

Senior Project Coversheet

Fact or Fiction:

Sifting through the falsehoods of the 2012 presidential campaigns

Honors Project

In fulfillment of the Requirements for

The Esther G. Maynor Honors College

University of North Carolina at Pembroke

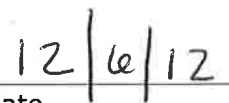
By

Hillary Akers

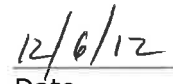
Mass Communication

December 6, 2012


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ABSTRACT

Fact or Fiction: Sifting through the falsehoods of the 2012 presidential campaigns, is a content analysis of 20 advertisements from the official campaigns of President Obama and Governor Romney during the 2012 presidential election. The advertisements were analyzed based on three criteria: focus, style and claims. The focus and styles of each advertisement were compared. The campaigns had similar focuses including taxes, jobs, welfare, and success. There were also several contrasting focuses including: Planned Parenthood, PBS funding, college funding, energy plans, voting, and President Obama's record. There were also similarities in the style of campaigns including: disapproval, uplifting, comparison, testimonial and sarcasm. The claims made by each campaign were checked on FactCheck.org, a nonpartisan nonprofit website. Compared to FactCheck.org, the claims made by the political campaigns were all classified as misleading or partially true.

Fact or Fiction:

Sifting through the falsehoods of the 2012 presidential campaigns

A commercial first aired by the insurance company State Farm in June of 2012 caught the attention of audiences across the United States. The commercial used humor to demonstrate an attribute that many consider disadvantageous to any person: gullibility. In the commercial, the female character doesn't believe that State Farm could have a sophisticated mobile app, with attributes allowing users to document accidents, get quotes and pay their premium, because she read it on the internet. She goes on to say that nothing can be published on the internet unless it's true. Her understanding of what's true and false is further solidified when she goes off with her unfortunate looking "French model" date, who she of course met on the internet.

Similar to the woman in the State Farm commercial, some consumers of media truly believe that everything they read in the newspaper, see on television, hear on the radio or search on the internet must be true. This belief can be very dangerous to a person and can cause them to form opinions that they think are based on fact. The truth is that media is not always correct. In fact, media sources often contradict one another. A commercial by McDonald's can claim to have the best french fries in the world, while the next spot has a Burger King ad claiming their french fries are really the best. So, which red and yellow mega-company has the best fries? In this case it's a matter of opinion.

More dangerous are commercials that may state true facts that are misleading and not representative of what the audience thinks. For example, most commercials that are promoting a product that cleans or cares for teeth, will use the phrase "number one dentist recommended," or "nine out of ten dentists agree" that this product will have this reaction. These statements may sound very scientific in nature, but they are actually very easy to manipulate. A lot of times the

surveys that yield these results are performed by the company itself. Meaning, they call dentists who are on a payroll to promote their brand. In effect, we end up with Colgate, Crest and Aquafresh all having the “number one dentist recommended” toothpaste.

What can be considered the apex of danger in media messages, are those that present completely false information along with completely true information. This method hides the false statements within facts. The danger can come when a consumer recognizes the true statements but not the false ones.

Because media is such an available medium of sharing messages in today’s society, all sorts of companies, social groups, political organizations, and public organizations are using advertisements to get their messages out. As a result, there is a wide variety of the types of messages that are transmitted and their impact on society. While opposing claims to who makes the world’s best French fries may not be a matter of gigantic importance in society, other opposing claims can create many issues in society.

For as long as the United States has been nation, there have been political campaigns supporting people, positions, and ideas. These campaigns and their strategies in many ways effect the way a population will decide on their leader. The goal of a campaign is to be successful in convincing their audience to buy into and support their message. The means by which this goal is achieved is ultimately up to those sending out the message. Although there are laws that deal with messages transmitted over public domain, including radio waves and public broadcasting stations, they are not very restricting. Laws dealing with what can and cannot be transmitted over public domain mediums generally restrict obscenity. These types of laws are called prior restraint. Prior restraint is the censorship of media messages before they are broadcast. The law does not, however, prevent the media from broadcasting false statements. If

someone wishes to seek retribution for false statements broadcast then it is up to them to take legal action, and simply stated any plea that goes against free speech in anyway had better be a good one, as the First Amendment is given preferred positioning when tried in court. Preferred positioning refers to the weighted favor for a certain law, in this case the First Amendment's protection of speech.

In conclusion of this information, it's easy to understand how false messages go unpunished in media. Where these false messages can become troubling for society is in an atmosphere of change, for example the presidential election.

Focus

In the 2012 presidential election, there were two major contenders; President Barrack Obama and Governor Mitt Romney. According to data gathered by the *New York Times* from the Federal Election Commission, President Obama raised \$934 million for his campaign and spent \$852.9 million and Governor Romney raised \$881.8 million for his campaign and spent \$752.3 million (Ashkenas). While not all of this money went directly into the production of campaign commercials, it did all go toward the promotion of a certain candidate and his message. So what messages were they sending?

In an analysis of twenty campaign advertisements from the 2012 presidential election campaigns (ten from each candidate) nine focuses can be found. These campaigns advertisements, which were broadcast to audiences from July 27, 2012 to November 4, 2012, are messages that were approved directly by either President Obama or Governor Romney. The nine focuses found are success/future goals, taxes/jobs/businesses, welfare/Medicare, President Obama's record, Planned Parenthood, PBS funding, college funding, energy plans and voting.

Looking at the Obama campaign, four ads focused on taxes, jobs, and businesses, two focused on successes and the future, and one each focused on Planned Parenthood, PBS funding, welfare and college funding. In the Romney campaign, three ads focused on jobs, taxes and businesses, two focused on the future, two focused on President Obama’s failures, and one each focused on Medicare, energy plans and voting. Altogether the top two focuses for the ads were taxes/jobs/businesses and success/future. The following charts (Figures 1, 2 and 3) show the Focuses of each ad and how the two campaigns were similar and different in focuses.

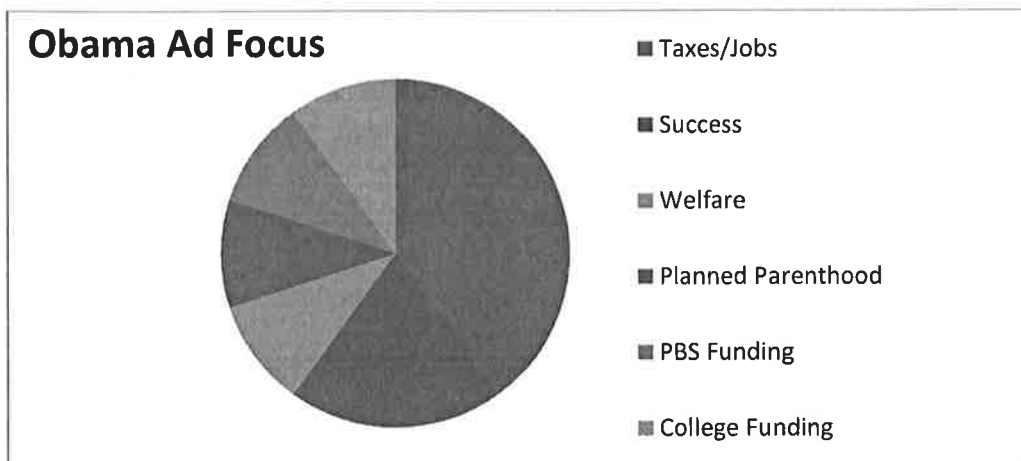


Figure 1: Obama Ad Focus

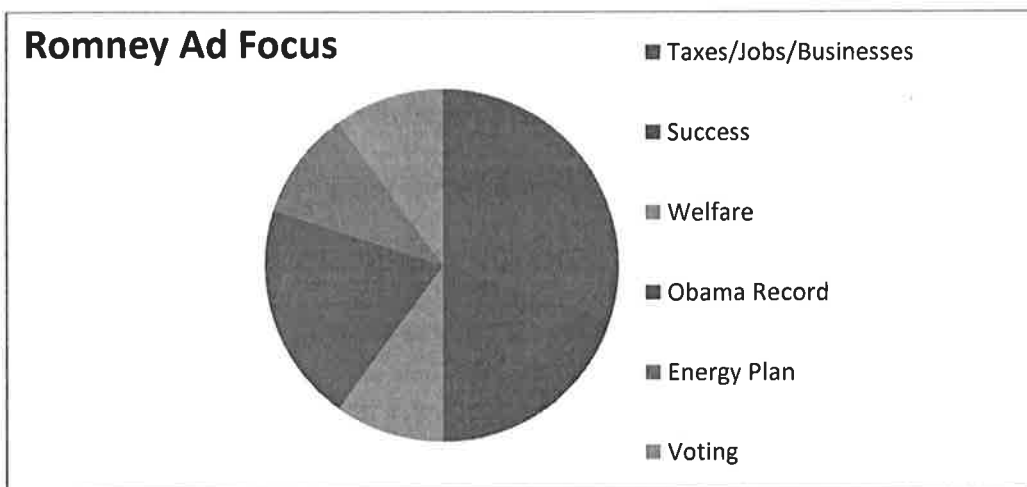


Figure 2: Romney Ad Focus

Campaign	Ad	Focus
Obama	I Believe	Success
Obama	Worried	Taxes
Obama	Balanced	Taxes
Obama	Stretch	Taxes
Obama	Important	Planned Parenthood
Obama	Big Bird	PBS Funding
Obama	Son of Boss	Taxes
Obama	Blatant	Welfare
Obama	Get Real	College Funding
Obama	Clear Choice	Taxes
Romney	Believe in Our Future	Future
Romney	Dream	Jobs
Romney	It Ain't Right	Medicare
Romney	Built by US	Success
Romney	Putting Jobs First	Jobs/Taxes
Romney	Healed?	Obama Record
Romney	Can't Afford Another Term	Obama Record
Romney	Crushed by Your Policies	Energy Plan
Romney	Revenge or Love of Country	Voting
Romney	America Needs a Leader	Success

Figure 3: Campaign Focuses

It's interesting to note that both campaigns had the most ads focused on economic issues such as jobs, taxes and businesses. The similarities in the strategies of the campaigns are also relevant. Each campaign targets certain issues specifically in a very blunt ad. For example the Obama campaign targets college funding, PBS funding and Planned Parenthood. In "Get Real," "Big Bird" and "Important" there is no question what the focus is. Similarly the Romney campaign targets energy plans in "Crushed by Your Policies," voting in "Revenge or Love of Country" and Medicare in "It Ain't Right."

Related to the focus which the campaign chooses to take on each ad is the decision to mention or not mention their opponent. The old saying "any publicity is good publicity," may or may not be true, but it's obvious that campaigns are very strategic when mentioning their opponents name. In the 20 ads analyzed, each campaign used the opponents name in eight out of

ten ads. More notable are the ads that the campaigns chose not to mention their opponent; the future and success focused ads. The idea to not use the opponents name in ads that talk about the future of the country was used in both campaigns.

Style

Evaluating the same 20 ads, looking at the style of each ad, seven clear distinctions of style can be found, including: disapproval, uplifting, comparison, testimonial, sarcasm, scare tactic and rebuttal. The following char (Figure 4) shows the use of these seven styles by each campaign.

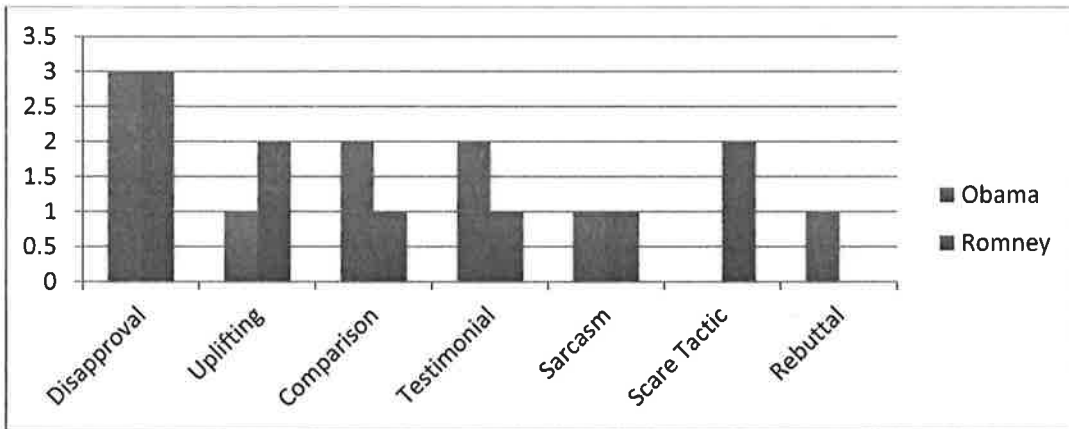


Figure 4: Campaign Styles

The style most used by both of the campaigns was disapproval. The ads that used this style each mention a statement or act of the opponent that they disapprove of. For example in the Obama campaign’s ad “Stretch” the voice over said, “You work hard, stretch every penny, but chances are you pay a higher tax rate than him. Mitt Romney made \$20 million dollars in 2010, but paid only 14 percent in taxes- probably less than you,” (Stretch, 2012). The ad goes on to talk

about Romney's tax plans. The style of this ad is intended to help the audience compare themselves to Mitt Romney and the amount of taxes they pay compared to him.

Similarly in the Romney campaign's ad "Revenge or Love of Country," a disapproving tone is pushed. The ad shows Mitt Romney saying "Did you see what President Obama said today? He asked his supporters to vote for revenge." The ad then shows a speech by President Obama which says, "Don't boo. Vote... Voting's the best revenge." The ad ends showing a speech of Mitt Romney saying he asks the American people to vote for love of country. This ad shows clearly Mitt Romney's disapproval of President's Obama's statements about revenge. The ad also follows up its disapproval with another course of action (Revenge or Love of Country, 2012).

Another style of ad used was the testimonial. In the 20 ads analyzed, three of them used testimonials. The Obama campaign used two testimonials but in very different ways. The first testimonial ad was "Important," which featured Alex and Dawn, two women who oppose Mitt Romney's views on Planned Parenthood. The testimonial ad included statements such as, "I think Mitt Romney's really out of touch with the average woman's health issues," "Contraception is so important to women," "I don't remember anyone as extreme as Romney" and "I think Romney would definitely drag us back," (Important, 2012). In this ad the testimonial was of the "average" person. This style of ad presents to the audience someone who seems just like them and accordingly should have similar opinions and values.

On the opposite end of the spectrum, the Obama campaign also had a testimonial with someone who people may not relate to but whose opinion may sway voters. In "Clear Choice," former President Bill Clinton speaks to the audience in a "fireside chat" style setting, giving his opinion on the way the country should go.

A third style of ad used is uplifting. The Romney campaign used this style in two ads. In “Believe in Our Future,” Mitt Romney is shown speaking to a crowd about his success and experience as governor of Massachusetts. Toward the end of the ad, he used a series of strong uplifting quotes. He said, “I want to use those experiences to help America to have a better future. We believe in our future. We believe in ourselves. We believe that the greatest days of America are ahead,” (Believe in Our Future, 2012). In this ad and the others that were classified as uplifting, the content is all presented in a positive manner and the opponents name is not mentioned.

Another style in this group, only used by the Romney campaign, is the scare tactic. The Romney campaign uses this style in “Healed?” and “Can’t Afford Another Term.” In “Healed?” newscasts are used to show the falsity in a quote Barack Obama made when running for president in 2008 about the world being “healed.” The scare tactic is also used in “Can’t Afford Another Term,” by talking about passing the economic on to the next generation. The ad said, “We may have made it through President Obama’s first term. It’s our children who can’t afford a second,” (Can’t Afford Another Term, 2012). This style focuses on an obscure future and makes the audience question the reality that they will live in in the future.

All of these styles have pros and cons and can be used by either candidate. Each campaign uses the styles differently. Noticing similarities and difference in the campaign strategies, however, can shed insight on the motivations and goals of each.

Claims

Finally, there are several claims that were made in these 20 ads. It’s important to understand what in these messages are fact and fiction. Using FactCheck.org, it’s simple to find

exactly what information is reliable. FactCheck.org is a nonpartisan nonprofit website that seeks to inform voters on the facts in politics. The following six claims were made by President Obama and Governor Romney in their campaign ads:

Obama campaign:

- 1- Mitt Romney's plan? A new \$250,000 tax cut for millionaires...
- 2- Mitt Romney's plan? ... increase military spending...
- 3- Mitt Romney made \$20 million in 2010, but paid on 14 percent in taxes, probably less than you.

Romney campaign:

- 1- As president, Barrack Obama cut \$700 billion from Medicare to pay for Obamacare.
- 2- ...twenty-three million people out of work or stop looking for work.
- 3- Obama's plan- \$4,000 tax hike on middle-class families.

All of these claims, after research on FactCheck.org, can be classified as misleading or half-truths. The first claim by the Obama campaign that Mitt Romney's plan was a new \$250,000 tax cut for millionaires is half-truth and misleading to audiences. "That figure...refers to tax cuts for individuals earning more than \$200,000 and couples earning more than \$250,000, not just millionaires and billionaires," (FactCheck.org). The claim makes the suggestion that the tax cut would only be for the extremely wealthy, when the cuts would really apply to individuals and couples in the upper-middle class.

Another claim by the Obama campaign that Mitt Romney planned to increase military spending is also false according to FactCheck.org. In the 2012 fiscal year, total defense spending was \$670 billion (4.3 percent of the nation's economy). "The Romney campaign says its candidate will increase base defense spending (which was 3.4 percent of GDP in fiscal year

2012), while war spending will naturally decline. As a result, total defense spending will not increase,” (FactCheck.org).

The third claim made by the Obama campaign was again a half-truth. The claim that Mitt Romney made \$20 million in 2010 and paid only 14 percent in taxes is true. The inconsistency comes into play when the ad says “probably less than you.” The ad, is trying to let the audience compare the amount of taxes they pay compared to Mitt Romney who is wealthy. But according to FactCheck.org, Scott Hodge, the president of the business-backed Tax Foundation, “97 percent of American tax filers paid a lower rate of income tax than Romney did.” Hodge said, “On average, people making between \$100,000 and \$200,000 paid about 12 percent in federal income taxes. That’s less than Romney’s 13.9 percent, and people making less than \$200,000 represent more than 97 percent of all tax payers,” (FactCheck.org).

The first claim made by the Romney campaign was that “as president, Barack Obama cut 700 billion dollars from Medicare to pay for Obamacare,” (It Ain’t Right, 2012). According to FactCheck.org, the conception that the president’s \$700 billion “cuts” to Medicare would hurt the program is completely false. “These cuts in the future growth of spending prolong the life of the Medicare trust fund, stretching the program’s finances out longer than they would last otherwise,” (FactCheck.org). Once again, although the ad was correct in saying that the president “cut” Medicare spending, it was misleading in the way it presented the information.

The second claim made by the Romney campaign was that there were 23 million people out of work or who had stopped looking for work. This claim is again a half truth. The number 23 million comes from several figures added together. “There were 12.5 million unemployed Americans in August (the most recent figures from the Bureau of Labor Statistics),” and there were 8 million who were working part-time but wanted full-time work, plus 2.6 million who had

not looked for work in the past four weeks. All of this adds up to 23.1 million people. This information, although credible, was not presented in full by the candidate. A more accurate statement would have been that there were 23 million people out of work, stopped looking for work, or working part-time wanting full-time work.

The final claim made by the Romney campaign was that President Obama's plan included a \$4,000 tax hike on middle-class families. The ad is talking about Obama's 2013 budget which actually calls for a tax increase on upper-income taxpayers. This budget says that the Bush-era tax cuts would expire at the end of 2012 for individuals earning over \$200,000 and couples earning over \$250,000, but the budget does say that the Bush tax cuts would remain in place for those earning under that amount (FactCheck.org).

Conclusion

It is easy to see the influence of broadcasted messages in society today. Some people will remain convinced that messages received over media broadcasts cannot be false or incorrect in any way.

The truth, however, is that any and all information that is sent out to mass audiences can hold any mixture of truths and falsities. There are sources that can be used to check this information. For consumers of media it very important to screen information as it comes and to not form opinions that are seemingly based on fact.

It is unfortunate that messages in such a monumental occasion as the presidential election can misrepresent true information so easily. With proper fact checking sources and an understanding of the sources of media, however, informed opinions and decisions can be made.

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