

JFK and the Media during his Electoral Campaigns

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Introduction

It is impossible to separate the major events of American history in the early 1960's from the development of American television. They are inextricably intertwined. The John F. Kennedy years stand out as an era bracketed by TV milestones. In the years between the Great Debates and the network coverage of the assassination and funeral of the President, television became truly central to American life.¹

In the history of political communication 1960 represents "a genuine turning-point and a natural dividing line."² The new television gained a dominant position among the mass-media and this fact had already been realized by the mid-50s.³

One of the most television target of that time was the presidential candidate (and then president) John F. Kennedy. "No stranger to the camera, JFK developed as president an ongoing relationship with the reporters and photographers who were intent on documenting his every move, to the extent that in later years, his close ties with the media were held responsible for obscuring some of the less palatable aspects of his life and administration."⁴ At the same time it is possible to claim that

With his death, the link between the man and the media was further sustained. The display and replaying of the still photographs and films taken on the day of his assassination strengthened the already existent symbiosis between JFK and his images, allowing that day in Dallas to live on in collective memory through its visuals.⁵

This analysis aims to study the new media as a innovative political instrument of communication and *propaganda*, with a particular attention to the impact and the approach of John F. Kennedy.

JFK and the Media

John F. Kennedy was the first American president who understood the power and the political relevance of television. From his first political campaigns JFK learnt to "campaign by campaigning"⁶ and to "communicate by communicating."⁷ JFK's public address experiences were equal to "his political development in shaping his public *persona*,"⁸ which was a intricate "mix of attractiveness, relevant message, and voter needs."⁹

¹ Mary Ann Watson, *The Expanding Vista: American Television in the Kennedy Years*, Duke University Press Books, 1994, p. 3.

² Mary Ann Watson, *cit.*, p. 4.

³ *Ibidem*.

⁴ *Ibidem*.

⁵ *Ibidem*.

⁶ Vito N. Silvestri, *Becoming JFK: A Profile in Communication*, Westport, Conn.: Praeger, 2000, p. 323.

⁷ *Ibidem*.

⁸ *Ibidem*.

⁹ *Ibidem*.

One of the starting-points of this study is Lubin's work and the volumes of Joseph P. Berry, Mary Ann Watson and Vito N. Silvestri.¹⁰

Lubin's book is really important because the author shows how all the images (above all JFK's pictures and video) represent a way to know and understand a fundamental period of our recent history. Images, journalism and film of that time are a new way of communication, not only in a political meaning. This material shows us the popularity of JFK with all the American people. Lubin is a professor of art and after a deep analysis of John F. Kennedy's pictures and videos argues that "JFK was significant not only for his political role as President, but because he became an icon of twentieth-century post-war America. He then describes how these photographs resonate with images and ideas in the art world and in contemporary commercial media, including films, television programs, and advertisements."¹¹

"By holding the first live press conference in the nation's history, John F. Kennedy showed that boldness and amiability trump all suits in an age of television. In his short time in office JFK also showed:

1. that all communication, even Presidential communication, must be relational;
2. that the substance of one's remarks is irrelevant if one cannot say it effortlessly;
3. that being *on line* and in *real time* bring a special energy to politics."¹²

John F. Kennedy was definitely a smart and intuitive man and through his way to communicate He was able to add a new instrument to the electoral campaigns. This influenced the dynamics of American politics and JFK was the very first politician who really understood the relevance of television.

John F. Kennedy's overriding campaign theme in 1960 was the need to get America moving again. After the seeming stillness of the Eisenhower years, the promise of a society in motion, however vague, was exhilarating. And television, itself making technological strides, was the perfect medium to chronicle movement. But the currents of change would be stronger and swifter than anyone could have imagined.¹³

During the 60's, television became the first media, in the United States and in the rest of the world. Radio didn't have images and videos, while newspapers didn't have a voice and contain news of the day before. The new media had voice, images and it allowed a new kind of communication.

The Presidential election of 1960 was to be a real barometer of a new era. It represented a shift in American political technique and underscored the forcefulness of television in the formation of public opinion. The medium's ability to convey the human dimensions of political figures, however, whether reliably or not, was far from a virgin issue in 1960. The factor of television performance was introduced in the elective process eight years earlier.¹⁴

¹⁰ David M. Lubin, *Shooting Kennedy: JFK and the Culture of Images*, Berkeley: University of California Press, 2003.

¹¹ *Ivi*, p. 324.

¹² *Ibidem*.

¹³ Mary Ann Watson, *cit.*, p. 3.

¹⁴ *Ivi*, p. 4.

It is useful to analyze several years in order to better understand the development of the *relationship* between JFK and the media.

1953

In October 1953, John F. Kennedy and Jacqueline Bouvier Kennedy were on *Edward R. Murrow Person to Person*,¹⁵ a live interview program broadcast. "Just as JFK was about to explain his position on the Taft-Hartley law, a ringing in the background distracted him. He looked over his shoulder, flashed an endearingly sheepish grin and said: «Perhaps somebody could answer my phone». The senator then continued his well-planned answer just where he had left off. It was a fleeting instant of naturalism, engaging but insignificant. Yet, in retrospect, it foreshadowed a contemporary style of both politics and television the American public would soon come to embrace."¹⁶

1956

In this period JFK was one of the vice-presidential candidates, but the nominated was Senator Estes Kefauver. During the Democratic convention JFK was remembered for his delivery of the speech nominating Stevenson. John F. Kennedy became the party's attraction and "television viewers were favourably impressed with the slender and winsome senator from Massachusetts. He was very soon the most sought after speaker in the Democratic party and clearly a strong contender for 1960."¹⁷

1957-1958

In 1957 JFK won the *Pulitzer* for *Profiles in Courage* and after this prize he was considered as a statesman and an intellectual.¹⁸ In this period, He soon became the best television guest of political entertainment and television viewers started to consider him as the presidential candidate of the Democratic Party, before a public announcement.¹⁹

1959

The readers of the *TV Guide* found the by-line of Senator John F. Kennedy in the magazine's November 14, 1959,²⁰ issue. In this article:

A force that has changed the political scene, he gracefully anticipated some of the criticism that would be directed his way in the following year. Television image, he argued, is not simply a counterfeit measure of a candidate's capacity to govern and lead. Rather, it is a substantive factor. Honesty, vigor, compassion, intelligence, the presence or lack of these and other qualities make up what is called the candidate's 'image', He wrote. "My own conviction is that these images or impressions are likely to be uncannily correct."²¹

1960

On January 2, 1960, JFK officially announced that he was running for the Democratic presidential nomination. The day after on *Meet the Press* John F. Kennedy said the American public would

¹⁵ *Person to Person* (1953-61) TV Shows, where Murrow chatted informally with a wide array of celebrities every Friday during prime-time. *Ibidem*.

¹⁶ Mary Ann Watson, *cit.*, p. 5.

¹⁷ *Ibidem*.

¹⁸ *Ibidem*.

¹⁹ *Ibidem*.

²⁰ *Ibidem*.

²¹ *Ibidem*.

presume that the Presidential candidate is going to have a normal life expectancy". He felt, therefore, the second name on the ticket was not going to be of critical importance to American voters. JFK said he was not interested in spending the next eight years of his life "breaking ties (in the Senate) and waiting for the president to die.²²

For JFK a television appearance represented the turning-point in the primary competition. He was Roman Catholic and decided to discuss this aspect of his life even against the ideas of his advisors. He said that "Nobody asked me if I was Catholic when I joined the United States Navy," he said. "And nobody asked my brother if he was Catholic or Protestant before he climbed into an American bomber plane to fly his last mission."²³

The topic of religion was very important at that time and in another occasion, the Sunday before election day, JFK "looked directly into the lens of the camera, into the eyes of the voters, as he delivered an impassioned statement of principle on the separation of church and state. He was deeply persuasive."²⁴

John F. Kennedy understood that *non-political talk to the unconvinced was better than political talk to the already convinced.*²⁵ His appearance on *Jack Paar Tonight Show*²⁶ in June 1960 showed JFK's skill to use TV for personality projection.²⁷ In Paar's introduction of the candidate, he welcomed him to the *relaxed atmosphere* of the late-night talk show.²⁸ After a commercial break, Paar apologized for the interruption and John F. Kennedy answered, "No, don't apologize, that's how it all operates."²⁹ JFK also mentioned the many popular prime-time western series. "I was made an honorary Indian", he said, "And now I cheer for our side on TV."³⁰ At the end of the talk F. Kennedy told Paar, "In campaigning through Wisconsin and West Virginia I ran into a lot of people who sat up nights watching you. And I think anytime it's possible for those of us in public life to have a chance to communicate, I think we ought to take it. Therefore, I regard it as a privilege to appear on this program."³¹

Lubin's volume also gives a *television outlook* of the United States.

In 1960, 87 percent of American homes, more than 46 million, were equipped with television, at least 25 percent more TV households than existed in 1956. The rivalry among the networks to capture the growing audience was more intense than ever. The conventions would be a showcase for a new look and feel in television reporting. Smaller, lighter, more sensitive TV cameras and walkie-talkie radios allowed correspondents greater mobility on the convention floor. Because of videotape, the natural drama and spectacle of the political conventions could be embellished by the ability to record simultaneous events and structure them through editing. The desultory could be eliminated; the

²² *Ivi*, p.15.

²³ Robert V. Friedenberg, *Notable Speeches in Contemporary Presidential Campaigns*, Praegers Publishers, Weatport 2002, p. 49.

²⁴ *Ibidem*.

²⁵ Robert V. Friedenberg, *cit*, p. 49.

²⁶ Jack Paar Tonight Show (1957- 62).

²⁷ Robert V. Friedenberg, *cit*, p. 49.

²⁸ Their conversation, which included actress Anne Bancroft and comedienne Peggy Cass, was pleasantly jocular. JFK seemed altogether accessible. *Ibidem*.

²⁹ Robert V. Friedenberg, *cit*, p. 49.

³⁰ *Ibidem*.

³¹ *Ivi*, p. 62.

tedious abbreviated. Improvements in synchronizing TV signals from various sources permitted live remote feeds from outside the convention hall and increased the use of graphic inserts and split-screens. The tremendous expense, with appropriate fanfare, was chalked up to public service.³²

After the winning of the nomination, JFK asked Reinsch³³ to help him in his electoral campaign and to become a member of his *campaign strategy team*. «Reinsch recalled the candidate saying, «Television may be the most important part of the campaign. It may decide the election. Will you handle my TV arrangements? » Within forty-eight hours Reinsch was in the John F. Kennedy's home in Hyannis Port discussing television strategy over clam chowder. The issue of television debates was raised and the candidate wondered what format they might take. «I'm not really concerned about the program», Reinsch told Senator J.F. Kennedy. «All I want is a picture of you and Nixon on the same television tube. We'll take it from there».³⁴

It is really important to underline that the convention of Republican Party and all the speeches of Nixon in Chicago «was not shared with the television audience».³⁵

JFK-Nixon Debates

There were four televised Great Debates between John F. Kennedy and Nixon. The first debate centred on domestic issues. The high point of the second debate, on 7 October, was disagreement over U.S. involvement in two small islands off the coast of China, and on 13 October, Nixon and JFK continued this dispute. On 21 October, the final debate, the candidates focused on American relations with Cuba. The Great Debates marked television's grand entrance into Presidential politics. They afforded the first real opportunity for voters to see their candidates in competition, and the visual contrast was dramatic.³⁶ In August, Nixon had seriously injured his knee and spent two weeks in the hospital. By the time of the first debate he was still twenty pounds underweight, his pallor still poor. He arrived at the debate in an ill-fitting shirt, and refused make-up to improve his color and lighten his perpetual 5:00 o'clock shadow. John F. Kennedy, by contrast, had spent early September campaigning in California. He was tan and confident and well-rested. I had never seen him looking so fit, Nixon later wrote.³⁷

There was a substantial difference between radio and television. People who listened to the radio debate were sure that Nixon was the winner. But, for television viewers (70 million) John F. Kennedy was the winner.³⁸ «Those television viewers focused on what they saw, not what they heard. Studies of the audience indicated that, among television viewers, JFK was perceived the winner of the first debate by a very large margin.»³⁹

³² David M. Lubin, *cit.* p. 28.

³³ He arranged the TV debates between JFK and Nixon.

³⁴ *Ivi*, p. 50.

³⁵ *Ibidem*.

³⁶ *Ivi*, p. 59.

³⁷ <http://nixon.archives.gov/virtuallibrary/documents/dailydiary.php>

³⁸ D. Herbeck & S. Mehlretter, *A Beard and a Pasty Forehead: Collective Memory of the First Kennedy-Nixon Debate*. Paper presented at the annual meeting of the International Communication Association, Sheraton New York, New York City, NY, 2005.

³⁹ Mary Ann Watson, *cit.* p. 70.

The *Great Debates* represented a turning-point for the American history. They allowed people to be a part of a more complete democracy. It is also possible to claim that “John F. Kennedy would have won the election with or without the *Great Debates*.⁴⁰

The volume of Watson gives a clear idea of the impact of the *Great Debates*:

Yet voters in 1960 did vote with the Great Debates in mind. At election time, more than half of all voters reported that the Great Debates had influenced their opinion; 6% reported that their vote was the result of the debates alone. Thus, regardless of whether the debates changed the election result, voters pointed to the debates as a significant reason for electing JFK. The Great Debates had a significant impact beyond the election of 1960, as well. They served as precedent around the world; soon after the debates, Germany, Sweden, Finland, Italy, and Japan established debates between contenders to national office. Moreover, the Great Debates created a precedent in American Presidential politics. Federal laws requiring that all candidates receive equal air-time stymied debates for the next three elections, as did Nixon’s refusal to debate in 1968 and 1972. Yet by 1976, the law and the candidates had both changed, and ever since, Presidential debates, in one form or another, have been a fixture of U.S. Presidential politics.⁴¹

Conclusion

It is possible to argue that the “*Great Debates* forced citizens to rethink how democracy would work in a television era.”⁴² In the 60’s, commentators soon realized the great impact of television on American society; in an electoral campaign appearance was more important than a good speech and John F. Kennedy was a perfect example of this condition. “Yet other views express confidence that televised presidential debates remain one of the most effective means to operate a direct democracy.”⁴³ “The issue then becomes one of improved form rather than changed forum. The Nixon-JFK debates of 1960 brought these questions to the floor. Perhaps as no other single event, the *Great Debates* forced us to ponder the role of television in democratic life.”⁴⁴

JFK was privileged and handsome, his character tempered by family tragedy and personal pain. The other, Nixon, accustomed to hard work throughout his youth, had common features and a patina of defensiveness about his ordinary roots. In the months that followed, the television networks capitalized on the inherent drama in the hard-fought contest that was filled with conflict and plot twists leading to a cliff-hanger ending.⁴⁵

Then, “John F. Kennedy was the first president to effectively use the new medium of television to speak directly to the American people and it is possible to state that He was also a model for other

⁴⁰ *Ivi*, p. 60.

⁴¹ *Ibidem*.

⁴² E. Katz & J.J. Feldman, *The Debates in the Light of Research: A Survey of Surveys*, in S. Kraus (Ed.) 1962.

⁴³ J. N. Druckman, *The Power of Television Images: The First Kennedy-Nixon Debate Revisited*, Journal of Politics, 65, 2003, pp. 559-571.

⁴⁴ Joseph P. Berry, *John F. Kennedy and the Media: The First Television President*, Lanham: University Press of America, 1987, p. 48.

⁴⁵ *Ibidem*.

statesmen for his *political use* of mass-media and in particular of television.”⁴⁶ If we think about John F. Kennedy we remember the President kissing his babies, the press conferences and the Zapruder film of his tragic death. “He was in control even when passionate. On television, a medium that magnifies personalities and mannerisms, John F. Kennedy’s reserve translated into a dignified, statesmanlike *persona*.⁴⁷

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⁴⁷ Joseph P. Berry, *cit.*, p.49.