Truth in Advertising? Visuals, Sound, and the Factual Accuracy of Political Advertising*

Barbara Allen  
Carleton College  
ballen@carleton.edu

Daniel Stevens  
University of Exeter  
D.P.Stevens@exeter.ac.uk


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“Everyone is entitled to his own opinion, but not his own facts” (Daniel Patrick Moynihan)

Perhaps the most fundamental tenet of desirable electoral politics is that voters cast informed votes. Campaigns should teach citizens the, “attitudes, temperaments, and competence of candidates; their policy commitments and intentions; their past actions in both public and private life; their party and other affiliations” (Kelley 1960, 12; see also, Bartels 1997; Lau and Redlawsk 2006). More informed citizens are both better able to identify and articulate their true interests and also are more likely to participate in elections (Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Downs 1957; Verba and Nie 1972). While political scientists have long since abandoned any notion of voters as fully informed, even less than perfectly informed voters require accurate information from which to base inferences. Even with the increasing use of internet sources, much of that information will come in the form of televised political advertising, which remains the major form of communication in American elections, as evidenced by the fact that candidates continue to spend vast sums of money on ad creation and broadcast, despite the increased use of less expensive forms of internet-based communication (Devine 2008).

Research examining the influence of paid political advertising broadcasts has primarily focused on candidate strategies, news media responses, and the effects on voter information, interest, and ultimately on turnout, paying far less attention to the accuracy of ads and the inferences they invite viewers to draw. While the 2008 election continued a trend of journalists challenging what they thought may be the false statements of political ads or other campaign communication directly in ad watches, truth tests, and political news stories (Hershey 2010), recent elections also featured blogs and news outlet websites that simply posted candidate videos with no comment at all. News outlets as a conduit through which candidates’ messages flow is,
for better or worse, less gated than ever before. In the age of viral marketing—a tool that works in tandem with paid political advertising broadcast on television—the concepts of advertising fairness and truthfulness and the effects of perceptions of fairness as well as the actual accuracy of advertising claims, whatever the medium of exposure, is perhaps more germane to our study of democratic processes than ever before.

In this paper we report on new findings from our multi-year study of information processing and voters’ perceptions of the fairness of election advertising. Our work has demonstrated that voters are often motivated by partisan biases when they evaluate the fairness of election advertising claims, but that they will reconsider such evaluations in light of information that draws a claim’s veracity into question (Allen et al. 2009; Stevens et al. 2008). We have also examined the importance of perceptions of ad fairness to citizens’ intentions to vote and have written more generally about advertising fairness, truth, and democratic political processes in the US. In trying to get at how perceptions of truthfulness in ad claims affect perceptions of ad fairness—and how either may affect voting behavior—we have faced questions about just what “truthful” advertising means. “Accuracy” is one potential dimension of ad truthfulness. We are thus concerned with what ad accuracy is, and the difference ad accuracy may make to voters’ inferences about candidates for office. In this paper we take an initial, but comprehensive, look at the features of political advertising, what they suggest about ad accuracy, and the relationship between the tone of political advertising and its accuracy.

Ad accuracy (and its measurement, as one aspect of measuring “truthfulness”) is itself a matter of importance. Consider the normative implications of “filling voters in” with inaccurate information. If political advertising has the effects that much of the contemporary literature grants that it does—engaging voters, providing them with information and giving them a greater
sense of the stakes in an election (Franz et al. 2008; Geer 2006)—does it matter if the information that ads provide is inaccurate? Exposure to advertising campaigns may get out the vote, but the consequences of a public misled by advertising claims may be less benign than our research findings generally indicate.

Political scientists appear to have paid relatively little attention to this issue for two reasons. First, we encounter assumptions about how the political process works: if, as a result of exposure to political advertising, voters have more to say about the candidates and see the candidates as further apart ideologically, for example, such a finding alone may seem sufficient to demonstrate its desirable impact. Second, we encounter concerns about measurement: perhaps one person’s “misleading” claim is another person’s “basically plausible” claim—and it is impossible to judge the relative or relevant accuracy of political advertising claims. These questions about measurement can be parsed into four more specific kinds of discomfort with the notion that the assertions made in political ads can be judged as more or less accurate: 1) a sense that we cannot check out all of the claims made in an ad—so deciding which will be fact checked places the entire enterprise in question, 2) a belief that the accuracy of a claim is less relevant to voters than the “accuracy” of the inferences drawn from the claim, 3) an intuition that it is the constellation of claims—the branding of candidates—not the individual claim, that we should consider, and 4) a question about who should judge the relevance of a given claim or its relevant level of accuracy.

This paper provides the first systematic analysis of the accuracy of the claims made in an entire advertising campaign. We studied the radio and television political advertising broadcasted in several elections in 2008: the presidential election, the Minnesota US Senate race between incumbent Norm Coleman and challenger Al Franken, and all the advertising in races for the US
Congress in Minnesota. In later sections of this paper we discuss our two primary measures of claim accuracy, one focusing on the accuracy of individual claims and a second focusing on the accuracy of the ads as a whole. We find that negative advertising is more likely to be inaccurate, particularly with claims about the traits of its targets, even controlling for the fact that it also tends to make more claims of all kinds. In addition we look at two other dimensions of TV and radio advertising that affect their impact and thus the inferences their audiences draw: the visual and sound messages conveyed in images and music (Brader 2006). We illustrate the systematic differences in the ways different kinds of ads use imagery and sound, with a particular focus on the use of visual compositing in negative advertising—combining images of the target with people or places not originally in the image to imply an association. We demonstrate that visual compositing is also associated with ads that are more likely to be factually inaccurate and that this association is independent of the ad’s verbal content, suggesting that visuals do more than simply reinforce the verbal message.

**Previous Research**

There are four particularly relevant elements of the literature on political advertising for our purposes. In this section we discuss each in turn before considering their implications for our exploration.

1. *The debate about negative advertising*

   Research on political advertising has gone through two distinct phases over the past 20 years. The first phase was the findings of Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1994; Ansolabehere et al.
1994) about negative advertising, culminating in *Going Negative* in 1995.¹ Using controlled experiments and aggregate data from a presidential election year, Ansolabehere and Iyengar argued that negative advertising, by which, in common with most researchers, they meant advertising that focuses exclusively on the reasons not to vote for an opponent, is particularly disturbing for Independents. The effects of negativity on Independents, they argued, were to make them see government as less responsive to their concerns, thus rendering them less likely to vote in an election.

In the second and current research phase, Ansolabehere and Iyengar’s findings have been subject to numerous challenges, moving the question from whether negative advertising depresses turnout to a debate between those who argue that negative ads engage and educate voters, ultimately *boosting* turnout, and those who argue that they have no discernible impact. For example, Freedman and Goldstein’s research has consistently claimed that exposure increases turnout (Franz et al. 2008a; Freedman and Goldstein 1999, 2004; Goldstein and Freedman 2002a, 2002b), while research teams Krasno and Green (2008) and Huber and Arceneaux (2007) as well as Lau et al.’s (1999, 2007) meta-analyses suggest negative ads have no distinct effect on voting behavior at all.

From our perspective, these two phases of research are interesting because, while disagreeing about the effects of negative advertising on turnout, Ansolabehere and Iyengar agreed that voters get information. It is the nature of those gains and the implication of the effects of this information on which they have disagreed. We now turn to that element of the debate.

¹ And the defence of some of the empirical evidence from *Going Negative* in the *American Political Science Review*’s symposium on negative advertising (Ansolabehere et al. 1999).
ii. Information in advertising

Ansolabehere and Iyengar’s (1995) experiments showed that exposure to positive and negative advertising increased individuals’ levels of “issue information.” However, they did not see this as a potential boon to elections for two reasons. First, while exposure to ads led to gains in information, the gains were greater for those who were high in education and politically knowledgeable, i.e., information gaps widened (see also Stevens 2005). Second, some of their evidence suggested that after viewing the first ad, information gains leveled off among voters who were low in education and less politically knowledgeable. From this finding they concluded, “we may surmise that as campaigns generate more extensive amounts of advertising, the less attentive and informed either tune out or fall victim to information overload” (55).

A great deal of research argues that this is not the case, however. Lau et al.’s (2007) meta-analysis of the most prominent findings in the field indicates that the evidence is of positive, though modest, effects of negative advertising on campaign knowledge after viewing several political ads. Lau et al. also show that negative ads are better remembered than positive ads. This finding is consistent with a wealth of research on the psychological effects of negative information: negative ads are recalled more easily, in more detail, and with greater accuracy than positive ads because they are more arousing, ego involving and, by presenting the choice of candidates in stark terms, can make voters feel as though the stakes are higher in the election (Johnson-Cartee and Copeland 1991; Newhagen and Reeves 1991; Shapiro and Rieger 1992). In addition, individuals are more confident in their evaluations of others when they are based on negative rather than positive information (Fiske 1980), negative information is given additional weight in decision-making (Kernell 1977; Lau 1982, 1985; Skowronski and Carlston 1987, 1989), negative first impressions are harder to change than positive initial feelings, and negative
information has a greater capacity to alter our existing impressions (Kellerman 1984). Individuals are predisposed to view others positively (Sears 1983), an inclination that also includes political leaders (Klein 1996); with such expectations, negative information has been shown to stand out and therefore be more credible and more informative (Lau 1985).

The most recent verdict on negative advertising—at least among researchers, if not necessarily the lay public—has been much more positive than early studies seemed to suggest (Jamieson 2000; Geer 2006). If not everyone says, “Two Cheers for Negative Ads” (Dolan 2004), as one political scientist put it, the idea of ad negativity is widely accepted as part of the cut and thrust of the campaign. Geer (2006, 3) summarizes this viewpoint well: “Campaigns are not feel-good exercises; they are pitched battles for control of the government. The stakes are often high and the competition is usually fierce. The real issue should be whether or not candidates present the information in campaigns that is useful to voters” (see also, Mayer 1996).

Geer and others suggest that the information is likely to be useful; negative ads contain more information than positive ads, by which these studies mean more facts, more on issues, more on the subjects that people care about, more information that draws on the candidates’ records and, overall, more that allows voters to make an informed choice by pointing to what candidates disagree about (Geer 2006, Jamieson 2000). Gilens et al. (2007) show that modern campaigns in which negative political advertising is prevalent are characterized by an enhanced tendency for voters to cite policy rather than personality considerations as factors in their preferences and a greater ability to place the candidates accurately on issues.

But more is not always better, political psychologists Lau and Redlawsk (2006) suggest. They find that more information does not necessarily lead to better decision-making and Koch (2008) demonstrates that while exposure to negative advertising makes voters more confident
that they know where candidates stand, in reality they are more prone to make errors (see also, Geer and Geer 2003). Perhaps more to the point for our work, these errors, Koch finds, are the result of inferences that voters draw about candidates. The erroneous inferences, Koch conjectures, “may have more to do with fallible citizens’ inferential strategies than the content of ads” (Koch 2008, 619). On the other hand, inaccurate information may be a source of faulty inferences or a factor motivating inferential strategies that lead to erroneous inferences.

It is worth mentioning, in addition, that thinkers such as Hamilton, Madison, Tocqueville, and Mill are often invoked in support of this view that negativity is both necessary and desirable in politics. In fact, Madison, Locke, and Tocqueville remained perplexed about the possible consequence of creating a new authority from mass opinion, or, having no moral guidance for politics and civil society at all. None of these writers thought that “turning out the vote” was sufficient to maintain republican or democratic liberty. For example, Tocqueville described the fate of democracies that had lost their participatory culture and could no longer depend on experience to guide their thinking about public problems, whose cognitive capacities were no longer engaged: “they congratulate themselves on electing their masters every four years” (Allen 2005).

Negative political ads are more likely than advocacy ads to present themselves as authoritative sources of information: negative ads are more likely than advocacy ads to be backed up by citing supporting evidence, often in the form of footnotes in the ad that refer to evidence such as a congressional vote or a newspaper article (Geer 2006). The verifiable documentation that negative ads often provide serves two purposes: as cue to viewers that claims are supported and as a source of facts to be checked. Political scientists have noted both functions, but have not been sufficiently interested in whether the claims are indeed accurate, as
perhaps we should be if we are to assume that more documentation means a more informed voter.

Anecdotal evidence suggests that the sources provided in ads often are not accurate. For example, Jamieson (1992) looked at a 1972 Nixon radio ad campaign that cited a “Congressional study” of “McGovern’s plan for a ‘32 billion dollar slash in the defence budget’” and the closing of numerous defence facilities that could cause large job losses in Rhode Island, the battleground state where the ads were aired, among other catastrophic consequences (305). Jamieson could find no such Congressional study, which alone renders the claim misleading. She went on to examine the specific claims, however, and found that whether or not such a study existed, “If the cuts were spread across the facilities listed in the ads, none of them would experience the level of projected unemployment detailed in each” (306) and if a few facilities bore the impact of the cuts, the other facilities would feel no effects from the cuts. As she put it the word “could” hid the fact that the “severe impact described in each [Rhode Island media] market” would not occur (306). Even if the correct inference about McGovern’s defence stand, which was indeed ideologically more liberal than Nixon’s, might be drawn from the ad, the claims of the ad are patently false.

An ad in the 2000 Minnesota US Senate race from Republican Rod Grams against Democrat challenger Mark Dayton also makes the point as vividly. The ad claimed, “The Congressional Budget Office says Dayton’s plan would result in a million Americans losing health coverage.” The Congressional Budget Office had not examined Mark Dayton’s health plan. Dayton, whose only other political office had been as the state’s 15th Auditor (1991–1995) would have had no plan attracting CBO scrutiny. The centerpiece of Dayton’s campaign was an
immediate push for universal healthcare. In this case, fictitious inferences were fabricated from falsehoods.

iii. *Truth in advertising: The Text*

Can the accuracy of political advertising be established? Those who say “no” make three arguments. First, they say that it is simply too difficult to establish the truth. For example, Buell and Sigelman (2008, 3) contend that, “the difficulty of determining degrees of untruth in many, if not most, instances is insuperable.” They use Jamieson’s (1992) dissection of the Willie Horton ad as an example. Buell and Sigelman are critical of the fact that “Jamieson glossed over Horton’s criminal acts before his murder conviction” (273). Yet so did the ad—describing Horton as a “first degree murderer” who had murdered a boy in a robbery but focusing on what happened while he was out on furlough. Jamieson (1992, 471) gave the information “equal time,” describing William Horton as a black murderer who had jumped furlough in Massachusetts.” But these are not the facts in dispute; what is at issue, Jamieson and others have argued, is not whether Horton was a murderer, but whether or not the description of the furlough program and Horton’s acts while violating his furlough were accurate. In this case, numerous fact checks show that the inferences viewers were invited to draw about “Dukakis on crime” were false.

A second, similar argument is that the truth is not only hard to establish but also perhaps less important than the inferences to be drawn from a claim. More relevant than whether the specifics of ads may or may not be misleading is whether voters draw the right conclusions to distinguish the choices before them. Geer (2006), for example, is uncomfortable with terms such as “misleading” and points to the problems with assessments like Jamieson’s of the 1988 George H. W. Bush Campaign ad “Tank Ride,” which shows an unflattering image of Democratic
presidential candidate Michael Dukakis riding along in a military tank and makes inaccurate claims about Dukakis’s defence proposals. Jamieson is critical of the claim in the Bush ad that Dukakis had opposed “virtually every weapon system we developed.” Geer (4) accepts that “Jamieson’s claim has some merit” but is more sanguine on the grounds that Dukakis did not support weapons systems as strongly as Bush. In other words, if ad claims do not lead voters to the wrong inferences an exaggeration or distortion is acceptable; after all, elections require us to make a choice and ads can help to clarify that choice.

But whether ads lead to correct inferences is debateable. Exaggerations may allow voters to place the candidates correctly on issues, e.g., that Dukakis is likely to spend less on defence than Bush, but if understanding of precisely what a candidate stands for is more important than where he or she stands on an issue relative to his or her opponent we might be less sanguine (Stevens 2005). To use another example below, is it sufficient for voters to know that Reagan wants lower taxes more than Carter if we are also invited to make the false inference that it was tax cuts in California that turned a budget deficit into a surplus? We know that individuals make inferential errors even when they appear to know the broad contours of policy (Bartels 2005). Such errors may be more likely if the policy positions themselves are misunderstood (Lau and Redlawsk 2006).

A third argument, also made by Geer (2006), points to additional problems of interpretation. First, “one has to decide when exaggeration crosses the line” (5). Second, as voters, we “tend to view these partisan exchanges with our own partisan lenses” (17). The first problem is a hurdle only if one is trying to establish the acceptability of an ad, by passing an overall verdict on its fairness, for example. Establishing the veracity of claims does not require a decision about when a line has been crossed, nor does it demand a judgment that a statement is
Partisanship, the second problem, also influences judgments about the fairness of ads and ad claims, as our own work testifies (e.g., Stevens et al. 2008). Our experimental work similarly shows that voters will abandon information processing motivated by partisan biases when they are presented with fact finding that disputes the veracity of ad claims (Allen et al. 2009). Regardless, the problem of motivated information processing is likewise not a concern in establishing the accuracy of an ad claim. Undoubtedly partisans will disagree about the accuracy and relevance of even the most testable factual claims, and perhaps they will find ways to diminish or disregard facts as they make decisions. Nevertheless, the claims are in principle testable, and the different interpretations that partisans will give to the same facts should not divert us from that.

Jamieson is unequivocal on this point: “Postmodernism aside, at some level, political discourse presupposes the existence of brute, verifiable facts … There either are or are not homeless on the streets. The rate of unemployment has either increased since 1988 or it has not” (1992, 217). We agree that it is possible to establish the accuracy of claims. Indeed, many information sources believe that we can assess truth in advertising. It has become commonplace over the last quarter of a century in newspapers, on television, and on websites such as factcheck.org and politifact.com to analyse the claims that candidates make and to declare them more or less accurate. Political scientists seem also to have become more comfortable than sceptics suggests. Jamieson (1996, xxiv) approvingly quotes an adwatch that took to task a Democratic ad, “falsely accusing Bush of wanting to ‘virtually eliminate all compensation for over one million disabled veterans.’” She is also comfortable with the claim that more than half
the presidential ads in 1996 were vulnerable to the charge that they contained at least one misleading claim (Jamieson 2000).

To be sure, establishing the accuracy of claims is rarely as easy as a simple “true” or “false”, as in the statement that a charge is “nominally true, but it’s fundamentally a lie” (Mark 2007, 10).\(^2\) We can evaluate the veracity of such statements as Al Gore’s election 2000 claim that Texas ranked 49\(^{th}\) out of the 50 states in providing health coverage for children, Al Gore’s (mis)characterization of his own tax plans as balancing each dollar of spending against a dollar in middle class tax cuts (Johnston et al. 2004), or John Kerry’s 2004 accusation that George W. Bush had the worst record on jobs since Herbert Hoover. Other facts may be harder to evaluate, however. For example, Jamieson (1992) examines a 1980 Reagan ad that said,

> When Governor Reagan left office, the $194 million dollar deficit had been transformed into a $554 million surplus. And while saving the taxpayers hundreds of millions of dollars, he improved the quality of life for the people of California. (432-3)

Here the bare facts are true but the problem is that the viewer is invited to make the false inference that the surplus was the result of Reagan’s tax cuts, whereas California only enjoyed a surplus because Reagan and the state legislature raised taxes three times (after which Reagan successfully pushed to provide tax refunds). Indeed, a plurality of the ad watches Kahn and Kenney (2004) analyzed from Senate campaigns were not “accurate” or “inaccurate” but “inaccurate and accurate.” Ad watches and fact checking organizations acknowledge this complexity with scales, such as “false”, “misleading” and “mostly true,” or scoring systems such

\(^2\) For example consider the claim in the McCain Palin 2008 ad, “Tax Cutter,” about Barack Obama’s voting record on Taxes. The ad said: “He voted 94 times for higher taxes. He is not truthful on taxes.” Numerous fact checks and reality checks disputed the “facts.” FactCheck.org’s Lori Robertson found a litany of problems with the figure of “94”, concluding that, “by repeating their inflated 94-vote figure, the McCain campaign and the GOP falsely imply that Obama has pushed indiscriminately to raise taxes for nearly everybody.”
as the “Pinocchio” rating used in the Washington Post’s fact checker articles—up to four—for lies and “Geppetto” (one) for telling the truth, or The Saint Petersburg Times Pulitzer Prize winning Politifact designation, “pants on fire,” for particularly egregious inaccuracies.

iv. Truth in advertising: The Visuals

An equally slippery element of political advertising, though less often the focus of research (for an exception, see Brader 2006), and indeed of ad watches, is what might be termed “the visual lie” or what West (2005, 170) calls “visual trickery.” Yet the visual and sound elements of an ad also may contain information that distorts, misleads, or lies. Political scientists also debate whether the accuracy of these elements can be the subject evaluated. Although Geer (2006) does not analyse the visual element of ads systematically, he claims that the pictures in advertising almost always reinforce the text and spoken word. He draws examples from the visual elements of a small sample of 25 ads to confirm the assertion, while allowing that implicit messages about race may be projected via imagery. If true, his conjecture implies that the obstacles preventing us from establishing the accuracy of the text of ads are similarly insuperable (or more so) when we attempt to establish visual trickery.

On the other hand, Jamieson (1992, xix) focuses on the images as well as the verbal content of ads, again using the 1988 presidential campaign as a principal example. She criticizes the imagery in George H.W. Bush’s “[Boston] Harbor” ad, in which a sign reading “Danger Radiation Hazard No Swimming” appears as the male announcer tells viewers: “The Environmental Protection Agency called his lack of action the most expensive public policy mistake in the history of New England. Now Boston Harbor is the dirtiest harbor in America.” As Jamieson points out, “the sign shown in the ad has, in fact, nothing to do with the Massachusetts governor or his record. Instead, it warns swimmers to stay away from waters close
to a nuclear repair space.” Jamieson also criticizes the 1988 Bush Campaign ad, “R敬畏ing Door,” for showing a procession of convicts going through a revolving gate, as the male narrator claimed: “As Governor Michael Dukakis vetoed mandatory sentences for drug dealers he vetoed the death penalty. His revolving door prison policy gave weekend furloughs to first degree murderers not eligible for parole.” A text block emerges over the image reading: “268 ESCAPED,” inviting “the inference that 268 first-degree murderers had been furloughed by Michael Dukakis to rape and kidnap” (Jamieson 1992 xix). Jamieson’s evaluation points out that the ad (and others with similar claims regarding the Massachusetts furlough program and William Horton) is doubly misleading, since more than a quarter of the furloughed convicts had not “escaped,” but had returned voluntarily, albeit up to two hours later than the furlough curfew requirement (Jamieson 1992, 543). Ansolabehere and Iyengar (1995, 4) say of Bush Campaign ad, “Willie Horton” that “the advertisement also appealed to voters’ racial prejudice and stereotypes by highlighting (both in the visuals and in the text) a black perpetrator and a white victim.”

In the 2002 US Senate election in Georgia, a Saxby Chambliss ad juxtaposed images of Osama bin Laden, Saddam Hussein, and his opponent Max Cleland to reinforce the message that Cleland was weaker on homeland security. After much condemnation of the ad, including criticism from Republican senators such as John McCain, the visuals of the ad were changed while the text remained the same (Mark 2007). The critics’ discomfort and the decision to substitute new visual material without changing the text in this suggest that visuals not only reinforce the spoken message but also shape the meaning of an ad’s verbal message. Different visuals invite different inferences. Indeed, Sulkin and Swigger (2008) argue similarly the functions of ad imagery exceed the task of reinforcing the verbal content of ads; images are also
used to appeal to or distance candidates from particular subconstituencies of voters. Such uses not only occur in negative advertising: “‘positive commercials can be just as manipulative’ by relying on ‘music that summons emotions and images stripped of context’” (James Bennet, *New York Times* 2/27/2000, quoted in Brader 2006).

West (2005, 171; see also 175) is clear that visual exaggeration and distortion is also worthy of attention and that simply focusing on factual inaccuracy is insufficient: “A campaign structure that is open, volatile, and heavily dependent on media coverage gives candidates clear incentives to seek strategic advantage through doctored images or video manipulation. The first of new technologies and the employment of professional campaign managers in the United States have broadened the range of tactics considered acceptable and given campaigners extraordinary tools for influencing voters.” Such manipulations, we found in 2008, can occur as technologically simple distortions that use an image from an unrelated source to illustrate a claim, as occurred in the ad “Harbor.” Manipulations can also be more sophisticated such as the “lens distortion” that enlarged Barack Obama’s teeth, chin, ears, or nose, in still and moving images of McCain-Palin ads “Ayers” and “Tax Cutter.” Our sample included ads in which candidate’s skin tone was darkened, such as occurred in the National Republican Congressional Committee (NRCC) ad, “Ashwin Madia Running.” The ad, which used high contrast, desaturation, a vignette, and darkened tones to distort the facial features and skin pigmentation of Madia, the American-born Democratic Minnesota congressional candidate of Asian descent, was excoriated in ad watches as distant from the Minnesota political scene as Calcutta.3

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In Minnesota’s 2008 race between incumbent Republican Senator Norm Coleman and Democratic Party challenger Al Franken, ads such as “Corporations” used “scan lines” and other effects to distort Franken’s image to make its point. The NRSC ads “Wouldn’t Vote,” “Who is He?” and “Character” used techniques such as color, vignetting, and “old film” effects to give visual context to the ads’ spoken and on-screen text. “Character” colored Franken a devilish red and stamped the image with the word “PORNO” in 100 point Stencil Font, used “old film effects,” vignetted images of processed images of Franken and his primary election challenger Patricia Lord Faris, using a film footage of Faris that did not sync, or match, the audio of her speaking. But it was “Too Far” and “Unfit”, which featured a clip of an animated Franken depicted in the male announcer’s deep voice as “angry” and “out of control” as well as “unfit for office”, that caused a flurry of fact checking by local and national journalists. In reality, the clip was taken from a Franken speech in which the candidate had assumed the character of the late Senator Paul Wellstone who, in Franken’s retelling of events was buoyantly encouraging his young son, David Wellstone, to run faster to beat out an opponent in a cross country foot race. The ad was immediately debunked in a televised “Truth Test.”

v. Sound

While few researchers have considered analyzing the visual aspects of political advertising, fewer still have considered the aural aspects of these media. What we see frames what we hear, but auditory cues also convey information and in some cases may surpass the visual in drawing the viewer’s attention to specific parts of the visual frame, the narrative, or the combination (Levi and Pesoni 2005, Drew and Cadwell 1985). Researchers in the fields of advertising and marketing have taken note of psychological studies of voice characteristics
suggesting that the gender of voiceover artists inflect an ad’s message in perceptible and, perhaps, predictable ways (Whipple and McManamon 2002).

In an interview with Ellen Goodman Jamieson conjectured that “The perception among consultants is that a female voice softens the attack and makes it more acceptable” (Goodman 1996). 4 Kaid and Davidson mapped out concepts and measures of the visual and auditory aspects of campaign communication in their study of 1982 US Senate elections (Kaid and Davidson 1986). Kaid (1999) conducted a basic analysis of videostyles and their effects in European democracies. Recent work with Anne Johnston offers researchers a code sheet of audio and visual material including ad genre (e.g. documentary, music video or issue dramatization), dominant camera angle and proximity; music presence, style, and relationship to ad text; voice over presence (timbre), gender, quality; type of speech, speech fluency; candidate presence, dominant facial expressions, dress, degree of eye contact, presence of candidate family members, body movement and expressions, overall ad staging, and presence of symbols and symbolic strategies (Kaid and Johnston 2001).

Kaid and Johnston have documented the changes in visual and aural communication style for political advertising in US presidential elections, showing how specific approaches play to the advantage of incumbents and the content and visual presentation that favors challengers; offered insights about ad strategies including the introduction of different ad genres, use of national symbols or the fashions of popular culture; and visual and aural presentation of candidates’ direct address to the voter. In each of these studies Kaid and colleagues have shown that we can study the visual and aural aspects of political advertising systematically. Among

other questions, what may be truthful or misleading in these elements and how the sounds and sights influence perceptions of ad content and “truth” remains to be studied.

vi. **Implications**

A great deal of research has raised doubts about the “rationality” of voters. Indeed, political science has abandoned the notion of voters as “rational” and informed, and, in some adopted a more complex picture in which, for example, voters are selective, using heuristics, cognitive and affective cues and shortcuts to form preferences. The complex picture of information processing strategies found, for example, in the work of Richard Lau, David Redlawsk, Deborah Brooks, and the position that we have taken in our research evidences a kind of conceptual kinship with early– and mid–twentieth-century theory and empirical work not only in psychology but also in cybernetics, organization behavior, and institutional analysis.

We also have evidence of framing effects and their limits; we observe various biases affecting information processing (e.g. prospect theory, availability bias, motivational bias). We know that humans also respond to situations in nearly pre-cognitive ways, “acting without thinking” in situations of threat and, perhaps, in situations that threaten core or even their less closely held beliefs, values, and identification. We also know that it is possible to cue individuals in ways that encouraging reasoning and reckoning under conditions of uncertainty about cause, risk, and consequence.

The positive view of political advertising as a force promoting one kind of participation, voting, comes from the idea that the information ads contain, especially negative ads, engages voters and helps them to make the right inferences. Thus, a common standard for seeing ads as “useful” is whether or not voters have more to say about candidates or are able to locate the candidates correctly ideologically with increased exposure to advertising. If ads have these
effects the corollary is that individuals exposed to them should also be more likely to vote. This is desirable. But is negative advertising sufficient for even this limited task?

“Voting correctly”, as Lau and Redlawsk (2006) term it, appears to be highly contingent on having accurate memories of the candidates. Take their hypothetical candidates A, B and C in Figure A.1 (266). Candidates A and C are both pro-choice while Candidate B is pro-life. Candidate A, however, accepts parental notification laws for minors while Candidate C does not accept any government interference in a woman’s right to choose. Suppose Candidate B misrepresents Candidate A and C’s positions as identical on abortion. A voter is still likely to make the correct inference that B is more pro-life than A or C and is more likely to be able to place the candidates ideologically on abortion than in the absence of this information. However, if he processes and accepts Candidate B’s claim he will not see any difference in A and C’s stances on abortion, potentially changing his vote preference.

In addition it is not clear that the kinds of cues and heuristics contained in political advertising benefit all voters. As Lau and Redlawsk (2001) demonstrate, the use of cognitive heuristics can decrease the quality of decision-making among political unsophisticates (see also Bartels 1996; Stevens 2005).

**Analytical Approach**

This paper represents a start toward a better understanding of different elements of political advertising and the effects they have. The precursor to examining effects, however, is to understand the nature of the claims and the visual and aural features of ads. That is what we do in this paper, leaving exploration of effects for another day.

We do not begin with the presumption that any one form of advertising is more likely to be accurate, or feature certain visual and aural characteristics, than another; that is a big part of
what we are exploring. There has been much speculation on these points but relatively little empirical evidence brought to bear. Geer (2006) has suggested that negative ads are more likely to be deemed misleading, both because they contain more claims and also because their arguments are more precise (Geer 2006). Others argue that positive ads are more likely to lie and obfuscate (Bartels 1996) and that “most lies in politics are told in positive ads” (Bob Squire, quoted in Geer 2006, 4). Yet others suggest that they may be equally problematic: “Probably the most significant problem with campaign advertising, positive and negative, is that so much of it is misleading, taking votes and actions out of context, or implying connections between events that may be completely unrelated.” (Mayer 1996, 455). Geer also points out that statements in positive ads are assumed to be accurate even though they are equally likely to exaggerate and distort information. Negative ads are more likely to be the subject of media adwatches (Kahn and Kenney 2004; Ridout and Smith 2008). Thus positive or advocacy ads benefit from their vagueness and from expectations that the accuracy of their claims does not need to be evaluated. We do not make any assumptions about which ads are more likely to contain inaccuracies but we need to be sensitive to Geer’s argument that the lack of specificity in positive advertising means that they may appear less misleading by virtue of obfuscation.

Before we describe the data used to dissect advertising it is important to be clear about what we are and are not seeking to accomplish. We are not denying that all ads are misleading in some sense (Geer 2006), although that is an empirical question for us. This is not another study comparing the effects of advocacy and attack advertising; our interest is not in whether differences in advertising tone lead to more interest in the election or to higher turnout. Neither are we saying that advertising is better or worse than in the past, nor that attack (or advocacy)
advertising should be regulated or discouraged. Our aim is also not to establish whether ads
cross some notional line of acceptability. Instead, we seek to provide an inventory of the
characteristics of political advertising of different kinds.

To our knowledge, only Jamieson (1992) has looked closely at the accuracy of the claims
made in political advertising and her approach was anecdotal. What is needed to test our
hypotheses is data on the claims made in a large sample of advertisements whose tone varies. In
2008 we trained a team of undergraduates to watch and code all the presidential ads from the
2008 campaign, along with ads for the US Senate and US congressional races in Minnesota. These included ads aired on behalf of the candidates and covered the networks and cable
television as well as radio.

Given our interest in the characteristics of ads of different tones we first needed to
establish the extent to which ads were advocacy, contrast, or attack ads. Rather than employ a
single indicator we coded each ad using several established measures, including Geer’s

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5 Although, according to Jamieson (1992, xix) on the question of changes over time, “major
party candidates, until 1988, assumed that outright lying in an ad would create an outcry from the
press … That assumption no longer governs.” Buell and Sigelman (2008) also note a “rising
chorus of fear arousal and dishonesty charges since 1984”, although these are charges rather than
constituting any evidence that campaigns have actually become more dishonest.

6 These were provided to us by Video Monitoring Service http://www.vmsinfo.com/ along with
data on the number of times ads aired and the amount that was spent in each designated market
area (DMA). Thus all the ads we analyze here were aired—we are not mixing “ads aired” and
“ads made.”

7 To be sure, the focus on established media such as television could be questioned but television
remains the "first screen" of political advertising. Television ads can link directly to the second
and third screens of computers and mobile devices, including telephones, MP3 players and
computer tablets. These secondary screens may be used to communicate messages that are either
too lengthy, costly, or controversial for broadcast on television or radio to the far less regulated
spaces of internet and email but television remains primary. In Election 2008 our search of
candidates’ websites showed that all candidates for federal offices, including the major and
minor party presidential candidates, posted their television ads. Independent groups likewise
posted virtually all of their televised ads. Thus, the second and third screens for televised
political ads are enhancing the reach and message content of the televised political ad.
assessment of each separate appeal in ads—for positive or negative tone within issue appeals, trait appeals or value appeals, two Goldstein and Freedman measures as well as Kahn and Kenney’s methods of classifying positive, contrast, or negative ads, and Jamieson’s measure giving an advertisement an “attack score” based on the number of attack words as a proportion of the words in an ad.\textsuperscript{8} This was a conservative approach to measurement that showed, as one might hope, that these five measures are very highly correlated. The lowest correlation between any two measures is .85.\textsuperscript{9} Thus the use of any one of these measures is interchangeable; we focus most here on Goldstein and Freedman’s categorization of ads as positive, contrast, or negative, following the approach of the Wisconsin Advertising Project.

We coded each ad by these multiple indicators of tone while, at the same time, examining the veracity of every claim. For example, Barack Obama first aired a positive 30-second ad called “Dignity” on June 30 2008. The text of the ad was:

He worked his way through college and Harvard Law. Turned down big money offers, and helped lift neighborhoods stung by job loss. Fought for workers' rights. He passed a law to move people from welfare to work, slashed the rolls by eighty percent. Passed tax cuts for workers; health care for kids.

As president, he'll end tax breaks for companies that export jobs, reward those that create jobs in America. And never forget the dignity that comes from work.

There were five issue claims in this ad, primarily relating to Obama’s record, whose legitimacy we assessed: 1) That Obama fought for workers’ rights, 2) That he passed a law to move people from welfare to work and cut the welfare rolls by 80 percent, 3) That he passed tax

\textsuperscript{8} For Goldstein and Freedman, one method followed the instructions on the Wisconsin Advertising Project’s website to categorize ads as positive, negative or contrast. Another followed more nuanced categorizations they have used such as “near parity positive/negative appeals, tipped positive” and “near parity positive/negative appeals, tipped negative.”

\textsuperscript{9} Geer’s measure is the proportion of negative appeals among all issue and trait appeals. Ridout and Franz (2008) also found different measures of campaign tone were correlated but theirs was a less direct comparison in two senses: 1. They used secondary data (i.e., the same coders did not code the data using the different criteria); 2. The different measures of tone were drawn from advertising, media and survey data.
cuts for workers, 4) That he passed health care legislation for children, 5) That he would end tax
breaks for companies that export jobs. This last claim is the type of platitude that could be
regarded as impossible to assess. But candidates have records and the task for our coders was to
see whether the candidate’s record suggested that this was anything more than a platitude. Similarly, if a candidate made a claim about experience, we checked the candidate’s background
to assess as far as possible whether this was a reasonable claim.

There were two trait claims in this ad: 1) That Obama worked his way through college
and Harvard Law School, and 2) That he turned down big money offers to help lift
neighborhoods stung by job losses. We denoted one value claim: “Never forget the dignity that
comes from work.”

Having divided ads into separate claims, coders searched for and listed data confirming,
challenging, or refuting each issue or trait claim (value claims were simply tabulated). We also
sought fact checking done by others and tabulated the kinds of attention each ad received by
print, broadcast, or internet media, categorizing those that fact checked, analyzed the audio
and/or video aspects of the ad, discussed ad strategy pertaining to the ad, provided on-line access
to the ad at a website, or merely mentioned the ad. Obama’s “Dignity” ad, for example, was
described in the New York Times, and dissected by Howard Kurtz in the Washington Post, by the
Associated Press, and by FactCheck.org. These assessments were collected. Our coders also

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10 In this case it did—Obama was a co-sponsor of the Patriot Employer Act
and Christopher Wills, “A Lone Lawmaker doesn’t ‘pass’ bills,”<http://www.frankwbaker.com/adwatch_dignity.htm>
Post, <http://voices.washingtonpost.com/44/2008/06/30/obamas_working_class_pitch.html>
Posted 06/30/08, Accessed 09/09/09.
consulted such cites as *Open Secrets*, *On the Issues* and resources including the Congressional Record and government documents listing roll call voting of specific measures and the nature of each vote. Multiple coders then examined the evidence for each claim and coded the total number of false or questionable issue and trait claims, and on a 6-point scale from “gross untruths” to “wholly accurate representation of facts” in an ad as a whole. For this latter scale, ten coders looked at the evidence for each ad and gave it a score, with disagreements reconciled by discussion.

For the analysis of the visual elements of ads, coders noted the presence or absence of distorted candidate images, mise-en-scene (or visual themes in the ads), use of different montages, any text on screen, and the use of graphics. We also coded the use of different visual distortion, such as various kinds of morphing, compositing with persons, places or images that were not in the original picture or were out of context, color shifts, such as when candidate images are darkened, and color change, as when a candidate’s face turns green. For sound, coders noted features of the ads such as the presence and nature of music cues, characteristics of voiceovers such as gender, and whether it was the candidate or a third party.

**Results**

We begin with descriptive results of the tone and characteristics of the ads we examined. In simple terms, what were the ads like?

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12 Two-thirds of the ads we analyze were fact checked via at least one of these media.
13 In the example we have been using, Obama’s “Dignity” ad, the newspaper and web sources did not entirely agree on whether or not Obama had worked his way through college and law school.
i. Tone, Visuals and Sound in 2008

Figure 1 shows that of the 314 ads\textsuperscript{14} we examine in this paper, 150 for president and 164 for races for the US Congress, by any of the five measures of tone there was a lot of negativity about in 2008; the only real difference is in whether any distinction is made between different kinds of contrast ads.\textsuperscript{15} About half the ads were negative, while around one in four were positive.

**Figure 1 about here**

We were also interested in whether or not our analysis would echo previous claims that negative advertising is more likely than other kinds of advertising to feature appeals pertaining to issues, that those appeals are more likely to be sourced, and that negative ads are also more likely to be the subject of adwatches (Geer 2006). We present this analysis in Table 1.\textsuperscript{16} The data indeed echo previous findings on these issues, lending our coding face validity: negative and contrast ads were more likely than positive ads in 2008 to contain issue and trait appeals but less likely to contain value appeals, were more likely to cite a source such as a bill number or newspaper article, and were more often the subject of adwatches.\textsuperscript{17} Thus the base characteristics

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\textsuperscript{14} This figure includes most but not all of the presidential ads. At the time of writing, we have more presidential ads to incorporate.

\textsuperscript{15} In Figure 1 GF1 = Goldstein and Freedman’s three category measure; GF2 = Goldstein and Freedman’s six-category measure—we categorize ads with no negative appeals and with majority positive appeals on this scale as “Positive” in Figure 1; KK = Kahn and Kenney’s three-category measure; KHJ = Jamieson’s “attack score” approach, where ads with 0-29% attack words are positive or advocacy, 30-70% are contrast, 71-90% are between contrast and attack, and 91%+ are negative. For Geer’s measure we took the proportion of negative appeals in each ad and coded them using the same system as Jamieson’s. Thus, where there are no bars for a category it is because the category is excluded from an author’s coding scheme.

\textsuperscript{16} For the categorization of ads here and in the remainder of the paper we rely in this analysis on the Goldstein and Freedman division of ads as used by the Wisconsin Advertising Project.

\textsuperscript{17} There is one difference to Geer’s findings from presidential elections from 1960-2000, however. Geer found that issue appeals were predominant in negative and contrast ads and constituted about half the appeals for positive ads. Our analysis of presidential ads in 2008 showed that issue appeals were less than half the content of ads of any tone and that this became more pronounced as the ads grew more negative. This is not unprecedented—Geer shows that
of these ads are in keeping with conventional wisdom: negativity is associated with more substantive appeals that are ostensibly more likely to be rooted in the facts—at least as indicated by their citing of sources.

Table 1 about here

We now turn to the visual characteristics of the ads. We coded for the presence or absence of visual distortion and then for types of visual distortion (ads could contain more than one kind). Four-fifths of ads contained some kind of visual distortion. Interestingly, the incidence of visual distortion is not statistically significantly greater in negative and contrast ads than in positive ads.\textsuperscript{18} We present the categories of distortion and their frequency from highest to lowest in Figure 2. The most frequently used techniques either alter color, add graininess, or use compositing to juxtapose people or places that were not in the original image and thus imply an association. Simply morphing a candidate’s face into another person’s face or into an animal may have lost popularity according to these data. While there were no significant differences in the incidence of visual distortion by tone of ad, we also examined differences in the use of specific techniques. We see large and statistically significant differences, for example, between positive and negative advertising in their use of compositing. There is also a statistically significant difference in the compositing of places or events in images between negative and contrast ads. In other words, it is not morphing or color transitions where we see variation in the use of visuals in ads but in the efforts of negative advertising in particular to use images to produce false associations and thus false inferences. The dramatic use of visuals in negative advertising and their ability to arouse emotions has been noted previously (Brader 2006) but not

\textsuperscript{18} Based on a chi-square test.

Carter, for example, attacked Reagan on traits with nearly two-thirds of his negative appeals. In 2008 McCain was particularly likely to attack Obama on traits such as Obama’s “celebrity” and “otherness”, although Obama also aired more negative trait than issue appeals.
this more subtle use of imagery whose aim appears to be cognitive as much, or more, than emotional.

**Figure 2 about here**

Finally, we examine the use of sound in these ads in 2008. The vast majority of ads, 91 percent of those we examined, used music to reinforce their messages. There are no differences in the incidence of the use of music by ads of different tone but, as would be expected, positive ads used music designed to arouse positive feelings, such as orchestral horns or sentimental piano, negative ads used repetitive and dissonant sounds, as well as burlesque or nursery rhymes where they aimed to mock, and contrast ads were more prone to use elements of both. Beyond music, ads also use, and sometimes manipulate, sound. Sounds may be natural or distorted, diacetic or non-diacetic—a distinction based on whether the sound is part of the film or “imported.” For example, in one of the early ads in 2008, McCain’s “Celebrity” ad, the opening frames are accompanied by a crowd chant of “Obama” but it is not from the crowd in the visuals; this is non-diacetic sound.

Table 2 shows the use of sound distortion and different kinds of non-diacetic sound in different kinds of ads. It is clear that the manipulation of sounds is far more common in negative ads than in any other kind, including contrast ads. Sound effects that change the meaning of events on film or that signal events outside of the original film are particularly common. The fact that negative ads are likely to manipulate sound may not be viewed as surprising, although the exact nature and differences of the use of sound have not received much attention heretofore, but what is surprising is that this is far more common not only in negative ads than in positive ads, but also in negative ads than in contrast ads. Along with the difference in visual techniques they
suggest that contrast ads are distinct from negative ads in important respects beyond their content.

Table 2 about here

In combination with the use of visual compositing these results suggest that negative ads try very hard to make false associations. In this sense, the notion that positive ads are equally likely to tell these kinds of “lies” is false. But does this amount to any more than acceptable exaggeration and the normal cut and thrust of a political campaign?

ii. The Accuracy of Ad Claims

We now turn to our analysis of the accuracy of claims. We begin by looking at the number of appeals that our fact checking suggested was less than entirely accurate. Our interest here stems from the argument that negative advertising is either more likely to contain questionable or misleading claims simply by virtue of the fact that it makes more of them and they are more specific, as opposed to the argument that positive advertising is equally or more likely to be misleading. It is worth reiterating that we followed Geer’s lead by examining issue and trait appeals separately. Overall, we found that 87 percent of the ads we analyzed contained at least one questionable issue or trait claim. There was a marginally higher proportion of questionable trait than issue claims.

Rather than cross tabs, our approach here is to estimate models in which the number of questionable issue or trait claims is the dependent variable and the independent variables are dummy variables for a negative ad and a contrast ad, with positive ads being the reference variable.\(^{19}\) This gives us a firmer grasp on the substantive as well as the statistical significance of

\(^{19}\) Again using the three-category Goldstein and Freedman measure of negative, contrast and positive advertising.
effects, controlling for other influences. We display the estimates in the first two columns of Table 3.

**Table 3 about here**

They show differences between issue and trait claims. For the number of questionable issue claims we find no impact of ad tone. Thus the notion that negative ads inevitably harbor a greater number of issue appeals that are deemed more misleading is not supported here. However, for the number of questionable trait claims there is a very clear impact: such claims are significantly more likely in negative ads than in contrast or positive ads, to the tune of almost two more less than accurate claims per ad than positive ads.

Geer argues, however, that negative advertising is said to be more likely to contain falsehoods simply as an artefact of their being more likely to be information-dense. This is a tricky question to examine empirically, although we have already shown it does not appear to have been true of issue claims in 2008, because the number of suspect claims is indeed going to be correlated with the number of overall claims—the correlations are at .63 for issue claims in our data and at .78 for trait claims. Thus one cannot “control” for the overall number of claims in any meaningful way in models such as those in columns 1 and 2 of Table 3 because they share so much variance. Instead, we transform the dependent variable to be a proportion rather than a “count” e.g., the total number of questionable issue claims as a proportion of all issue claims in

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20 The difference with contrast ads is based on a Wald test of the difference in coefficients.
21 One can examine such models as a check, however. For issue claims, with the inclusion of the total number of claims as a control variable, the coefficient for the effect of contrast ads on the number of questionable claims is about half its standard error but the coefficient for negative ads becomes larger than in column (1) of Table 3 and its standard error smaller (p<.05). For trait claims, where the correlation between the total number of claims and the total number of questionable claims is also stronger, the estimated effects for negative ads is also statistically significant at p<.05, while that for contrast ads is no p<.13. Thus, in both models there is a signal that controlling for the total number of claims does not simply wipe away the impact of ad tone.
an ad, and examine the effects of ad tone on the proportion of questionable claims, controlling for the overall number of issue or trait claims in an ad. We also examine whether adwatches are more likely to be found in ads that contain a higher proportion of inaccuracies. Columns (3) and (4) of Table 3 show the results. They indicate that there is a relationship between the total number of issue claims in ads and the amount of inaccuracies they contain—and it is substantively large, with each additional claim associated with a roughly 7-point rise in the proportion of questionable claims—and a weaker relationship, both substantively and statistically (p<.15) between the total number of trait claims and how misleading they are, all else equal. However, even controlling for these relationships negative ads have a far higher proportion of questionable issue and trait claims than positive ads. The difference is in excess of 20 percent in both cases. For contrast ads we also see a difference with positive ads for trait claims, of about half the size of negative ads, but a difference that is not statistically significant for issue claims.

Thus our first cut at the data suggests that, contrary to the claims of some, whatever else they might do, positive ads do not appear equally likely to contain inaccuracies as negative or contrast ads. However, all we have examined so far is the number and proportion of claims that are anything less than accurate. An ad that contains three mildly misleading statements would be treated as equivalent to an ad containing three gross exaggerations. But we suggested earlier that there are scales of inaccuracy. Thus, an additional element to our coding was a summary of the accuracy of the trait and issue claims of each ad, having fact checked all claims, on a 6-point scale from “gross untruths” (5) to “wholly accurate” (0).

Trait appeals could be seen as the kind of nebulous claims that it is difficult to fact-check decisively. This point appears to lie behind Geer’s argument that positive ads are seen as less
misleading because they contain less on issues and more on traits; they are therefore not as specific, he argues, and more likely to be given accuracy verdicts that fall in the middle of a scale. It is noteworthy then, and perhaps a testament to how carefully our coders examined all claims, that on our scale trait claims had a marginally higher mean score, i.e., were more misleading, with a score of 2.22 compared to 2.06 on the 0 to 5 scale.\(^\text{22}\) We next estimate models in which these “truth scores” for issue claims in an ad and for trait claims in an ad are the dependent variables and the tone of the ad is again the key independent variable. We are also interested here in two of the other features of ads we have mentioned above: 1) the relationship between the sourcing of claims and how accurate ad claims appear to be and 2) whether the compositing of the visuals in ads—a visual lie—is associated with more misleading ads, independent of their greater occurrence in ads that are negative in tone.

Ads that have no issue claims or no trait claims obviously received no truth score. Given that they are not a random sample of ads, the estimates that follow are Heckman selection models where we first estimate the influences on the probability that an ad contains any issue or trait claim at all and then, if it does, the influences on how accurate the ad is. We include dummy variables for whether an ad was negative or contrast, as well as whether it cited a source and whether the visuals including compositing, in both first and second stage equations. Heckman models necessitate a variable in the first stage that is not included in the second stage. We have already shown that adwatches appear unrelated to the number or proportion of questionable claims. We would, however, expect a lower probability of adwatches where there are no issue or trait claims.

\(^{22}\) Between “Mildly Misleading from Factual Basis” and “Omissions and Misleading Representation of Facts.” This difference in means is on the edge of statistical significance (p<.10).
no trait claims. We therefore include this as an additional variable in the selection equation that is excluded from the second stage model. The estimates from these models are shown in Table 4.

There are several interesting elements to these estimates. In some respects they confirm conventional wisdom. In particular, the first stage selection equations indicate that negative ads are less likely than positive ads to be absent of any issue or trait content. The second stage estimates additionally indicate that negative and contrast ads are more likely to make inaccurate issue and trait claims about candidates than are positive ads, with negative ads again being more misleading in this respect than contrast ads. Thus we illustrate in a different way that negative advertising appears to be more factually inaccurate than other types of advertising, and that this is not merely an artefact of the number of claims negative ads make, their specificity, or because the positive ads we examined were more full of nebulous trait claims. We find no relationship between the accuracy of ads and whether they provide a source for their claims. Whatever cues these footnotes and references may provide to their audiences they are no indication of greater (or less) factual accuracy. Finally, the presence of visual compositing has no discernible independent association with the veracity of the claims made in ad, although the association with misleading trait claims is close statistical significance (p<.12). In addition, in other analysis we re-estimated these models using only presidential ads, where we found a strong relationship between visual compositing and misleading issue claims. Thus our analysis provides some evidence that visual lies are an important part of the package in ads. If they simply reinforced the verbal message we would not expect to see an independent relationship. However, they are not always wholly accounted for in the content of the ad.

Table 4 about here

23 Based on a Wald test of the difference between these two coefficients in the second-stage equation.
Discussion and Conclusion

This paper has provided the first comprehensive and systematic analysis of the nature of the issue and trait claims, visual and aural characteristics of political advertising. In so doing, we have found some patterns that conform to conventional wisdom and many others that either do not or that resolve what has previously been speculation. Findings that are confirmatory of previous research are that negative advertising contains more information than positive advertising—it makes more issue and trait claims—and is more likely to cite supporting sources for its claims. But other claims made in previous research or speculated upon appear false. In particular, no matter how we looked at it—in terms of the number of questionable claims in an ad, the proportion of questionable claims in an ad, or at ads on an overall scale of truthfulness—negative ads emerged as more misleading than other types of ad, and not merely because they are more dense with information; even accounting for that fact they are more likely to mislead. No doubt positive advertising can be as misleading as negative advertising but our research shows that it is demonstrably not systematically so. The relationship between the citing of sources and the accuracy of ads and whether the visuals of advertising do any more than reinforce the verbal message has been more speculative. We have shown that there is no association between truthfulness and the citing of supporting evidence for claims and that visual features of advertising have an independent association with their accuracy.

What do these findings imply for the normative questions with which we began this paper? Perhaps our analysis has merely put more flesh on what is acceptable and productive electioneering. We think it has done more than that, however. It has provided evidence about accuracy, for example, that should put to rest some misconceptions and that could ultimately be
seen as disquieting. The next question is whether there is any connection between what we have shown here and the accuracy of political knowledge in 2008.
Table 1: The Relationship between the Tone of Ads and Issue, Trait and Value Appeals, Sourcing, and Adwatches

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All ads</th>
<th>Positive</th>
<th>Contrast</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Appeals</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% with Issue appeals</td>
<td>79</td>
<td>72</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>76</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% with Trait appeals</td>
<td>95</td>
<td>88</td>
<td>96</td>
<td>97</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% with Value appeals</td>
<td>53</td>
<td>70</td>
<td>62</td>
<td>41</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Sources</strong></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% citing supporting sources, including newspaper articles</td>
<td>43</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>34</td>
<td>62</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td><strong>Adwatches</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>% with adwatches</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>51</td>
<td>63</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>N</strong></td>
<td>314</td>
<td>69</td>
<td>89</td>
<td>156</td>
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Table 2: The Characteristics of Sound in Ads in 2008

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>All ads</th>
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<th>Tone of Ad</th>
<th>Negative</th>
</tr>
</thead>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>Contrast</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sound Distortion (%)</td>
<td>41</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>54</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td>C,N</td>
<td>P,N</td>
<td>P,C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Non-Diagnostic Sound</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sound Effects signal events</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>26</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Not seen on screen/radio events not in story</td>
<td></td>
<td>N</td>
<td>N</td>
<td>P,C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Sound Effects change meaning</td>
<td>17</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>24</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>of on-screen images/radio events not in story</td>
<td></td>
<td>C,N</td>
<td>P,N</td>
<td>P,C</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>“Subliminal” type (inaudible or unintelligible sound)</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>6</td>
<td>8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>150</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>44</td>
<td>81</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Notes: The following symbols are from chi-square tests: $^p$ = different from Positive ads at $p<.10$; $^C$ = different from Contrast ads at $p<.10$; $^N$ = different from Negative ads at $p<.10$
Table 3: Advertising Tone and Questionable Claims in Ads

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Dependent variable = Number of questionable claims</th>
<th>Dependent variable = Proportion of questionable claims (0-100)</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Issues</td>
<td>Traits</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative ad</td>
<td>.21 (.21)</td>
<td>1.70 (.28)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contrast ad</td>
<td>.15 (.24)</td>
<td>.52 (.31)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total issue claims in ad</td>
<td>6.98 (1.11)*</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total trait claims in ad</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject of adwatch</td>
<td></td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>1.22 (.18)*</td>
<td>.78 (.23)*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N 314 314 314 314
Adjusted R² -.00 0.12 .14 .11

* p<.05  † p<.10(two-tailed test)

Notes: Estimates are from OLS regressions.
Table 4: Influences on the Accuracy of Issue and Trait Claims in Ads

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Inaccuracy of issue claim</th>
<th>Any trait claim</th>
<th>Inaccuracy of trait claim</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>(0=wholly accurate,</td>
<td></td>
<td>(0=wholly accurate,</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>5=gross untruths)</td>
<td></td>
<td>5=gross untruths)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Any issue claim?</td>
<td>Any trait claim?</td>
<td>Inaccuracy of trait claim</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Negative ad</td>
<td>.46 (.22)*</td>
<td>.76 (.32)*</td>
<td>1.23 (.24)*</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Contrast ad</td>
<td>.87 (.24)*</td>
<td>.66 (.40)</td>
<td>.54 (.24)*</td>
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<tr>
<td>Ad cites a source</td>
<td>-.09 (.18)</td>
<td>-.01 (.31)</td>
<td>.10 (.18)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Ad uses visual compositing</td>
<td>-.25 (.21)</td>
<td>.15 (.44)</td>
<td>.35 (.22)</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Subject of adwatch</td>
<td>-.22 (.15)</td>
<td>.35 (.25)</td>
<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Constant</td>
<td>.59 (.17)*</td>
<td>.97 (.22)*</td>
<td>1.45 (.20)*</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

N 314 248 314 298

*p<.05 (two-tailed test)

Notes: Estimates are from Heckman selection regression models.
Figure 1: The Tone of Ads in 2008
Figure 2: The Visual Features of Ads in 2008
References


