

Analysis: “Thou shalt not bear false witness” unless it’s in a campaign ad

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WASHINGTON (RNS)—Distortions, stretches, half-truths and omissions are familiar features of political campaigns. But independent fact-checkers and analysts say outright falsehoods in candidates’ ads may be reaching a level not seen since TV commercials entered presidential politics more than a half-century ago.

It is happening, they say, because false advertising has worked; because there are few, if any, penalties for it; and because truth becomes a relative and disputable term in the alternate reality of partisan politics—or as George Costanza once said on *Seinfeld*, “It’s not a lie if you believe it.”

Sen. Barack Obama addresses a crowd of about 75,000 people in Portland, Ore. (PHOTO/Newhouse News Service/Michael Lloyd)

“They’re drinking their own Kool-Aid,” said Brooks Jackson, director of the nonpartisan FactCheck.org at the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg Public Policy Center. “I’ve come to believe that an awful lot of the time they believe the ads. They’ve convinced themselves.”

Political scientist Darrell West examined past patterns in his book *Air Wars: Television Advertising in Election Campaigns*. The most dubious and misleading ads generally have come from groups independent of candidates, such as those who made the “Swift Boat” ads against John Kerry in 2004, he noted.

“This year, the candidates themselves have really pushed the envelope,” West said. “The 2008 campaign has reached all-time lows in the use of misleading and inaccurate political appeals. Even Karl Rove, the architect of negative ads in previous campaigns, has complained about the tenor of this year’s campaign. When Karl Rove says that, you probably ought to pay attention.”

Sen. Barack Obama has been cited for ads that quoted Sen. John McCain out of context to say he would support “100 years” of war in Iraq or that said McCain would slash Social Security benefits.

Obama’s campaign also aired a higher percentage of negative ads than McCain’s—77 percent to 56 percent—in the first wave of advertising after the conventions, according to a study by the [University of Wisconsin Advertising Project](#).



Republican presidential nominee Sen. John McCain addresses supporters at a campaign rally. (PHOTO/Newhouse News Service/Kimberlee Hewitt)

But negative is not necessarily untruthful. PolitiFact.com, a project of Congressional Quarterly and the St. Petersburg Times, rated 47 McCain ads and statements from “barely true” to “pants-on-fire” false, compared with 30 for Obama. McCain had six ads in the “pants-on-fire” category. Obama had one.

“McCain is the one who has had the bigger problem in terms of factual accuracy,” West said. The Republican, he added, was the one coming up in the polls until the crisis in financial markets started last month.

Two McCain ads drew particular notice from fact-checkers. One said Obama’s “one accomplishment” was “legislation to teach comprehensive sex education to kindergartners”—misrepresenting his support for teaching them about inappropriate touching by adults, and understating his record.

The other said a “disrespectful” Obama compared Sarah Palin to a pig. Actually, he was talking about McCain’s claim to be a force for change when he said, “You can put lipstick on a pig, it’s still a pig”—using an expression McCain once applied to Hillary Clinton’s health-care plan.

McCain ads have said falsely that Obama would raise taxes on the middle class, when in fact he would exempt families earning less than \$250,000 from higher taxes, and that Palin did not seek earmarks as governor of Alaska.

The *Washington Post* said in a front-page story that after becoming fed up about claims that Palin said “thanks but no thanks” to the Bridge to Nowhere, the Obama campaign broke a taboo and used the “L-word of politics to say that the McCain campaign was lying.”

'Lying' a word you don't hear

Lying, however, is a word “you don’t hear” from independent analysts, Jackson said. “A lie is an intentional deception. Unless you’re a mind reader, it’s very difficult to prove the intent of anybody.”

Whatever the intent or term, false and negative ads often work very well, said Carolyn Lin, a communications professor at the University of Connecticut. “When it works, it works like a charm, and historically it has worked. That’s why they do it.

“The unfortunate thing about political advertising is that when you tell lies, these lies often stick, and the liars never receive any penalties.”

Studies have shown that debunking falsehoods can have the backfire effect of reinforcing falsehoods by repeating them.

Screening out the facts

People screen out facts that run counter to broad narratives they accept, and they perceive reality in a way that conforms to their long-held beliefs, said science writer Farhad Manjoo, who writes about the phenomenon in his book, *True Enough: Learning to Live in a Post-Fact Society*.

By rebutting untruths, meanwhile, a candidate departs from his own message and can risk being seen as weak or complaining.

Legally, candidates have a right to lie to voters just about as much as they want, said FactCheck.org’s Jackson.

The Federal Communications Commission requires broadcasters to run ads uncensored, even if the broadcasters believe they are false. And the Federal Election Commission deals with finances, not ads.

“Ohio has the toughest truth-in-political-advertising law in the nation. And it doesn’t work,” Jackson said. “There’s no fines, no enforcement mechanism.”

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