertainment as an attention-grabbing strategy, political advertising remains wedded to information and plausibility. It is increasingly evident that politics is not sold like soap or cornflakes. It is sold with far less concern for audience pleasure. The content analysis of UK PEBs revealed that information content is their biggest virtue; there was strikingly little attempt to engage audience interest through use of genre, or innovative narrative structure, and pace Labour, little recognition of the emotional intelligence of viewers.

This study has wider applicability than just the UK. It is probably true that the commercial/political contrast is greater in the UK than some countries; the commercial sector prides itself on innovation and creativity, while the prohibition of paid political advertising has limited parties to rationed time-controlled slots. This may exaggerate the contrast. Moreover, the particulars of popular genre may vary from country to country, and thus the categories used here may require modification. Nonetheless, the underlying rationale can be applied, even perhaps to the US, where one might expect fewer differences between commerce and politics. There too, commercial advertising has moved away from sincerity hard sell, to more playful, pleasurable strategies, while political advertising seems locked in a clichéd time-warp of formats and appeals (Green, 2004).

It is, of course, probably true that politicians, for whom victory is the prize, may be less concerned with engaging audience interest and enthusiasm than with beating opponents and driving the news agenda. However, parties, as self-interested organizations, must sooner or later consider their long-term survival. They must consider at some point how to develop a more pleasurable, emotionally intelligent relationship with citizens. Political ads are a gift for popularity, they should make better use of them.

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## Tables

**Table 1: Information content: PEBs general elections of 1997 & 2001**

	<b>Labour % (n)</b>	<b>Conservatives % (n)</b>	<b>Lib-Dem % (n)</b>	<b>Total % (n)</b>
<b>AD EMPHASIS</b>				
Issue	70 (7)	80 (8)	75 (6)	<b>75 (21)</b>
Image	30 (3)	20 (2)	25 (2)	<b>25 (7)</b>
<b>POLICY PROPOSALS</b>				
Vague	50 (5)	80 (8)	62.5 (5)	<b>64.3 (18)</b>
Specific	30 (3)	40 (4)	62.5 (5)	<b>42.9 (12)</b>

**Table 2: Use of appeals**

	<b>Labour % (n)</b>	<b>Conservatives % (n)</b>	<b>Lib-Dem % (n)</b>	<b>Total % (n)</b>
<b>USE OF APPEALS</b>				
Logical	80 (8)	100 (10)	75 (6)	<b>85.7 (24)</b>
Emotional	80 (8)	70 (7)	25 (2)	<b>60.7 (17)</b>
Source Credibility	60 (6)	40 (4)	50 (4)	<b>50 (14)</b>
<b>DOMINANT APPEAL</b>				
Logical	20 (2)	40 (4)	62.5 (5)	<b>39.3 (11)</b>
Emotional	40 (4)	40 (4)	0 (0)	<b>28.6 (8)</b>
Source Credibility	40 (4)	20 (2)	37.5 (3)	<b>32.1 (9)</b>

**Table 3: Presence of negative appeals**

	<b>Labour % (n)</b>	<b>Conservatives % (n)</b>	<b>Lib-Dem % (n)</b>	<b>Total % (n)</b>
<b>PRESENCE OF NEGATIVE APPEALS</b>				
Yes	50 (5)	90 (9)	50 (4)	<b>64.3 (18)</b>
No	50 (5)	10 (1)	50 (4)	<b>35.7 (10)</b>

Dominant FOCUS				
Positive	70 (7)	10 (1)	87.5 (7)	<b>53.6 (15)</b>
Negative	30 (3)	60 (6)	0 (0)	<b>32.1 (9)</b>
Balanced	0 (0)	30 (3)	12.5 (1)	<b>14.3 (4)</b>

**Table 4: Genre**

	<b>Labour % (n)</b>	<b>Conservatives % (n)</b>	<b>Lib-Dem % (n)</b>	<b>Total % (n)</b>
News/Documentary	50 (5)	20 (2)	75 (6)	<b>46.4 (13)</b>
Horror/Thriller	0 (0)	50 (5)	0 (0)	<b>17.9 (5)</b>
Comedy/Spoof	20 (2)	0 (0)	25 (2)	<b>14.3 (4)</b>
Romantic drama	20 (2)	0 (0)	0 (0)	<b>7.1 (2)</b>
MTV/Music video	10 (1)	0 (0)	0 (0)	<b>3.6 (1)</b>
Others	0 (0)	30 (3)	0 (0)	<b>10.7 (3)</b>

**Table 5: Emotional appeals**

	<b>Labour % (n)</b>	<b>Conservatives % (n)</b>	<b>Lib-Dem % (n)</b>	<b>Total % (n)</b>
Happiness	30 (3)	0 (0)	12.5 (1)	<b>14.3 (4)</b>
Hope/Utopia	30 (3)	0 (0)	0 (0)	<b>10.7 (3)</b>
Patriotism/Nat. Pride	50 (5)	30 (3)	25 (2)	<b>35.7 (10)</b>
Fear	10 (1)	70 (7)	0 (0)	<b>28.6 (8)</b>
Sadness	10 (1)	20 (2)	0 (0)	<b>10.7 (3)</b>
Anger/ Disgust	10 (1)	10 (1)	0 (0)	<b>7.1 (2)</b>

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<sup>1</sup> MORI/*The Times* (2001) Campaign Poll Week 4, May 2001

<sup>2</sup> This content analysis design closely followed Kaid and Johnston, 2000. The intercoder reliability for the content analysis averaged +.97 across all categories of the coding frame.

<sup>3</sup> Contrastingly, commercial advertising is limited in its use of fear appeals by consumer protection codes, and explicitly prohibited from the use of child characters in fearful settings.

<sup>4</sup> When in doubt about genre use, or where there was a mix of genres, classification was determined by the opening sequences. Both the Liberal Democrat comedy spots opened with comedy devices, including music, but then moved towards a voice-over documentary style.