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TELEVISION / *Both politicians and TV programmers live and die by the numbers. Incestuously, ratings give rise to polls which give rise to ratings – is it any surprise that John Q. Public is responding to both with a jaded eye?*

Image Makers & Breakers

BY RICK GROEN
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IT'S 1960, and the celebrated case of five o'clock foreshadowing. In the first presidential debate ever televised, the seminal one between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon, a bit of chin stubble does in the luckless Tricky, and the nature of politics is radically altered. Television, the pundits are quick to tell us, has ushered in the primacy of the image, the ascendency of personality, the cult of the leader. Beware, they intone: politicians can manipulate the imagery and ignore the substance; elections turn not on the thrust of one's platform but on the cut of one's jib.

It's 1990, and TV has wielded its political clout, and the pundits have repeated their conventional wisdom, through three changeable decades. But now, with the body politic ailing and the corporate networks troubled, that wisdom bears re-examining. The simple equation it posits – image versus substance – is just too neat; it doesn't factor in a host of countervailing pressures that seem to be causing viewers and voters to behave in curiously similar ways, ways that are affecting our very perception of the government process.

One of these pressures has its roots in a largely ignored parallel. The rise of television as a political determinant is matched by another phenomenon – the emergence of the pollster as a political guru. Although each of these trends has incited ample comment, they are almost always discussed as separate forces; few attempts are made to connect them.

In the absence of those attempts, we're left with apparent anomalies. Huge anomalies, like the typical result of a recent Globe/CBC poll that found "historically high levels of cynicism and dissatisfaction with politicians in general." It also discovered, also typically, that "Canadians are making contradictory demands of their politicians and system of government ... expecting politicians to be responsive to the wish of the people, but at the same time demanding strong leadership." In short, folks think politicians are jerks and so, logically enough, want those jerks to act as populist sheep, merely following the public mood. Yet, such is human nature, they also hope for a saviour, some charismatic titan who will lead the flock out of troubled pastures.

Seems we're confused. Yet this much is certain: if TV has allowed politicians to favour image over substance, the politicians have made a lousy job of it. After 30 years of manipulation, their image stinks – "untrustful, directionless, and open to corruption" is the polled consensus. Admittedly, what with scandals and deficits and recessions, politicians have brought some of this upon themselves. Yet there have always been scandals and deficits and recessions, and never has the politician's image suffered so badly. Clearly, television is a factor here. And that's because TV has "demythologized" many professions once held sacred. Doctors, lawyers, police, yes, politicians, all have had their image tarnished in the electronic age. Lending itself to manipulation but also manipulating in return, the tube taketh away a lot more than it giveth.

Why? Well, both in literal terms (the tiny size of the screen) and in thematic terms (Dr. Welby's life trivialized to meet the dramatic demands of episodic fiction), television tends to diminish the exalted and, by implication, to exalt the mundane. America's funniest home video and America's very own president compete for national attention on the same little box, the goof next door and the guy in the Oval Office both shrunk to smaller-than-life-size, both pathetically crying out to be heard.

In levelling the high with the low, the tube promotes a kind of ironic democratization, a jaded sense of equality. This sense is reinforced by the way TV is governed: by ratings, of course, the *box populi*. Thus, although TV programmers initiate the agenda, viewers "vote" on that agenda via the ratings. To that extent, the mass medium runs as an ongoing referendum, with programmers pandering to the popular taste, hoping to satisfy most of the people most of the time.

This perception – that, over the years, we must be getting the programs we want, or at least deserve – gives rise to a strong ambivalence among viewers. When social researchers organize "focus groups" on the topic of television, two words keep popping up: "addiction" and "guilt." Indeed, people talk about TV in much the same way as an addict talks about his fix: TV is a soporific escape, I need it; TV is a soporific escape, I hate it. This ambivalence fosters a prevailing hypocrisy. Claiming to want "better" shows that will engage their minds, viewers actually use the medium in precisely the opposite way – to disengage their minds, to float, to channel-surf in a semi-attentive haze. It's no coincidence that TV's most successful and most enduring format – the half-hour situation comedy – is one that allows the viewer to partially resolve that hypocrisy. Affable, aphoristic, cleverly scriped, the "quality" sitcom rewards a little attention without ever demanding more.

OKAY, but what has this to do with today's political mood? Consider the parallels. Whereas programmers are obsessed by ratings, politicians are increasingly guided by polls. So are the politician's "media advisers" – they use polls to craft their candidate's image to fit an electronic medium that gauges its worth by ratings. But it gets even more incestuous: lately, the media themselves have taken to commissioning their own polls to generate the kind of populist headline (Tory Support Slumps to Record Low) that in turn generates bigger ratings.

Ratings giving rise to polls giving rise to ratings – these two yardsticks aren't just linked, they're cemented. Consequently, while viewers have long seen TV programmers as the lackeys of Mr. Nielsen, voters are now beginning to view politicians as the puppets of Mr. Gallup. Of course, the same people are twigging to the obvious – who are Mr. Nielsen and Mr. Gallup but you and me? In this game of manipulation and counter-manipulation, we're holding a lot of strings. And wanting to pull them, to have our will enacted directly. Little wonder that the Burkean concept of democracy – in which politicians are elected by the people but responsible to their consciences – is now in tatters, replaced by the cry for populist policies from every region and the clamour for a national referendum on every issue.

So the levelling effect of television has its analogue in our perception of government itself, where we've diminished the once-esteemed politician while exalting ourselves, the individual voter. (Psychologically, the statistical premise used in both polls and ratings – whereby the random sample represents the universe, and the selected few echo the voice of the many – has precisely the same levelling effect.) Reduced to so many look-alike Pinocchios, politicians and the parties they embrace, like programs and the networks they espouse, have started to seem pretty much interchangeable.

(*continued overleaf*)

The parallels continue. On one hand, we have politicians pandering to their "audience" exactly as TV programmers do, each selling content with lowest-common-denominator appeal, each guided by the numbers. On the other hand, we have the electorate responding to the political process exactly as viewers react to television: with an addicted mix of ambivalence and hypocrisy. That is, they claim to need a strong leader (quality programming) who will engage them, while also demanding a populist figure (digestible pap) who will appease them. In other words, folks want to get the government they deserve, and still want to believe they deserve better.

IF the TV format that most successfully bridges this gap is the sitcom, the only recent politician to enjoy the same success possessed all the characteristics of a sitcom. Ronald Reagan, of course. He, too, was affable, aphorisitc and cleverly scripted. He, too, rewarded a little attention without ever demanding more, simultaneously seen as the ideological leader and a man of (if not for) the people. Yes, Ronald Reagan was *Cheers* incarnate.

By contrast, the current Brian Mulroney is failing on both fronts. Having cultivated an image perceived as smooth to the point of slick, he's now trying to sell us on his leadership strengths, a heroic man bravely launching the GST against the popular tide. Of course, nobody's buying. These days, *The Life of Brian* is viewed as neither quality fare nor digestible pap; it's more like *Dynasty* metamorphosed into *The Nation's Business.*

But the purpose here is to point out parallels, not to establish an absolute cause-and-effect relationship between the dynamic of television and the malaise of politics. Neither institution can bear the weight of that burden. However, there do seem to be connecting forces at work that go far beyond the clichéd image-versus-substance dialectic. And the forces reflect the fact that both institutions are now guided by essentially the same numbers; that the dependence on those numbers has yielded similar styles and similar content; that, in each case, viewers and voters are responding with jaded attitudes that are themselves similar; and that networks and politicians have both experienced a consequent loss of allegiance and respect.

Apparently, those who live by the numbers are dying by the numbers, and those who contrive to manipulate their image are suffering an image problem – the fabled cult of the leader is being eroded by the fickle will of the people. Thirty years after the curtain rose on the Kennedy-Nixon debate, it's getting late in the night, and that 5 o'clock shadow is adumbrating more than we know.

The article EM9038 reprinted overleaf and above is used in Figure 8.16a of the STAT 220 Course Materials.