

Spring 5-1-2010

The Televised Presidential Debate: Decreasing Effectiveness and the Impact of the New Media Spin in the Fourth Age

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The Televised Presidential Debate:

Decreasing Effectiveness and the Impact of New Media Spin in the Fourth Age

A Capstone Project Submitted in Partial Fulfillment of the Requirements of the Renée
Crown University Honors Program at Syracuse University

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05/2010

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Date: 9 May, 2010

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Introduction

When the first televised presidential debates occurred during the 1960 election year, the way that people were able to view and analyze politicians was significantly changed. Presidential candidates became visible to the mass population for the first time, and their image was revolutionized. After that first debate, televised debate experienced a sixteen-year hiatus, and then proved once again to have a dramatic effect. In less than twenty years, the political culture of America had transformed into an entirely new entity, with media and televised visibility, becoming not a benefit or option for candidates to consider, but a vital and indispensable form of communication with the general public. As the 2000 and 2004 debates came to a close, scholars concluded that technology and the New Media would transition the importance of the presidential image to unprecedented levels.

Nevertheless, was this success of the televised debate uniform throughout the years, and did this success carry on through the most recent set of elections? It is easy to see the effects and changes brought about by the first debate in 1960, but what of the subsequent generations of debate? Did the American public continue to tune in for information? Have the debates lost their ability to maintain interest, change or affect electoral outcomes, or help inform the masses of the actual policies and promises of the candidates? Have the advances in technology and media had any effect on these issues? The 2008 televised debate provides not only an interesting set of data regarding the success of televised debates, but also a prediction regarding how effective these debates will be in the future.

Despite the benefits offered through the rapid advancements in technology, problems too have arisen. In examining data from the 2008 debates, which will be addressed more thoroughly later, it appears that the televised presidential debates have lost much of their efficacy. In this latest series of debates, the American people have become increasingly apathetic towards televised debates, do not rely on the information provided within the televised format to change or even affect their opinions and even have begun to ignore the discussions entirely.

Demonstrating this clearly requires new analytical methods. As a result, this research paper will utilize a new and original structural formatting of televised debate history. Breaking down its forty-eight year history offers challenges, but dividing the successes of the televised debates into four distinctive sections of history yields a solid and organized pattern of debate efficacy. Each of these sections, or Ages, will represent key events, the introduction of new formats and the influence of new technologies on the process. I hope to show that the most recent or the Fourth Age of debate has demonstrated a trend of decreased influence and importance. With the new technological distractions of graphics and charts that news networks now display during their broadcasts, increased dependence on instantaneous spin through media such as blogs, online videos (via YouTube and other media), and comedy spoofs like *Saturday Night Live*, the televised presidential debates have become less effective in the Fourth Age.

Paper Structure and Data Methods

For the purpose of this research, the entire history of televised presidential debates has been condensed to four Ages of debate. This section discusses the precedents

to televised debate, the rationale for each Age and the overall structure and format of the debate discussion. In each identified section, research and literature from political and media experts will be consulted for background data, arguments of successes and failures in debate history and commentary on the future of debates that will be compared and contrasted with new data and public perception following the 2008 debates.

First, this paper will briefly examine the history of political debates in the U.S. prior to 1960. This section will identify key political precedents set by the Lincoln-Douglas Debates of 1858 and the 1948 Presidential Primary Radio Debates.¹ This section will show how these precedents shaped the televised debates and gave people an early understanding how media played an important role in providing access and exposure to garner public support. In addition, this section will note how the technological world was shaping up right through the first broadcasted debate, and the importance of its first eventual broadcast. Although these debates are important in establishing precedent, the information presented will not be exhaustive, so as not to dilute the central focus of the televised presidential debate. It will merely give a relevant understanding of how debates prior to the television era made an impact on their media-driven successors.

Following the historical background, this thesis will be organized into my creation of the four Ages of televised debate, as well as my justifications for doing so. The breakdown is as follows:

- **The First Age**, taking place in 1960 between John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon, represents a powerful short-term impact in that it arguably

¹ It is important to note that even in these two rare occurrences of face-to-face debate, the first true general presidential election debate did not occur until the 1960 debates between Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy.

changed the course of that election, but a weaker long-term impact in that televised debates would not exist for sixteen years following these debates.

- **The Second Age**, taking place from 1976 to 1988, which I feel represents the pinnacle of televised debate. This is the period when television debates became permanently established in American media culture. Increased scrutiny and the impact of comedy satire will also become important in how this Age took shape.
- **The Third Age**, taking place from 1992 to 2004, begins with the introduction of the Town-hall style of debates. This Age also sees an increased influence and number of cable news networks, comedy satire (with the popularity of *Saturday Night Live* and *The Daily Show*) and the Internet.
- **The Fourth Age**, beginning with the 2008 debates between John McCain and Barack Obama. This Age represents the increased technological capabilities of the Internet through the creation of YouTube and blogging websites, as well as focuses on the increased viewership and reliance on cable news networks for debate coverage.

A significant amount of attention and focus will be spent on the First Age of Debate due to its two-fold effect on the nation. In 1960, the first televised presidential debate transformed the nation, at least in the short-term, for it was the first time provided its citizens completely candid access to the physical presence and appearance of the candidates. I will be focusing on public reaction to that new system of evaluating

presidential potentials and the creation of the “image of the president.” Engaged citizens have always observed presidential candidates under a critical eye, but the image presented on the television screen offered this same public an entirely new and effective realm of interpretation and analysis: the “values of television” (Schroeder 9). The First Age consists only of the 1960 debate series, due to its incredible impact on the political world, only equaled by its disappearance for sixteen years due to a legal technicality.²

A detailed yet succinct description of the Communications Act of 1934 will make note of the equal-time rule and how it played a part in halting the benefits of televised debate broadcast for close to two decades (Minow and Lamay 31). This section will act as an extension of the First Age in that it will reflect how, in the long-term, debate was not allowed to continue on after 1960 despite the efforts of media experts, scholars and political advocates. As a result, one will be able to conclude from the analysis that, although the political mindset regarding debates changed, practically speaking the long-term effects of the First Age did not change the political world. Since the language and analysis of the Communications Act of 1934 is still examined and debated today, the discussion within this paper will merely attempt to simplify the language of the statute and explain its relevance for the age divisions that I have created.

The Second Age will begin with the debate of 1976 between Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter and end with the George Bush and Michael Dukakis debates of 1988. This Second Age, which represents the institutionalization of televised debates, marks itself as a time where they had established themselves as a permanent part of the election process

² Due to the fact that only one series of debates occurred within the First Age, no trend data will be composed or shown for the age, save for the final compilation trends in the **Conclusions** section of the text.

in America. Additionally, and what will ultimately separate the Second Age from the Third Age is that the Second Age will be described, as an age of political gaffes. Due to the debates' relative newness following the sixteen-year gap, many of the presidential hopefuls did not yet realize the importance of consistent, confident and factual responses to questions, nor did they quite realize how this increased exposure could damage their credibility in the eyes of the public. The Second Age will recognize these gaps as well as make an assessment of how the public reacted to the revitalization, establishing itself as a viable and effective age of debate.

One additional factor that will be considered and noted within the Second Age is the impact that comedy programs such as *Saturday Night Live* would have on the image of the president for years to come. Although this trend will be noticed in all subsequent ages of debate, the creation of televised comedic presidential parodies, beginning with the Chevy Chase impersonations of Gerald Ford, will be shown to have had an overwhelming effect on how presidents have since been portrayed and packaged (Minow and Lamay 51-52). Presidents and presidential candidates would begin to realize within this Second Age that comedy and parody have their place within the political forum, and this knowledge would forever change how they would be regarded.

The Third Age of debate will begin with the Bush-Clinton campaign season of 1992 and will end with the George W. Bush-John Kerry debates of 2004. What defines the Third Age is not only that it was the first time that a third party candidate was able to participate against the two major candidates, namely Ross Perot, but also that a new form of debate took place: the "Town-hall" style of debate. For the first time, the Third Age allowed ordinary citizens to take the role of moderators in the debates, asking the

questions that they felt were most pertinent. First appearing in 1992, this new type of debate will be shown to have had an incredible effect on the president being able to speak on behalf of the common voter, giving the public heightened access to their politicians. With Clinton emerging as the unlikely champion of the 1992 campaign season, the Town-hall style will be demonstrated to have had a significant impact on the attitudes of candidates as well as the general public.

Accompanying this new attitude of reaching out to the public, the Third Age will also focus on the impact that New Media began to play in the public's ability to both watch and interpret the televised debates. Over the course of the 1990s into the early 2000s, television media (including the increase in the number of viewers watching 24-hour cable networks) as well as the Internet boom began to offer multiple outlets for people to watch debates and to offer their own interpretations of how the candidates performed. Although this Age suggests future complications and distractions that viewers would experience, thereby diminishing the efficacy of debate, evidence noted by the academic community will show that this did not yet detract from efficacy nor did it steer people away from tuning in to the debates over the course of the Third Age.

Finally, this paper will approach the latest series of debates, contested between John McCain and Barack Obama in 2008. As this paper will suggest, New Media and technology have become so available and widely used over the past few years following the boom of blogging, social networking sites and video sites such as YouTube that the 2008 debates mark their own transition and separation from the Third Age. This newly formed Fourth Age of debate will represent a problematic shift for the politicians running for this highest governmental office, as this severe influx of New Media outlets (and new

technological abilities broadcast within the programs themselves by television stations) detracts from the ability of the public to watch and analyze the debate on their own. Although it has been said that “...a candidate has won the debate if they are told that by the reporters... the people [don’t] have any view of this on their own without extra help” (qtd. in Kraus 147), the new technological innovations on the television screen, to be described in its respective section, offer such distractions that the public has been more reliant of these professional commentaries instead of forming their own opinions on the results of the debates. Media spin has become, in its most literal sense, instantaneous throughout the broadcast of the debates, and these factors make watching, and more importantly listening in on the substance, almost irrelevant.

Distractions were also prevalent following the debate. With the myriad of blogs, political sites and video critiques on YouTube available and easy to access within Internet search sites today, people have been allowed to ignore the debates entirely, focusing on the ideology they agree with instead of looking to assemble and rationalize substance of the debates themselves. This presents a two-fold problem as firstly, news media outlets are forced to try and compete with this development by engaging in their own spin, blurring the lines between journalistic objectivity and subjective interpretation, and secondly even further removing the public’s ability to glean relevant debate information, as every interpretive blog or website contains only the opinions and pertinent party information of the candidate that it supports.

Though this instantaneous and wide array of outlets does provide a convenient way for people to recap the debates and discuss it in their own forums, many people have elected to only visit the sites as opposed to supplementing their own viewing,

interpretation and understanding. It is ironic to note that, while much of this argument will be speaking ill of the incomplete and inaccurate clips of debates that are posted on YouTube, most of the research evidence on the debates will make use of the site. It is thus my intention to only call upon the detriments of using the media source as a primary, instead of supplemental source for information, as should be the case.

Lastly in terms of substance, this paper will focus in on several reasons for public disinterest of presidential debates in the Fourth Age: the heightened influence of comedy and satirical spoofs on the presidential candidates; the overdrawn and overdone primary season in which issues were repeated *ad nauseam*; and the increased ability for the public to watch other programs, with more television channels and diversions than ever. All of these factors will conclude that the Fourth Age of debate is considerably the weakest Age, forecasting a bleak future in debates' ability to influence the public. The rapid expansions in technology, on top of the heightened interest of having the first African-American candidate run for president should have resulted in increased interest towards debates. As the data will show, however, this was not the case. Viewer trends tended to decrease even further than the other Ages of debate in both numbers and household ratings, demonstrating that debates are continuing to lose efficacy over time. By this point, the image of the president has long been established, and the overdone campaign and debate seasons will further disenfranchise voters from watching the televised debates.

This work will conclude with the lessons that can be learned from the information on this newest Age of debate. An analysis of the Fourth Age gives pertinent conclusions that could benefit the public's understanding and appreciation of debates, and if these were to be acted upon debates could thrive for many years. While these interpretations

will be both speculative and subjective, because of the lack of information available and the uncertain future of televised debates. Nevertheless, this opinion will be crafted to both mark the pitfalls the Fourth Age has already experienced as well as offer potential directions that the debates can utilize in the future. The televised debates have had an extraordinary impact on the political world over their history, and hopefully they will continue to play an enormous role in how the public will access and assess their politicians.

In all of these sections, a large, if not central focus will be devoted to the efficacy of the debate age in terms of viewer interest and potential to be convinced. For the sake of simplicity and explicitness of understanding, “efficacy” will be defined in this research as both *the average number of viewers in a particular election year* and *the average numbers of households watching the debates (known as the “Average Household Rating” by Nielsen Research)*. The source for these factors is the Nielsen Research Group data. This definition, I believe, defines the significance of televised debates: in order to be affected by them, people must *watch* them. This research greatly relies on the statistical significance of television viewership, and the themes of this paper will reflect upon this same significance.

History Prior to the Televised Debates

Even before televised debates made their debut in America, a few key events occurred that would set the stage for the tremendous impact that the 1960 debate would have on the course of presidential history. While debate in early America was far from uncommon, the first recognized and recorded debates between presidential hopefuls in

front of the public were the Lincoln-Douglas Senatorial Debates of 1858. Although it is important to note that these were not presidential primary debates, but were a contest for a senatorial seat, the impact from these early debates set the stage for later expectations of televised debates. As D.E. Fehrenbacher notes in his article on the Lincoln-Douglas debates, "...in the senatorial campaign of 1858, the door to the presidency was opened for Lincoln, as a result of the new prominence he had achieved" (194).

More importantly, later on in the same article, he notes, "The debates with Douglas did three things for Lincoln: they moved him ahead of potential rivals in his own state, like Lyman Trumbull; they increased his stature to presidential (rather than mere vice-presidential) proportions; and they fixed him in the public mind as the peculiar nemesis of the Democratic champion" (Fehrenbacher 194). All of these factors play an important role in how debates were observed once they were introduced on television. Although public access and interpretation was extremely limited during the 1850s, the impact of the debates, spread across the country through word of mouth and news reporting, gave Lincoln the chance to emerge as a candidate for the presidency. Lincoln's oratory ability allowed him to stand out and appear presidential, even if the public did not have access to actually witness the debate. Lincoln's successful exposure through the debates can be connected to the future role that images and physical presence would have when television provided presidential candidates the outlet to voice their differences.

Needless to say, the greatest challenge facing these candidates, as well as future generations of presidential campaigners, was that of media access and fair interpretations of their opinions and disagreements. In order to better understand this idea, it is helpful to turn to John Zaller's book, The Nature and Origins of Mass Communication. Zaller notes,

“Political awareness is associated with increased exposure to current communications that may change one’s opinion, but it is also associated with heightened capacity to react critically to new information” (21). Prior to the availability and accessibility of information that media such as the radio and television were able to offer, neither of these two crucial parts of information analysis was able to occur in a timely and reliable manner for the public. News spread slowly, and even then was only readily available to a small portion of the masses. Additionally, this information, even when available, was not easily processed save for the few elites that could access and interpret the information when it reached them. In this sense, Zaller’s model of political awareness can be applied throughout American history, affecting each Age of debate. In the future, both information availability through technological breakthroughs as well as the cognitive ability to process and understand the information presented would allow for the future of debates to develop.

This accessibility to politicians looked brighter as technology began to catch up with the public’s need to observe and analyze their future presidential candidates. As Newton Minow and Craig Lamay note in their book, Inside the Presidential Debates: Their Improbable Past and Promising Future, “The idea of a *broadcast* debate was not new: the first nationally broadcast political debate was on radio on May 17, 1948, between Republicans Harold Stassen of Minnesota and Thomas Dewey of New York” (21). More importantly, Minow and Lamay subsequently note the impact this would have on televised debates, stating, “In a foretelling of what would later become one of the biggest obstacles to broadcast debates, the two candidates negotiated the terms of their encounter almost to the last day before going on the air...each candidate gave a twenty

minute argument; each then gave an eight-and-a-half minute rebuttal in which he lambasted his opponent” (21). These pieces of information provide important insights in how debates were to develop. Noting the structural format as well as the disagreements between the two candidates on how to properly conduct their debate, the debates began to take shape and establish how presidential contenders would balance substance with passionate argument.³ As a result, the radio debate of 1948 allowed people access to this forum of argument, as over nine hundred radio stations across the country broadcast the arguments and for the first time Americans across the country were allowed to listen in on and react to the politicians in real time (Minow and Lamay 21).

Indeed, as technology and media outlets increased over the years, pressure was able to take place in order to push candidates towards televised debate. In a 1960 article written in *This Week* on the need for debate, Adlai Stevenson said, “I would like to propose that we transform our circus-atmosphere presidential campaign into a great debate conducted in full view of all people” (qtd. in Minow and Lamay 20). Understanding the value that a media-political interaction could provide to the public in a debate forum, Stevenson demonstrated the changing attitudes of the media and public in general. Even though he did not suggest that the debates needed to be centralized in a one-on-one conversation, the point remains that debates were the next crucial and coveted step for American people to access their politicians.

To obtain the means necessary for this transition, the television would provide the impeccable timing necessary for the debates’ greatest impact. As Minow and Lamay

³ It is important to also note that these disagreements can also be associated with a greater legal issue; namely, the Communications Act of 1934. The issues in their relation to the radio debate as well as their eventual halting effect on televised debates will be discussed in the “**Equal-Time**” section, dedicated to the act.

note, “[In 1948] there were only twenty-nine television stations operating in the United States, broadcasting to only about 1 million television sets, less than 9 percent of the nation’s homes... By 1952 television penetration had jumped to nearly 40 percent of American homes...” (18). This boom in television sales and usage provides an important argument in the timing of the televised debates. As more television sets entered into the homes of the viewing public, it seemed increasingly viable to begin to offer the medium as a way to broadcast political messages across the country. Noting Zaller’s argument, access and interpretative ability increased over this time span, resulting in the recognition that publicly available televised debates were within the foreseeable future.

Bringing these arguments full circle, as Cleveland State University professor Sidney Kraus noted in his book, Televised Presidential Debates and Public Policy, these developments reflected an increasing trend in the understanding of politics in general. He notes that, “one could argue that the media continue to be attracted by the images of winners, but are more *discerning* in their coverage of presidential debates today than they were in Lincoln’s generation” (Kraus 156). This quote, when juxtaposed with Stevenson’s article as well as Newton and Lamay’s statistics on television ownership and usage, shows the validity of Zaller’s model of political awareness: that both access to information as well as its processing are vital in political understanding by the public. As a result, every factor of political debates prior to the televised revolution in 1960 affected the powerful outcome that occurred.

The First Age of Debate

September 26, 1960 was a day that greatly impacted how people were to vote in that year's election, and allowed them to get their first visual taste of presidential politics. It was the first time that two presidential candidates stood before a television screen and debated their standpoints on issues. As Theodore H. White noted in his book, The Making of the President, 1960, the televised debates allowed “the simultaneous gathering of all the tribes of America to ponder the choice between two chieftains in the largest political convocation in the history of man” (qtd. in Salant 335). This metaphorical interpretation of the event may seem extreme, but the conclusion to be drawn from it remains the same: given its recent boom in the 1940s and 1950s, the television allowed for an unprecedented amount of people to watch, analyze and critique the performances of the two presidential candidates. Never before had so many citizens been given access to the candidates, and this increased access would change the scope of campaigns for years to come.

Before this debate was even allowed to hit the television screens, however, networks had an important obstacle to overcome. Due to the constraints of the Communications Act of 1934, legal arguments within the houses of Congress nearly prevented the debates from happening. Minow explains the burdensome process he undertook in 1956 with Adlai Stevenson to obtain any sort of airtime of presidential candidates, noting that when he and Stevenson went to the Federal Communications Commission (FCC) to attempt to gain broadcast time, “[The FCC] ruled against us by limiting its decision to the particular controversy before it: ‘We do not believe that when Congress enacted Section 315 it intended to grant equal time to all presidential candidates

when the President uses air time in reporting to the nation on an international crisis”
(19). This statement by the FCC, though the news networks eventually were able to ignore it, allowing Adlai Stevenson some time to broadcast his political positions, marked a troublesome problem for politicians hoping to be able to speak on television. After all, if a presidential hopeful was unable to gain any sort of airtime, much less time to *debate* the incumbent president directly, what chance was there for a series of debates between candidates during an election season? The choice made by the FCC to rule out public speaking for candidates on television left little hope that such a forum could be instituted.

Nevertheless, through the actions of Minow and Stevenson, legitimate questions regarding the language of the statute, especially Section 315, came into play, and these same questions set the stage for congressmen to consider allotting time for debates between candidates. Eventually, as Minow notes, “[Congress] suspended that portion of the equal opportunities law that made it impossible for broadcasters to air candidate debates, *but only for 1960* and only for candidates for the offices of president and vice president” (27). Although the italicized section of this quote caused future problems for debates, all of which will be featured in a later portion of this paper, for this small window of time, a significant victory in the progression of televised debates was achieved. Noting that there was no incumbent, as President Eisenhower was finishing his second term, Congress allowed for this opportunity to occur, almost as a social experiment (Minow and Lamay 27). This exemption-allotted gap, while ephemeral in its provision, finally allowed candidates of the 1960 presidential election circuit to appear on television and debate issues, a moment that would forever change how the public would analyze their politicians.

To briefly discuss the nature of the event, *Inside the Presidential Debate* breaks down this landmark first debate. The authors note that the two candidates running against each other were Senator John F. Kennedy and Vice President Richard Nixon, and the sixty minute debate was broadcast on all of the three major networks: CBS, NBC, and ABC (Minow and Lamay 153). Newton and Lamay also inform their audience that the debate topic revolved around domestic issues, focusing almost exclusively on the internal American concerns that arose from the threat of global Communism, particularly from China and Cuba (27). As the two candidates argued their positions in an empty debate room, save for the moderators, the public observed and analyzed their dispositions, their answers to questions and their potential to serve as the next Commander in Chief. These four debates of the 1960 general election season marked the First Age of televised debate.

Few people realized, however, just how powerful an impact the first televised debate would have on the American people. In an excerpt of a PBS documentary on Richard Nixon and John F. Kennedy, narrator Will Lyman discussed the tremendous effect that the debate had on Americans. He stated, “The Nixon-Kennedy debates would forever change the way Americans chose their presidents. Political rallies and old-fashioned hand-shaking became much less important than the image on the television screen” (“Nixon/Kennedy TV debate” 0:50). It was because of this newly established attribute of the election that frontrunner Richard Nixon met his match, and following the debate his campaign took a turn for the worse.

In order to fully understand the impact of the debate in its television presence, it is important to first calculate how large of a television audience actually witnessed the debate between Kennedy and Nixon. Turning to Alan Schroeder’s *Presidential Debates*:

Fifty Years of High Risk TV, an accurate account of the television audience can be obtained. Schroeder notes that, from the evidence obtained in several studies, “An estimated seventy million Americans watched [the debate] on TV, while several million more listened on radio” (5). These mathematical results, as well data compared from other debates on television viewership, have been condensed and organized at the end of this paper in **Appendix A**⁴.

Since the first televised debate was, for many people, one of the first times they had ever seen candidates face-to-face debating issues, the “image on the television screen” that the documentary notes was a revolutionary new way for people to look at their political contenders. The image of the two men on the television screen became a new qualification in looking presidential, and in that qualification Richard Nixon left a lot to be desired. As Minow put it, “many people remember only the first debate, in which the vice president, recovering from the flu, looked pale and sluggish while Kennedy appeared poised and fit” (28). Minow went on to cite numerous testimonies for just how weak and haggard Nixon appeared, saying things like he “looked like death”, “his color was terrible”, and even “his beard did not look good” (28). Meanwhile, Nixon’s counterpart, the Senator from Illinois John F. Kennedy, looked strong and confident, his appearance both acceptable and inviting to the viewing public. Overall, the two candidates looked tremendously different, and these differences in appearances would pay dividends for Kennedy in the future.

⁴ **Appendix A**, using television station reports provided by the Nielsen Research Group, contains average viewing totals, as well as average household ratings. These averages were calculated and created by the author.

How strongly did the television debate affect Nixon's candidacy in the short-term? Both the Youtube clip of the PBS documentary and Minow's book suggest that the effects were beyond anyone's expectations. The first important aspect to notice was that the televised debate was simultaneously broadcast over the radio, and the attitudes of the two audiences prove an interesting point. As narrator Will Lyman put it, "the first debate was costly to Nixon. The radio audience thought he had won, but the largest television audience in history had seen the Vice President haggard and drawn..." ("Nixon/Kennedy TV debate" 1:43). In short, the documentary suggested that discussion of the issues themselves was no longer sufficient to appease the American people. As a result, the phrase "looking presidential" became more relevant than it ever had before, and Richard Nixon's appearance did not qualify. Americans felt that the sickly, unkempt, even physically transparent nature of Nixon made him an uninviting candidate, and the votes suggested the same.

Nevertheless, it was not only Nixon's appearance that played a large role in the minds of people, but Kennedy's as well. Labeled humorously as "the Bronze Warrior" because of his tan skin, Kennedy's image coupled with his unflappable demeanor changed many people's minds regarding the inexperienced Senator, with some of these people important enough to change the course of the election. "Before that first debate, [Chicago Mayor Richard] Daley had been lukewarm to the Massachusetts junior senator; now his support made all the difference. The state of Illinois played a major role in determining the outcome of the election two months later" (Minow 28). In short, Richard Daley had not been sure of Kennedy's ability to lead; after all, he was a young and relatively inexperienced senator, so showing support for such a man could have proven

costly in his own approval ratings. After the first debate, however, Kennedy's confidence was enough to convince the Chicago mayor to push his constituents to vote for Kennedy.

Why did the image of a president become so potent in American politics? After all, it is true that the 1960 debates were the first time that two presidential candidates appeared on a television screen, with over seventy million Americans watching, but why would focus on a candidate's physicality and his visual mannerisms make such an impact on how people, such as Daley, felt about their presidential nominations? Ironically, as Nixon speechwriter Ray Price noted in a 1967 memorandum on general strategy, "Selection of a President has to be an act of faith... This faith isn't achieved by reason; it's achieved by charisma, by a *feeling* of trust that can't be argued or reasoned, but that comes across in those silences that surround the words" (qtd in McGinniss 194). Price noted that the words, the actual substance of arguments, were important, but that it was this sense of faith conveyed that acted as the final piece to the complete candidate puzzle. Without it, a politician cannot get by on words alone, for another politician who is more able to charismatically deliver a message will always exist. The televised debates offered the public, for the first time, a chance to notice the physical characteristics of those running for the highest office. Nixon spoke the words that the audiences around the country wanted to hear, but by looking ill, uncomfortable and physically "transparent," was unable to enrapture his televised audience, whereas Kennedy's calm and collected nature made all the difference.

The last important point to be made regarding the First Age of televised debate was a lesson that Nixon learned and echoed in his book, Six Crises: "I had concentrated too much on substance and not enough on appearance. I should have remembered that 'a

picture is worth a thousand words,” (qtd in Schroeder 9). This adage aside, Nixon did indeed recognize the costliness of attempting to win the people over on words alone. This is not meant to discredit substance or to somehow suggest that the American people are too foolish or simple to understand the importance of policies and political ideologies, but it does recognize the effects that television has on its viewing consumers. As Schroeder puts it, “Presidential debates are best apprehended as *television shows*, governed not by the rules of rhetoric or politics but by the demands of the host medium. The values of debate are the values of television: celebrity, visuals, conflict and hype” (9). All of these factors, whether they positively or negatively change the focus of campaigns is irrelevant; what does matter is that the television screen revolutionized the entire campaign scheme of politicians in the years following 1960. As “the old fashioned handshakes” became obsolete, the PBS documentary suggests, the presidential look became key in winning public support.

Overall, the Kennedy-Nixon debates proved tremendously successful in revolutionizing how people valued and looked at that specific campaign. Nixon ended up losing the election to Senator Kennedy, arguably brought about in part by that first televised debate. Since the exemption to the Communications Act of 1934 only allowed for this one year of debate to exist, the First Age of Debate, in its practical application, ended as suddenly and as noticeably as it had begun. Kennedy and Nixon allowed Americans a whole new way to view their candidates, changing the role that candidates had to assume in order to capture and captivate their audiences, but this was only the beginning. Audiences across the country had received their first taste at witnessing presidential candidates argue back and forth on domestic and foreign issues. Though it

would take sixteen years to reinstate the debates, and thus the First Age lacked the evidence to be called revolutionary, the notion that television could have such an incredible impact on electoral outcomes showed media and political experts the new avenue they wished to pursue in campaigns.

“Equal-Time”

As stated before, the congressional exemption to the Communications Act of 1934, allowing for the 1960 debates to occur, was temporary. Following the 1960 debates, Section 315 kicked back in, cutting off any political access to televised debate for sixteen years. In this event, following the landmark and revolutionary changes to the image of the president that the First Age delivered, why would the nation revert back to a system that was more restrictive, less candid and less advanced? Why did the Communications Act of 1934 even play a role in televised debates, and why would it keep politicians from accessing this potential goldmine of accessibility and visibility? Should the congresspersons and senators of the time simply have abolished the statute altogether in this new age of political-media interaction?

In order to understand the motivations of Congress and how their hands were conceivably tied, it is best to examine the statute itself, especially the section that caused the biggest issues, Section 315. It is in this section that the “equal-time” law comes into effect, offering the greatest challenge to televised political debate. The section of the statute begins by stating, “If any licensee shall permit any person who is a legally qualified candidate for any public office to use a broadcasting station, he shall afford equal opportunities to all other such candidates for that office in the use of such

broadcasting station” (Communications Act of 1934 167). In this one simple sentence, problems could already be detected for debates to occur. This “equal-time” clause, written as such, offered a potential media paradox, as if anyone wished to broadcast these kinds of messages while running for office, the same media outlet would have to offer it to *every* candidate. As there was the potential for an unknown number of third-party candidates that could run for office, in addition to funding and fairness issues, numerous questions arose and had to be negotiated for the debates to even exist.

While the “equal-time” measure did seem to provide the fairest system of media coverage, Minow and Lamay reveal many questions and concerns about how the act applied in a realistic setting. As they put it, “The law requires broadcast stations that provide airtime to a candidate for public office also to provide ‘equal opportunity’ to other qualified candidates for the same office. But which candidates? All or some? And how much time?” (30). They also question other parts of the statutes, including what defines a “legitimate” news story versus a donation of airtime, as well challenged the fact that Congress did little to expand upon or clearly define these questions with their updates to the statute. All of these confusing aspects of the bill made airtime for politicians, especially within a debate setting, extremely difficult, if not impossible to accomplish.

Although these complications sound absurd in today’s media-driven world, at the time they represented crucial and legitimate concerns about how politicians were to be allowed to use the newer forms of media. As Minow and Lamay claim regarding the 1927 Radio Act, the equal-opportunity predecessor to the Communications Act of 1934, “Legislators were concerned that without such a requirement broadcasters would use the

airwaves to manipulate elections by favoring some candidates and ignoring others” (31). In short, although the language and objectives behind Section 315 would undergo different interpretations over time, the concern of the politicians between the 1920s and 1930s was justified. With the debut of radio and television sets in the 1920s through the 1940s, the fear was that the broadcasts would serve as yet another means for the major candidates to bully out others as well as control the spin delivered.

Nevertheless, during and after the 1960 debates occurred, broadcasting companies caught on to the powerful role that television could play in marketing and displaying politicians for the entire nation to observe. As early as the 1950s, television companies saw and fought for rights to air politicians, representing a continuation of the First Age in that, even though televised debates did not occur, the long-term goal of reinstating them became the mission of these media groups. As an editorial for *Broadcasting* magazine wrote, “By political accident broadcasters have been given a chance, and a good one, to cover the 1960 elections with the same freedom accorded to the press...If broadcasting covers the campaigns with wisdom, ingenuity and thoroughness, the electorate that goes into the polls next November will be the best informed in history...” (qtd. in Minow and Lamay 38). This quote reflects two important points. First, the 1960 debates demonstrated to media companies the powerful status that the political world could obtain for broadcasting. Until the First Age, print media had monopolized political campaign coverage, but when the 1960 debates hit the television screens, this sole authority was extended to other media. The broadcasting companies reveled in this newfound ability to sell politicians to the public and wanted this ability to continue after the exemption to Section 315. The second point that can be gleaned from the editorial

relates back to John Zaller's model of public opinion. The editorial recognized that televised media could be the most expansive form of "elite" information dispersal, and the public could become more informed than ever before through it. Once again, the televised debates were recognized as a positive thing, and people wanted them back.

Unfortunately, even after this recognition, the FCC and Congress felt that they were unable to move forward. As Minow notes, "The [National Association of Broadcasters'] hope that followed the 1960 suspension, it turns out, was short lived. Congress did not amend the law further to make the suspension a recurring feature for subsequent elections, nor did it repeal Section 315" (39). The inactivity of Congress and the FCC, as stated by Minow, points out an interesting disconnect between political elites and media elites at the time, and the general public suffered as a result of it. Media outlets on the television felt that Section 315 was outdated and too restrictive in matters of First Amendment rights, while Congress and the FCC sat on their hands to ensure democratic integrity in campaigns, still convinced that the equal-time clause was established for an important reason. Congress and the FCC believed that, even despite the efficacy of the First Age of debate, politicians would be able to manipulate the system and gain too much power in television media, so they refused to amend or abolish the statute.

One final issue that sealed the fate of televised for what would be thirteen years occurred in 1962, two years after the "Great Debates" of 1960. In a lawsuit involving NBC, a Prohibition Party candidate complained against the network for not giving equal opportunity to convey messages in a gubernatorial campaign debate between California Governor Pat Brown and the challenger Richard Nixon (Minow and Lamay 41). The FCC validated the Prohibition Party candidate's arguments, upholding that NBC *did*

break the requirements of the statute, and had to provide equal opportunity to the candidate to compensate for the debate that they had broadcast. This upholding made the likelihood for debates next to impossible to occur.

The break in the debate for televised debates occurred in 1975, when the FCC reevaluated its stance on the use of television media to depict political broadcasts. As Minow and Lamay note, “In what is known as the *Aspen* decision, the FCC ruled: ‘Debates between qualified political candidates initiated by nonbroadcast entities...will be exempt from the equal time requirements of Section 315...’” (45). The authors also state that debates had to be “in good faith,” meaning the policies and candidates had to be fairly represented, and the licensees had to ensure that the debates could be qualified as a “bona fide news event,” so as to not disrupt the rules set by Section 315.

Overall, despite the criticisms of this judgment by the FCC, important information can be taken from it, justifying this gap as an extension of the First Age. The most important thing to take away from the changes is that the FCC ruling did *not* affect the language of the Communications Act of 1934, but rather just changed its interpretation. The exemption for “bona fide news events” always existed within the document, but the debates had never before fallen under its scope. The interpretation that shifted was largely due to the work of the media and political representatives that saw how influential televised debates could be in future elections. With the *Aspen* decision, televised debates now qualified for the exemption of the equal-time, equal-opportunity law, and could reappear during the general election campaigns. The debates were allowed to get back on track, and in 1976, they would finally appear again on television.

The Second Age: A Revival

1976 would mark the beginning of the Second Age of televised debate. Running from the Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter debates in the 1976 election cycle, the Second Age would continue all the way to 1988 with the George H.W. Bush-Michael Dukakis debates. These twelve years would mark a “revival period”, in which the televised debate was reintroduced, as well as the pinnacle of televised debate effectiveness. These two factors brought about many changes in spite of the debates sticking to traditionally-run formats. Within these debates, political gaffes would be key in helping the public lean towards the candidates they felt were fit for office. The Second Age also served as an important introduction of satirical comedy about candidates with the creation and public acclaim of *Saturday Night Live*. Results from the Nielsen Research Group will also show that the Second Age was tremendously effective in maintaining public interest and engagement with the media spots. Americans were excited to see the return of debates on television and sets all over the country tuned into the political exchanges. All of these factors help define the Second Age.

Although the 1976 election season was as close to an open-and-shut election as there was in presidential history, with Jimmy Carter up thirty-two points in the campaign, the 1976 televised debates marked the first time Americans had watched a debate on television in sixteen years, bringing with it a chance for the politicians to regain full public access. Minow’s direct access to the politicians as an elected delegate to the Democratic National Convention in New York in 1976 gave him a tremendous insight and firsthand account of the candidates pursuing the presidency. According to Minow, both candidates wished to debate due to their different positions in the polls: since Gerald

Ford was down thirty-two points, he had nothing to lose and hopefully much to gain from appearing on the televised debates, whereas Jimmy Carter, even thirty-two points ahead, felt that the American public did not know him well enough to elect him president, and so wanted to debate live on television as well (47-48). Both of these candidates, knowing the success that increased exposure could provide to their campaigns, allowed this revival of televised debates to reoccur and the Second Age to begin.

The revival of the televised debates brought about its own set of tremendous changes. One of these changes came in the form of political gaffes. With the television audience as large as in that first landmark series of debates, and the candidates much more prepared in terms of appearance, audiences turned back towards listening to responses, judging the validity or absurdity of their answers to questions. Starting with the Ford-Carter debates, gaffes became a hot topic of concern that, added with appearances, redefined what made a candidate look or not look presidential. In 1976, Gerald Ford, as he accepted his party's nomination as the presidential candidate, hoped to regain this presidential appearance. Amid raucous applause, Ford stated, "I'm ready, I'm eager to go before the American people and debate the real issues face to face with Jimmy Carter" (qtd in Karayn 1). This statement, as hindsight would eventually prove, could not have been more inaccurate.

It was because of this heightened scrutiny and access that Gerald Ford made a costly error that solidified his thirty-two-point spread from his opponent and sealed his fate of losing the election. As President Ford unfortunately remarked in the second of his three 1976 debates, "There is no Soviet domination of Eastern Europe, and there never will be under a Ford administration" (Ford-Carter Debate Excerpt, 0:59). Immediately

following this question, it is easy to notice the clear sense of confusion and even humored disbelief that spread over the face of moderator Max Frankel of the *New York Times*, so much so that he asked the question over again in an attempt to gain a correction from the president. In this excerpt, Ford's gaffe cost him both respect and admiration from many audience viewers. Soviet domination was considered to be a large threat to many Americans at the time, and Ford's denial of its presence in Eastern European nations such as Poland came across as unrealistic and even ignorant.

Gerald Ford's presidential image was dealt a severe blow, for many people believed that one so callous to state, and even more detrimentally reiterate, that Soviet domination was not existent—when the evidence was clear that the Soviets indeed had a presence in the countries in question—was not fit to lead a country against so large a threat. As Minow claims, following the gaffe, “the audience gasped, and of course the remark became the great news of the debate, if not the big news of the entire 1976 debate series” (51). He also adds, “it became one of those defining moments in which a candidate makes a gaffe... and that single moment—rather than the broader and more complex features of debate or the discussion of the issues—becomes the whole story” (51). Again, it is easy to see how crucial of a role the televised debates played in determining how the public felt towards each of the candidates.

Sidney Kraus concurs with Minow's opinion, citing numerous instances in which the media who had witnessed the gaffe blistered Gerald Ford's performance. He notes, “Members of both the invited press and those in the working pressroom at the debate site made such remarks as: ‘this will cost Ford the election.’ ‘A major faux pas.’ ‘Now, they're even.’ ‘Ford not only fumbled, he made headlines’” (qtd in Kraus 147). Ford's

performance was sub-par, his leadership and casual outlook on such a dramatically regarded problem, and he lost the election to Jimmy Carter that autumn.

Before moving to the other key gaffes and memorable speeches that defined the Second Age, it is important to note one other aspect that factored into President Ford's loss: an aspect that would pave the way for the new media that people viewed the debates in and how they felt about presidential candidates. Debuting on October 11, 1975, *Saturday Night Live* began to change the way people viewed candidates, and in the year between its introduction and 1976, Gerald Ford would receive the blunt of its satirical humor. In a famous opening scene of *Saturday Night Live* (called *Saturday Night* at the time) Chevy Chase, mocking Gerald Ford, gave a speech to his audience as an opening to that night's show. However, throughout the conversation, Chase portrayed Ford as clumsy and unintelligent, stumbling over chairs, confusing his speech, and filling a glass of water then drinking out of an empty one next to it (NBC.com). The purpose of the satire related to the famous moment where Gerald Ford stumbled out of Air Force One on a trip to Austria.

Though Chevy Chase looked nothing like Gerald Ford and the stumbling, unstable mannerisms were both inaccurate and exaggerated, the humor hit its mark. Many people began to associate his performance of clumsiness and clueless nature with the real mannerisms of President Ford. It was stated that "comedian Chevy Chase appeared as President Ford in the fourth episode, turning Ford into the first pop-culture president and beginning a comic tradition that continues today" (Minow and Lamay 51-52). Overall, *Saturday Night Live* played a tremendous role in establishing the funny side, and more

importantly the convincing side, of humorous political satire: a revelation that would continue throughout the years up to the Sarah Palin spoofs of 2008.

If Jimmy Carter reaped the benefits of Gerald Ford's mistakes during the 1976 debates, four years later a similar gaffe and its ensuing fate would affect his own presidency. The Second Age continued on in 1980, as current President Jimmy Carter and California Governor Ronald Reagan agreed to meet in their own forms of debate. Before getting into the gaffe itself, however, it is first important to note that Carter was already suffering in his candidacy. As Kraus states, "Carter, slipping in the polls as the economy lagged, and with the Iranians as recalcitrant as ever, wanted to debate Reagan first" (48). In the four years that Carter had served as president, the country was not shaping in the way that most Americans found acceptable. People were unhappy in the manner that President Carter conducted himself, finding his sympathetic and pacifist ways as weak. Even aspects of the economy and foreign affairs that were largely out of his control were attributed to his own personal failings as president. From this information, President Carter knew that he had to act to try and reestablish his reputation with the public; the debates seemed to be the best outlet, suggesting that the Second Age of debate still had a powerful presence in helping shape public opinion.

While Carter was trying to work up a strategy to repair his collapsing presidency, Ronald Reagan was quickly establishing himself as a real up-and-comer in American politics. Schroeder goes as far as to remark, "Could any presidential debater have been better prepared for the task than Ronald Reagan?" (146). Over the course of his career, Ronald Reagan developed his speaking abilities in almost every profession he undertook: as an actor, as an announcer, as a governor and as a spokesman. Following a debate with

Robert F. Kennedy, the man instructed his aid, “‘don’t ever put me on with that sonofabitch again’” (qtd in Schroeder 146). Reagan’s abilities outshined nearly every other adversary in the media and political realm, his political preparation to talk in front of a television audience unparalleled. Reagan was ready and eager to debate his competitors for the office of the president, and his preparation would pay off in the 1980 debates.

As the debates finally began to unfold, Carter’s presence, in a clash with the powerful and commanding personality of Mr. Reagan, left without a doubt the man who would emerge as the clear victor in the debates. The personality and statesmanship that had served him well in his debates against Gerald Ford four years ago would eventually come to defeat him in the later election. “Ironically, Carter’s strength—his command of facts and issues—became his undoing, making him seem didactic instead of commanding, humorless instead of reassuring” (Schroeder 142). Compared with Reagan’s command of the theatrical elements of political performance, President Carter was dwarfed in personality, and audiences took note. These televised debates caught the attention of millions of Americans tuning in who were ready for a change in office, and Ronald Reagan delivered the personality they desired.

In a manner very similar to the mistake that sealed the fate of his competitor four years prior, Jimmy Carter too made a fateful gaffe that convinced the country the suspicions they had already felt: that he was no longer suitable to lead the country out of its problems. Minow and Lamay identified Carter’s crucial mistake, stating that, during the debate the president explained to the moderator and the rest of the viewers “he consulted with his daughter Amy about nuclear weapons policies” (59). Amy Carter, who

was born in 1967, was thirteen years old at the time of the debate. Audiences responded very negatively towards the comment, mostly in the form of “scattered snickers” that could be heard within the debate hall (Schroeder 142). President Carter’s gaffe, while seeming minor, established the suspected notions of weakness and ineptitude already in the minds of the public. To have consulted with his thirteen-year old daughter in any issues of national importance displayed blissful ignorance on his part and made him appear as if his candidacy had reached its expiration date. Again, Carter’s presidential image had suffered as a result of the gaffe, even if his future position as president was tentative at best, and quite possibly turned many votes against him.

Following the 1980 debates, in which Ronald Reagan won handsomely, his second round of debates fared even better. When Walter Mondale challenged the president, he was unaware of how comfortable an office Reagan had entered into and how unprepared he was to challenge the Republican incumbent. Even during the first of the two debates, in which Mondale was determined the clear winner, his fate was sealed by the events of the second. As stated in Presidential Debates: Fifty Years of High Risk TV, “Edwin Newman, who moderated the second debate, described Mondale as so nervous that ‘when he came on stage, he did not even say hello to me and the questioners.’ Postdebate commentary suggested that the two candidates had reversed roles, Mondale seeming old and tired while Reagan sparkled with vitality” (Schroeder 144). Although no gaffes technically occurred within this debate period, the lack of Mondale’s vibrancy, accompanied with Reagan’s solid final debate performance allowed him to remain in office. In an important reminiscence of the First Age of debate, the viewers paid close attention to the image of the president over the specific policies of the

candidates, and Ronald Reagan won the viewer support. He was easily reelected for a second term, defeating Mondale in one of the greatest Electoral College vote differentials as ever seen in American history.

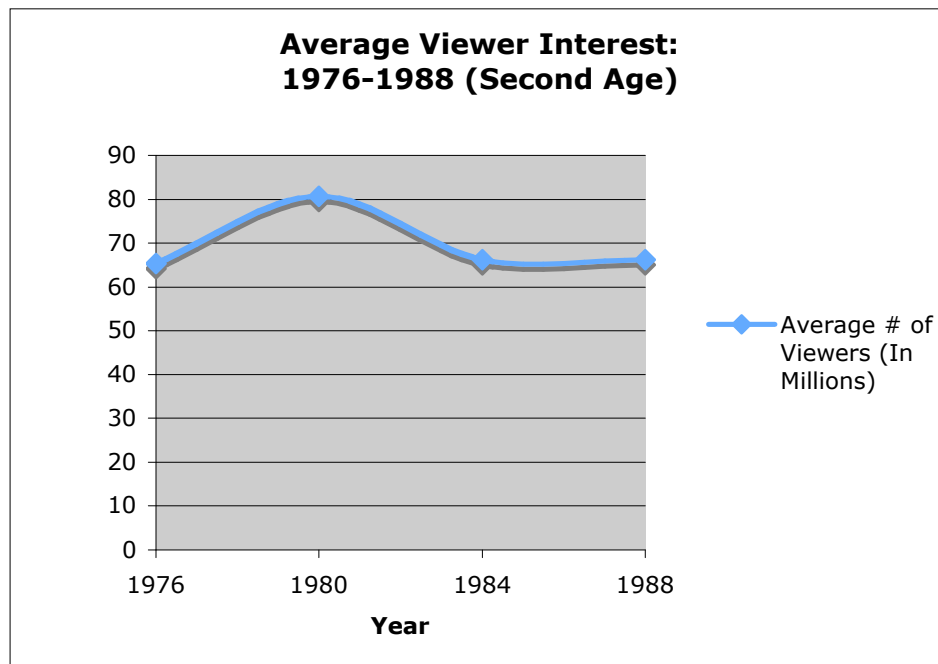
Moving into the last series of debates in the Second Age, one final gaffe would put a final mark on the end of the Age and set the stage for the new series of debates to occur. Fought between Massachusetts Governor Michael Dukakis and Vice President George H.W Bush, the 1988 debates served as a final reminder of how important image and presentation could count in the evaluation of the politicians. What was the basis for the controversy? “Now, in this debate, a single issue served to overburden Dukakis who had been accused of being ‘soft on crime’” (Kraus 87). Dukakis knew, with the amount of political pressure received from the Republican Party regarding his crime control methods and ideals that he would have to take a strong position whilst maintaining his personal integrity. The process and the position would be difficult for the governor, this much was certain to everyone involved in his campaign, but the confidence in the potentiality of the televised debates to change the minds of the public.

Unfortunately, despite the realization that crime questions were likely to have been asked in the debate as a central focus, Governor Dukakis’ response to a key question would prove catastrophic in his campaign. When CNN moderator Bernard Shaw began the debate by asking a hypothetical question regarding if the governor would favor an irrevocable death penalty for a man who had raped and murdered his wife, Dukakis responded, “no I don’t Bernard...and I think you know I have opposed the death penalty...” (“Dukakis-Bush Debate: death penalty” 0:18). Though Dukakis continued to ramble on about statistics regarding his defense against the death penalty, the audience

saw his response as cruel, heartless and even robotic. As Sidney Kraus notes, “The several thousand guests...were stunned by his lack of emotion. Clearly, Dukakis’ response not only set the tone for the rest of the debate, it lent credence to Bush’s accusation that Dukakis was ‘soft on crime’” (87). Once again, due to the powerful presence of televised media in the application of scrutiny, Dukakis found himself in a similar position as two of his political predecessors. Much as was the fate of Gerald Ford and Jimmy Carter, a gaffe may not have cost Dukakis the election, nor did it necessarily sway a significant amount of public sentiment, but what it did do was give stead to and solidify issues that were already developed in the public conscious. Dukakis lost his election to George H.W. Bush, and the Second Age of debate effectively came to its conclusion.

How did this Second Age of debate represent viewer interest as a whole over its twelve-year lifespan? Beginning with simple average viewership data of each of the debate seasons over the time span of the Second Age, a trend can be determined, as noted by **Image 1**⁵:

⁵ Note: the decision to average out the Nielsen viewer totals, as well as the household rankings, is a creation of the author and is not reflective of any similar calculation that Nielsen itself performed.

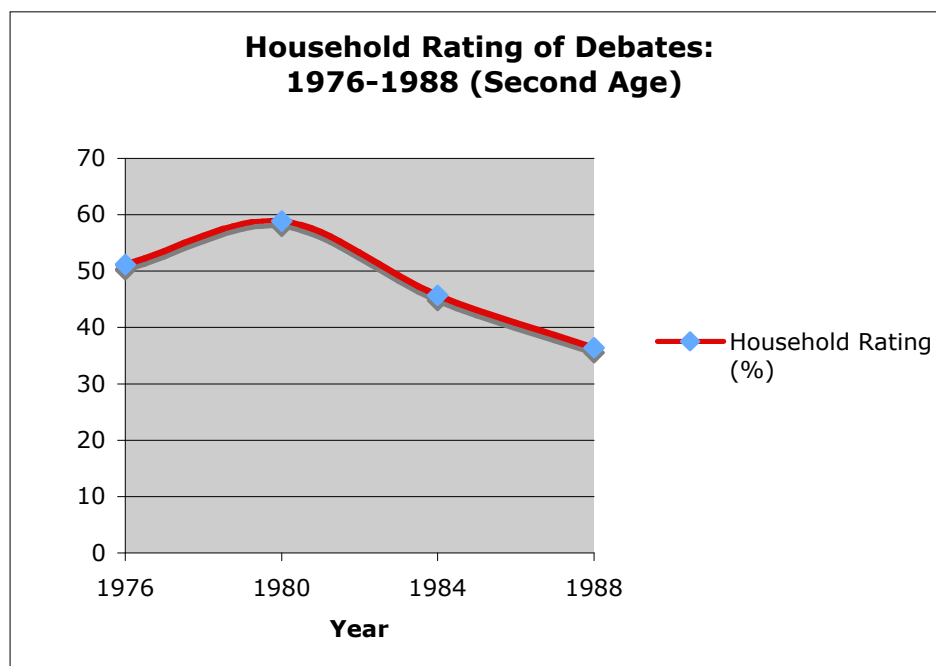


In looking at **Image 1**, an interesting trend appears. Through the averages of 65.4 million viewers in 1976, 80.6 million viewers in 1980, 66.2 million viewers in 1984 and 66.2 million viewers in 1988, the scatter chart shows almost a flat progression of viewership in the Second Age. If a linear regression trend line were to be drawn among the data, the line would be nearly flat, demonstrating almost no change in the amount of viewers watching the debates over the entire course of the age.⁶ Given this information, one could be quick to conclude that the Second Age represented a flawless and unmoving trend in viewer interest of the debate, showing that the Second Age was just as effective as the First Age.

Nevertheless, the simple viewership data is not entirely accurate. Statisticians at Nielsen Research recognized that the population of the country, as well as the amount of television sets owned by American families, must be accounted for, since these numbers

⁶ Data by Nielson Research Group, 1976-1988

were sure to change over time and these changes could easily offset accurate readings of the data. As a result, Nielsen created a separate calculation, which they called the “Household Rating” of debate. In this instance, population discrepancies as well as television ownership and usage is factored in to gain much more legitimate and accurate results as to how televised debate viewing trends actually progressed. Composing and condensing these “Household Rating” percentages into averages per debate series, the results form **Image 2:**



The results of this data are far more telling in their depiction. Whereas 1984 and 1988 had approximately the same amount of viewers (66.2 million), the Household Rating of these two years shows an average shift from 45.7% to 36.4%.⁷ This trends towards a constant decrease from 1980 through 1988 in the amount of households tuning

⁷ See **Appendix A**

into the debates, showing a more accurate depiction that viewer interest *started* to decrease during the Second Age. The trend line that could be formed from this data demonstrates both a greater pattern of decreasing interest and greater statistical significance than the raw viewership data. This is not to state that the Second Age was ineffective in maintaining viewer interest; in fact, the Second Age can be argued as being quite effective, especially compared to the results of future Ages. The information merely suggests that the Nielsen calculation of Household Ratings provides a much clearer picture in the data analysis.

Overall, political gaffes and the introduction of comedic satire allowed the debates to continue on as an extremely effective mode of communication. People continued to tune in during the 1976-1988 series of debates, allowing the Second Age to remain nearly as effective as the First. Even with the consistent decline in number of viewers and the ever-increasing availability of distractions in television, debates still remained as a viable and effective form of information provision, exchange and analysis.⁸ As political and media changes extended from the Second Age to the Third Age, however, a trend towards decreasing attention would continue to occur all the way throughout the age and beyond into the Fourth Age.

The Third Age: The Town-Hall

The Third Age of Debate, which spanned a period between 1992 and 2004, represented a change in the debate forum that would allow for one last attempt at effectiveness before reaching the ineffective Fourth Age. This change in debate came in

⁸ See **Appendix B**

the form of the Town-hall format. This format was constructed so that, instead of the moderators asking the questions, as was the norm, the audience members would ask the questions for the candidates to respond to. Though each audience member's question would be carefully prepared and scrutinized by expert panels before it could be asked, the Town-hall format allowed audiences to directly feel a connection between themselves and the candidates. Instead of moderators running the entire debate, preparing and asking all of the questions, the Town-hall format allowed people to expose the straight talk of the candidates, to judge responses, and have a less strictly structural feel to their debates.

The Town-hall meetings proved most effective in the first debate in which they were used: the 1992 debate between President George H.W. Bush, Governor Bill Clinton, and businessman Ross Perot. In a YouTube clip of the famous debate, audience member Marisa Hall asked President Bush "how the national debt has affected [his] life" (Clinton vs. Bush in 1992 debate, 0:05). President Bush's response left many people confused or angry: he dodged the question, made muddled comments, and even went so far as to put himself on a pedestal, informing the audience member that as president, he had seen and dealt with things that no other person has. As Schroeder notes, "Although Hall's question was confusingly worded, Bush's 'I don't get it' response contributed to the public perception of a White House out of touch and gave Bill Clinton ammunition that would last throughout the campaign" (206). Bush's attitude and personal posture towards the questioners reflected an attitude unbecoming of a president, resulting in his debate answers to be received as political gaffes.

Bush's attitude within the 1992 debates reflected even beyond what he said during the debate. As Kraus notes, "The second gaffe was observed in a shot that included all of

the candidate. Bush was not talking and looked at his watch. The impression he made was, ‘When is this debate going to go away?’” (100). Even if his intentions were not negative or did not mean to invoke a sense of boredom, the audiences witnessing the debate took it as so. The public perceived that Bush, in his tenure as president before 1992, felt so entitled and even pompous that a debate was not worth his time. The fact that this happened to be the debate that was most “democratic;” that is, was the debate whose questioners were not of Zaller’s political elite, but ordinary citizens only further enforced that the Bush administration was out of touch.

Conversely, Governor Clinton’s response became much more honest, real, and down to earth, impacting greatly how many people viewed him. As written in Presidential Debates: Fifty Years of High Risk TV, “What Clinton dubbed the ‘people’s debate’ offered an ideal showcase for the Arkansas governor’s vaunted television skills, uniting electoral politics and show biz in a way that perfectly suited this schmoozy Southerner’s emphatic style” (Schroeder 157). Schroeder continues with saying, “Working a crowd like a televangelist, Clinton redefined the relationship between debaters and debate watchers, and raised the standards for future nominees” (157). Clinton’s body language was close and personal, moving right up to the audience member Marisa Hall after Bush’s weak response. He explained kindly and evenly that he had friends who had lost their jobs due to the debt, had to do more with less money as governor, while offering her his own strategies and keeping the conversation peaceful and meaningful. As a result, audience members felt that he truly fit the image of the president, as it had been established those long years ago, and the votes reflected this

attitude. Clinton won handsomely in the election, proving that the Third Age of Debate had its own level of efficacy.

The introduction of the Town-hall format in 1992 was met with tremendous praise in the eyes of the academic and media communities. As Schroeder states, “In postdebate analysis on ABC, Jeff Greenfield emphasized the civilizing effect of the questioners. Greenfield credited two unanticipated reactions to the town hall participants: they knocked the candidates off their sound bites and kept attacks to a minimum” (206). Schroeder remarks that many other outlets spoke equally as highly about the Town-hall debates, using phrases such as “a shining example of how well things can work in presidential politics,” and “the candidates had little choice but to be civil and engaging,” (qtd. in Schroeder 206). As both the public and the press valued, the Town-hall debate allowed for citizens to directly relate to and challenge their politicians. It called that which, for both the history of debate and the history of the presidency in general, candidates have always claimed: they are a reflection of the voice of the people and are in tune with what they need and want in a presidential candidate.

The Third Age of debate did not simply end with the 1992 debates, however. As was previously noted, the actions of Clinton and the new presence required of politicians to act in front of the general population had merely raised the standards of televised debate. Moving forward from the debates in the 1990s, the public gained an even greater understanding of the rules of engagement in political discourse, holding politicians increasingly accountable for their presence, their demeanor and their abilities demonstrated in the televised debate arena. Reminiscent of the Second Age of Debate, the presence of people responding to political gaffes did not die out in the Third Age, but

rather became even stronger as citizens grew even pickier in their standards for candidates to meet, as Minow and Lamay note in their book. They write, “Other such moments live on in public memory even among those who never saw them... Al Gore’s audible sighs in his 2008 presidential debate with George W. Bush; and Bush’s inexplicably quizzical facial expressions in his first 2004 meeting with Senator John Kerry” (51). In looking at the myriad of events that continued to occur, the public began to hold their politicians even more accountable for what they said and how they appeared; moments such as a sigh issued by Al Gore to voice frustration even gained media attention as being professionally discourteous to his debating counterpart. The Third Age held politicians to a higher standard than they had ever been held before, and coupled with the increased ability to access and evaluate presidential hopefuls, political gaffes became more viable and damaging than ever before.

The media took note of these kinds of actions as well. Looking at a *Washington Post* editorial written by Michael Kelly, many reporters and media contributors found the sighing noises to nearly every disagreeable remark made by Governor George Bush to be distracting and annoying. He writes, “Every time Bush spoke, it seemed, Gore would haul up another great gust of oh-really-now from his lungs and blow it all over the stage...” (Kelly A35). Once again, the media elite paid attention to the attitude of Gore and did not like what they saw. Owing credit to John Zaller’s model of public opinion, this core of information that the public could access (along with its criticisms of Gore’s actions) influenced how the general public assessed and interpreted the information provided to them. The Third Age had lost none of its efficacy, for many members of the

public began to frown upon Gore's style of debate during the presidential season and if anything at least began to take his opponent, the governor from Texas, more seriously.

Despite this increased accountability, however, comedy was making a greater impact in how people viewed politicians than ever before. Whereas *Saturday Night Live* had easily established its domineering role over the satirical media, other forms of comedy satire began to develop a strong presence in informing people of the lighter side of politics. In fact, I argue that, in the Third Age, as people began to unyieldingly scrutinize the politicians' actions during debates, comedy shows such as *The Daily Show* satirized this attitude itself. In a clip from its *Indecision 2000* series titled "Sigh Language (First Presidential Debate)," comedian and host Jon Stewart makes note of the criticism of Democratic candidate Al Gore's attitude during the first debate of 2000, saying, "For much of the evening, Gore was frustrated, responding to Bush's statements with audible sighing" ("Sigh Language" 0:01). Although this criticism began much like any other, focusing on the annoyed attitude of the Vice President, *The Daily Show* and Jon Stewart turned the argument around by adding a comedy spin to the scenario. Following Stewart's statement that, "As if the sighing weren't bad enough, Gore's behavior got worse," ("Sigh Language" 0:12) the writers and visual editors for the show added Photoshopped images of Gore reading a book during Bush's turn, following it up with an even more absurd image of Gore playing with sock puppets when Stewart added "and ultimately [Gore's behavior became] downright rude" ("Sigh Language" 0:18). Overall, the clip from *The Daily Show*, even if not offering any substantive information regarding the debates, allowed for people to see the lighter side of an important decision. By making humor out of Gore's sighs, audience members and viewers could see that maybe

some of their political criticisms were overblown and potentially offered a greater appreciation that the candidates were indeed human and therefore were not deserving of such criticism.

Nevertheless, this same *Daily Show* clip, while making light of the heavy criticisms for simply sighing during the debate, challenged the real substance of the debate in general. Asking, “But what, if anything did the voters take away from this debate?” Jon Stewart passed the question to both the debaters, and a twenty-second montage of clips from the debates was edited to only show George Bush repeating the words “fuzzy math” and Al Gore using the words “lockbox” (“Sigh Language” 0:23-0:43). The over-repetition of these words throughout the clip critiqued the lack of substance offered by the candidates during their first debate in October 2000. By breaking the entire ninety-minute debate (Minow and Lamay 162) into two phrases, viewers established a humorous critique of the candidates and their respective campaigns, with Al Gore’s “lockbox” remarks—which he used seven times in the actual debate, as according to the transcripts (Schroeder 70)—proving to be especially damaging in the credibility and faith of the candidate.

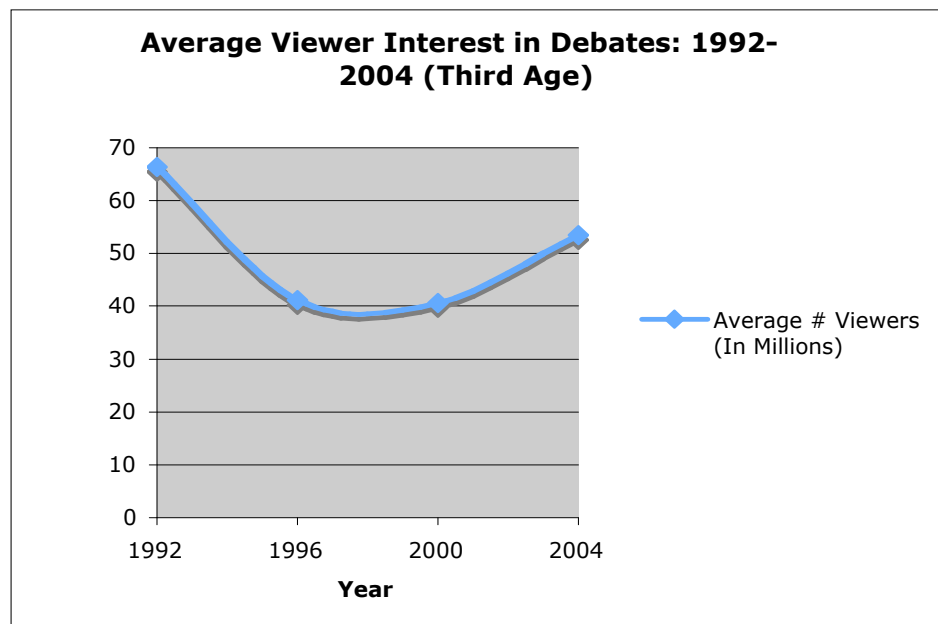
If *The Daily Show*’s repetition of the words “lockbox” were not enough to damage Al Gore’s reputation as the subject of ridicule, *Saturday Night Live* and its largest television audience in history would potentially place the final nail in the candidate’s coffin. Unfortunately, as NBC has removed many of the videos from their archives, including the spoof of the 2000 debate, the full video file cannot be found for viewing online. Though an audio file of the debate has been provided to fully emphasize the comedic effect of Darrell Hammond’s performance as Al Gore, a transcript of the

fake debates has been made available online for reference.⁹ As the transcript notes, Darrell Hammond spoke in a slow drawl with broken syllables, responding to George Bush's policies by saying, "Rather than squander the surplus on a risky tax cut for the wealthy I would put it in... a 'lock box'" (SNL Transcript – "First Presidential Debate"). Taking this a step further, the skit jokingly purported that Gore's "lockbox" was an actual, physical safe rather than the metaphor as it was intended. As the phony debate reports, "...in my plan, the 'lock-box' would be used only for Social Security and Medicare. It would have *two* different locks. Now, one of the keys to the 'lockbox' would be kept by the President. The other key would be sealed in a small, metal container and placed under the bumper of the Senate Majority Leader's car" (SNL Transcript – "First Presidential Debate"). The humorous, so-called "plan" issued by Hammond's Gore made a complete mockery of the real candidate's plan on Social Security and Medicare, and audiences began to respond strongly towards this criticism. In time, Gore would be known almost more for the sighs and the "lockbox" statement than he would be for his campaign policies.

How did the Third Age stand up to the prior two ages? What is interesting to note that possibly demonstrated the future of debates to come was that the television audience rapidly began to decline in the twelve years of debate between 1992 and 2004. As Minow and Lamay state, the Nielsen Media Company, a television research firm, collected public viewership results from those debates, with the results reflecting an interesting curvilinear trend, starting with a decrease (and thus towards disinterest) and then reviving itself. Noted in their charts, viewership went from about sixty-two to seventy million

⁹ See Works Cited Page: "First Presidential Debate"

people watching in 1992 down to between thirty-six to forty-six million in 1996, remained about even in 2000 to between thirty-seven and forty-seven million, with a large spike in 2004, in which forty-seven to sixty two million people watched (Minow and Lamay 162-164).¹⁰ Averaging out these viewer totals, the 1992 debates between Clinton, Bush and Perot averaged approximately 66.4 million viewers, an estimated 41.2 million viewers for the 1996 debates between Clinton and Dole, approximately 40.6 million viewers for the 2000 debates between George W. Bush and Al Gore, and then back up to 53.4 million viewers in 2004. **Image 3** represents this plotted data:



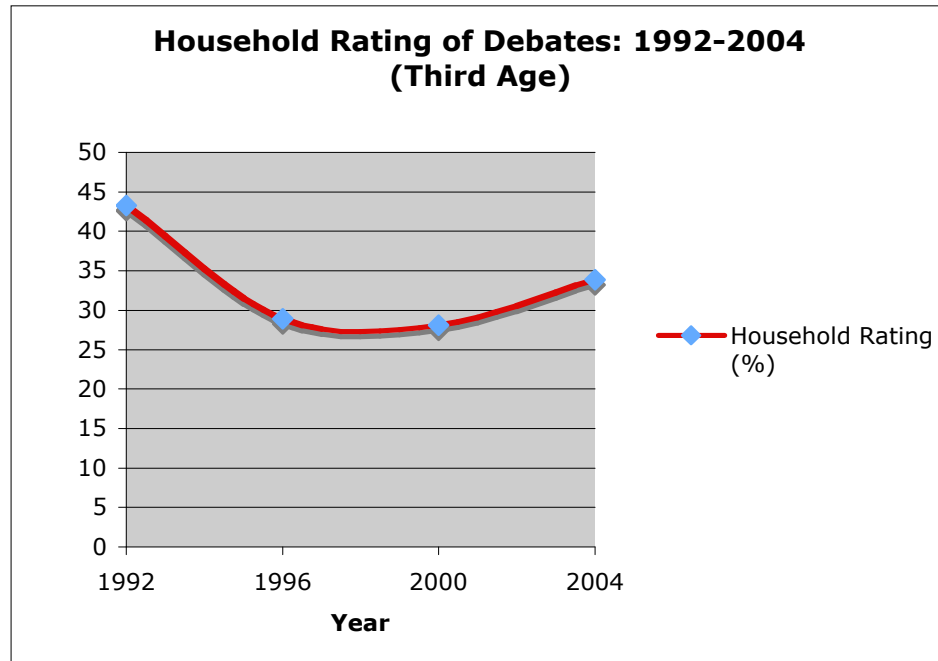
The data demonstrates the final point that can be garnered from the Third Age, as well as the cause for optimism in many of the minds of the scholars on presidential

¹⁰ Note: the Nielsen data, while represented in Minow and Lamay's book, can also be found, in its completion, at **Appendix B** on page 63. This data not only contains viewer totals, but also what those totals mean in the scheme of viewer ratings.

debates. While the rapid decline of interest between 1992 and 2000 led many to believe that debates were becoming an obsolete tool in public-political interaction, the spike in viewers in 2004 put many of these concerns to rest. Even in spite of the added distractions that media outlets offered—including Major League Baseball Playoff games that occurred alongside at least one televised debate per election cycle—people began to take interest once again with the Bush-Kerry debates of 2004 (Nielsen Research, 2004). Additionally, although the Internet was making its greatest boom throughout this era, methods of importing video files of the debates, much less watching them remained rather limited. As a result, media and political scholars remained confident that the debates in the 1992-2004 election series (i.e. the Third Age) still kept audiences interested and informed.

Additionally, however, one must compare what this data means in comparison with the actual television household ratings during that period. Once again, it is best to turn to Nielsen's rating system focused on the "Household Rating Percentages." As was calculated before for the Second Age data, the Nielsen Household Ratings for each debate series (1992, 1996, 2000 and 2004) were collected, averaged together and placed on a connected scatterplot. The result of this data is demonstrated below as a part of

Image 4:



Yet again, the averaged Household Rating data, as created by the Nielsen Ratings Company proves itself as the more accurate interpretation and calculation of viewing interest, impact and efficacy. In analyzing **Image 4**, the chart states that in 1992, the Household Rating was 43.3%, in 1996 it was 28.9%, in 2000 it was 28.1% and in 2004 it increased back to 33.9%.¹¹ Though this too demonstrates a curvilinear slope, and as the total viewership reflects the debates seemed to rebound in 2004, the Household Rating category remains much more valid in its interpretations. As a final note on the data, one could claim that some of the results were skewed due to the offsetting occurrence of Major League Baseball Championship games on certain media networks; however this fact *supports* the thesis rather than refutes it. With people willing to tune out the debates for other forms of entertainment, such as sporting events, the Third Age reflected yet another trend of decreased interest. As a last pitch for an optimistic appraisal of the age, the success of the 1992 debates (i.e. the introduction of the Town-hall format) and the

¹¹ See **Appendix A**

spike in interest in 2004 allowed many to believe that the debates had the potential to regain strength and validity in the eyes of the public.

In fact, many of these same experts believed that only more positive results would occur in the debates of the future, thanks to the increased power and access to New Media. In their future recommendations for how to improve debates, Minow and Lamay conclude, “The Commission on Presidential Debates should make every possible innovative use of the Internet to broaden the appeal and informative power of the debates” [italics removed] (119). Minow and Lamay understand that the Internet, invented and continuously upgraded throughout the twelve-year Third Age, has become an incredibly powerful tool to broadcast information, inform the public and provide an infinite realm of data to sort through. The innovations that the Internet has undergone allow people now to access and process information at faster speeds than ever before. The presence of information, as Minow as well as others have suggested, could be extremely effective at keeping people informed and educated on the policies of candidates, making the debates of the future even more effective. Sadly, a few choice mistakes during the onset of the Fourth Age have potentially ruined any chance for these innovations to hold public interest.

The Fourth Age: The Fading Presence of the Televised Debate

Since the country has just entered into the Fourth Age of Debate, much of the argument to follow will be speculative. When more data of the age can be collected over approximately the next decade, a more accurate and substantiated interpretation can occur. Nevertheless, I believe that the information to follow will not be completely

unsubstantiated, as many of the arguments used to claim why the Fourth Age can be predicted to be even more ineffective than previous ages will be presented and justified. In short, the Fourth Age of debate had the opportunity to utilize the greatest resources yet to be available to the public since televised debates began, but that these increased advantages subsequently led to increased distractions, thus rendering the Fourth Age far less effective than it should have been.

It may seem hard to believe that the 2004 debate season did not contain the full breadth of Internet technology for people to utilize, but in fact one of the Internet's most popular and widely used creations was not available during that campaign season. Although to many, the invention of YouTube (and prior lack thereof) is obvious in its effects, others may have a hard time understanding how revolutionary the creation of the site was in how people could access data. As technology moved from the 20th to the 21st century, YouTube made its Internet debut in the spring of 2005, just months after the 2004 presidential debate season and marking what is perhaps the greatest factor in transitioning from the Third Age to the Fourth Age of debate (Cloud 2006). The availability for a website to be able to collect and stream free video broadcasts offered an incredible opportunity for politicians and members of the public to receive information at a rate and availability never before granted to people.

Much to the pleasure of many of the experts regarding the future of debates, this technology was, at least once, utilized to its fullest capacity. Eager to take advantage of this new technology, CNN partnered with YouTube to create the newest format of debate: the conveniently named *CNN/YouTube Primary Debates*. In this newly designed format, citizens from all across the country were allowed to submit videos asking

specific, debate-type questions to either the entire group of debaters, or perhaps specifically directed at one debater. These submissions would then be reviewed by the CNN panel moderating the debates, and a few choice submissions would get the green light to be aired to the politicians. The Democratic Primary debates took place on July 23, 2007 and had approximately 3,000 videos submitted from citizens, while the Republican Primary, which took place on November 28, 2007 had about 5,000 videos submitted (CNN.com, 29 November 2007). For the first time ever being pioneered, this newest form of debate had great potential, and the public interest established a new level for how to examine debates.

How could the YouTube debates have had such a significant presence in establishing the Fourth Age? For one, the site and the format of the debate allowed, in essence, *every* citizen the opportunity to engage in the discussion with the politician, establishing a sense of an updated Town-hall style to the debate series. The Town-hall, while engaging everyday people, was by nature restricted to the constituency that the debate took place in. This limited the scope of interests to that of the debate district. By sending a video into the screening room for the YouTube Debates, each citizen was given the equal chance to have his or her questions heard and responded to by each of the presidential candidates. In this sense, the Fourth Age offered the potential for the greatest exchange of information (via John Zaller's model), the greatest democratic participation in debate and a peaked viewer interest, since the questioners could be ordinary people instead of media elites. Given all these promising prospects of the Fourth Age of debate, it would seem that it could easily be the most effective age since the First Age in garnering viewer interest and understanding.

One additional aspect of the Fourth Age is that the debate season of 2008 offered something never before experienced in American history: the first African-American candidate for the highest political office offered in the country. As soon as Illinois Senator Barack Obama received the Democratic Party nomination for the president, media outlets began a flurry of stories regarding the landmark moment in history. In addition, much as John Zaller's model would predict, this increased media attention gave many more people greater access to information and better understanding of the information, so Obama's nomination sparked the interest of a great deal of the American public. As a result of this incredible increase in media attention, the public received more detailed information about both candidates, and the unusual nature of Obama's rise to fame and the nomination should have resulted in greater public attention once the debates began to occur.

In spite of all of these positive media factors that should have resulted in yet another spike from the 2004 series of debates, the 2008 debates did not result in such promising figures. As the Nielsen data states, 52.4 million people watched the first televised general election debate between Barack Obama and John McCain, a number that the research firm calculates to equal roughly 31.6% on the Household Rating Scale. Formulating this data, the other two debate viewership and Household Rating debate ratings could be calculated and averaged together for the 2008 averages.¹² In looking at the results of the 2008 debates, clear evidence can be determined that, despite the factors contributing to higher public interest, this did not translate to higher viewership to the 2008 presidential debates.

¹² See Appendix A

Why was there disconnect among interest in the candidates, the newly introduced format of debating, and debate watching? One problem that can be seen during the Fourth Age of debate was simply the incredible volume of debates that occurred during the *primary season* for both political parties. Between April 26, 2007 and April 16, 2008, 26 Democratic Primary debates occurred, 21 of which were broadcast on a television network. Comparably for the Republican Party, 21 debates occurred, 19 of which were televised. The YouTube debates were part of this series, occurring right near the middle of the series for both political parties. Looking at the sheer quantity of these debates, one can see why audiences would become disaffected during the general election season of debates. Within this primary debate season, audiences received the position of the candidates, their disagreements and their presidential capabilities *ad nauseam*. To then enter into the general election debate season with all positions and weaknesses revealed over the course of a year with more than 20 debates per party, audiences could effectively tune out all of the arguments of the candidates in the general election season and still be as informed on all the positions than anyone watching the debates.

For further proof on the excessive amount of campaign coverage by the media during the primary season, and the toll it took on the general election debate series, a video by 236.com provides the necessary information. Titled “Synchronized Presidential Debating,” the video, which can be found on YouTube, connects footage from the three 2008 presidential debates, syncing all of the overused catchphrases of the candidates. As a portion of the video accounts, Senator Obama breaks into three different windows, each saying verbatim, “So what Senator McCain is proposing, is a three-hundred billion dollar

tax cut to some of the wealthiest corporations in America” (“Synchronized Presidential Debating” 0:58).

The footage marks what Schroeder notes in his book: that “catchphrases and scripted lines have become inevitable ingredients of presidential debates, focus-grouped and poll-tested and crafted for maximum political return long before the live event begins...Problems arise when candidates try to shoehorn into a live debate what they have so painstakingly rehearsed in practice sessions” (70-71). Because of the overdone campaign season, these “little darlings” of slogans appeared numerous times throughout the primaries and into the general elections. Much like Al Gore’s “lockbox” statement, but even more recognized through technology, the syncing of the debates in the video by 236.com revealed the unfortunate circumstance that presidential debates have endured. Politicians, having debated up to twenty-five times before the general elections even started, began to run out of things to say. Because of this, the catchphrases and scripted lines became one of the only resorts left for the candidates to use. Sadly, this only hurt their credibility and reduced the need to watch them again on the television screen for the general elections.

Yet another important factor in this decreased effectiveness came about in the form of the technological clutter and instantaneous spin on-screen that news stations began to provide. Possibly the station most guilty of the technological clutter on-screen was CNN, which in the 2008 debate gave its High Definition television audience a number of distractions to blur the issues and make the debates seemingly useless. **Image 5** best captured the blur of technological data that CNN offered:

QuickTime™ and a
TIFF (Uncompressed) decompressor
are needed to see this picture.

From **Image 5**, a clear picture to how messy and distracting the debates have become allows one to see how ineffective the Fourth Age has become. Looking at the bottom, viewers can notice the flashy graphics: the shining stars, the “1st Presidential Debate” sign that flashed to another message intermittently, and the “CNNHD” symbol that constantly pulsed with a flash of light.

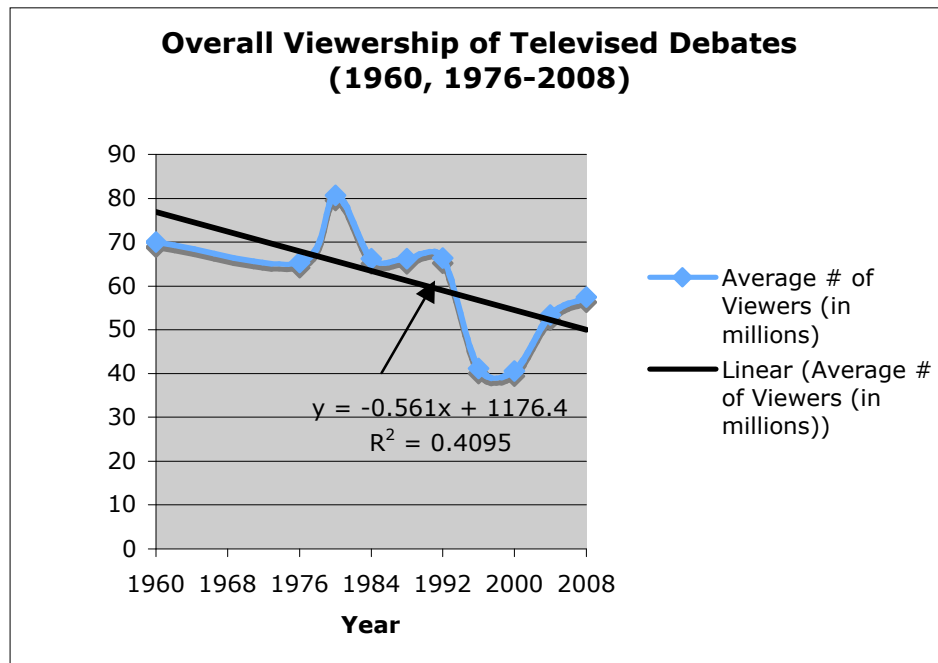
On top of those graphics alone was the introduction of the “Agree-o-meter” or “Like-o-meter”. Noticeable at the bottom-center of the screen, CNN introduced a panel of undecided voters. When each candidate expressed his position on an issue, the audience had a dial in their hands, which they would turn to the “+” side if they agreed with it or the “-” side if they thought it was a poor point. This in turn would be streamed into the live chart, which would move up and down throughout the entire debate. This chart proved to be extremely distracting to viewers, many of them focusing on the chart rather than the candidates even talking about the issues. As a result, audience members, whether

subconsciously or outright, would tend to agree or disagree simply by how the CNN streamed audience was reacting. A good example of this chart in action comes in the YouTube video “McCain’s Deer in Headlights Moment” (Youtube.com). In just the thirty-second clip of the debate, the chart streams distractingly the entire time, blurring the single issue portrayed. Conclusively, this led to a decreased interest and a decreased effectiveness of the debate, for issues and the candidates became blurred simply by how the CNN audience was responding.

In addition, the CNN High Definition audience was given one last distraction to even further blur the issues and influence the audience’s standpoints. Looking back to **Image 5**, six pie charts surrounded the candidates, and each chart contained numbers on either a “+” side or a “-”. These charts represented CNN’s “expert panel,” each individual of CNN’s news team serving as a member on the panel. These panelists would assume a function much like the “Like-o-meter” audience, scoring positives or negatives for each candidate’s points. Once again, this distraction takes more away from the debate than it gives. Hypothetically speaking, if there were people who agreed with McCain’s point and then found out that the expert panel scored it negatively, they would either subconsciously or consciously ask themselves why they agreed with the point when the “experts” did not. Arguably, this could in turn affect their choices and beliefs, taking away from their own personal opinions and making them victim to whatever ends the media wished them to reach.

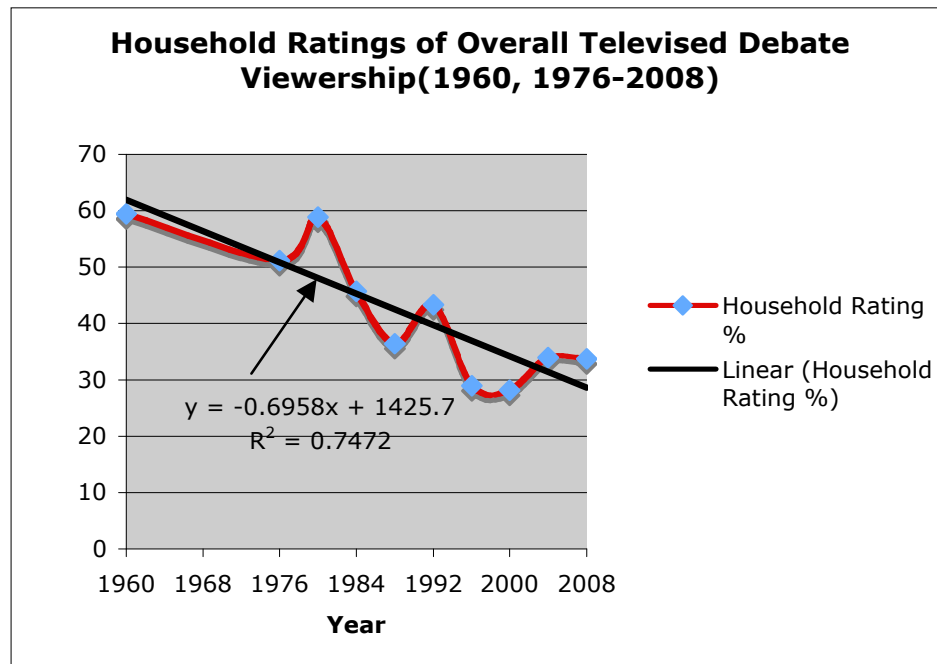
Lastly, it is once again important to bring up the research and statistics collected by the Nielsen Research Group. Since the 2008 debates have been the only occurrence of the Fourth Age, it would not make sense to try and isolate the single year of debates. As a

result, one more analysis remains available. **Image 6** compounds all of the debate averages in millions of viewers over all four ages of debate, as pictured below:



While it would be redundant to bring up each value of viewership from the entire debate period, the more important component to note is the linear regression “best-fit” line of the viewership totals. The regression can be seen as a steeply declining value over the course of the televised debate existence, with a correlation coefficient (noted as R^2) of 0.4095. This coefficient indicates that there exists statistical significance between the year, as noted on the X-axis, and the amount of people watching the debate, noted on the Y-axis. As a result, one can understand that, as each age of debate has progressed, fewer people have tuned in every time. The Fourth Age marks a period of its lowest status yet, and if things do not improve to attract greater interest, then the debates will only keep losing viewers and garner less interest every season.

The Nielson data on Household Ratings for the entire period contains within it an even greater significance. Composed as a chart of the entire debate existence (averaged again according to the debate series), the data is revealed as **Image 7** below:



Looking at the graph, the linear regression “best-fit” line represents an even steeper negative slope, suggesting that debate watching in regards to total number of households has steadily declined over the years. From the First Age to the Fourth Age, a spread of almost 30% is represented by the regression. Even more significant, however, is the correlation coefficient, R^2 . While the viewership coefficient was significant in itself, with a measure of 0.4095, the correlation coefficient of the Average Household Ratings is .7472. This number suggests that the connection between the year and the percentage of households tuned into the debates is in sharp decline with a high degree of confidence. All of these factors together sum up the ineffectiveness of the Fourth Age, as

representative of the entire televised debate history, showing it as a distracting, disappointing medium in which people can no longer gain the information they desire or see what they need to see from their prospective presidents.

Conclusions

In retrospect, it is easy to see the influence of the specific ages of debate. Though they started as a powerful way to capture and captivate the American public, televised debates no longer have the authority that they once did, and this in turn has led to a disappointing result in the Fourth Age. With all of the distractions that television now has to offer, people have become disinterested in the debate itself, and have largely resorted to other forms of spin and media for their values. *Saturday Night Live* has only become stronger in its satirical representations with the uncanny resemblance of actress Tina Fey to Sarah Palin, and even more Americans use it as a source of information about candidates.

Concordantly, with the advent of YouTube, people all around the U.S. have posted short, synoptic clips of debates in order to convey messages or their feelings on the candidates. Though clips like “McAngry: Debate Edition” may not be the most effective, more and more people have resorted to videos like it to decide how they feel on candidates (Youtube.com). The reliance on spin has become overwhelming in the Fourth Age, truly making the debate in itself ineffective and almost useless. Viewership and household ratings for debates have been in sharp decline, and even with the increased availability to access the information online, the count of viewers has not done enough to offset the imbalance that has been created.

This makes sense; with the ability to access a seemingly infinite amount of digital media online today, people are much more keen to ignoring the debates entirely for other diversions and distractions. Given the option between watching the televised debate or a video where a baby is dancing to “Single Ladies,” most rational people can guess which option the general public would tend to lead towards. The debates are not the most highly entertaining venues by any means, so often times ignoring them as they pass by does not affect the public perception of candidates in the least.

What will need to happen to keep debates alive? I have only a few suggestions and conclusions due to my research, both of which I feel could embrace the positive aspects of this newest age and eliminate the cons:

First, eliminate the lengthy, expensive and detrimental televised primary debate season. I am not suggesting that the primary debates would be a bad thing, as candidates do wish to stand out among their competitors of the same party, but twenty-two to twenty-six primary debates in one election cycle is just absurd. It pits people of like minds against each other for far too long. It dulls the issues that politicians stand for and tires out their catchphrases before the general election even begins. One may argue that removing debates would force people to whittle down potential candidates without even knowing as much as they could about them, but I challenge that this overdrawn season whittles *all* of the candidates down to nothing but clichés and broken-record promises. Narrow the primary debate season down to two or three debates, much like the general election series, so we can keep the candidates fresh and interesting.

Secondly, utilize the YouTube debates in the general election. One of the best things to come out of the Fourth Age was the YouTube debate, but they should not have

been restricted to the primaries. We do not require a stuffy, overbearing moderator to ask the candidates the questions; in fact, we would probably be very open to the idea of everyday people asking the questions most pertinent to them and the country. YouTube gives people the greatest access to the most democratic process of asking candidates the questions, and utilizes the New Media aspect that the younger generation would respond positively towards. Adding a YouTube debate to the general election could also help the candidates clarify their positions, better than they would be able to in a primary. With two almost polar opposite viewpoints that get represented during elections, a specific question posed to both candidates could easily reveal information pertinent to our decision-making.

Lastly, stop making candidates tabloid news stories every step they take on the campaign trail. On top of the lengthy primary season, it is only damaging to the candidates to have every move scrutinized and criticized. Let the public figure their alliances for themselves; they deserve to make up their own minds.

In time, Americans may realize the distractions and the inability to know the real issues from the spun issues, and make the necessary changes in order to return the debate to its natural, useful setting. If not, Americans may see the debate fade away, replaced by some other, New Media form of engagement.

Appendix A

Year	Average Household Rating %	Average # of Viewers (In Millions)
1960	59.4	70
1976	51.2	65.4
1980	58.9	80.6
1984	45.7	66.2
1988	36.4	66.2
1992	43.3	66.4
1996	28.9	41.2
2000	28.1	40.6
200	Source: Nielsen Media Research. 2004 http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/media_entertainment/top-ten-presidential-debates-1960-to-present/	
200		

Appendix B

YEAR	NETWORK	DATE	CANDIDATES	HOUSEHOLD RATING %	# of HOUSEHOLDS (in millions)	# of PERSONS 2+ (in millions)
2004	ABC, CBS, FOX, NBC, CNN, FOXNC, MSNBC	Sept. 30	Bush - Kerry	39.4	43.0	62.5
		Oct. 8		29.6	32.5	46.7
		Oct. 13****		32.6	36.3	51.2
2000	ABC, CBS, NBC FOX, CNN, MSNBC, FOX NEWS CHANNEL	Oct. 3***	Gore - Bush	31.7	32.4	46.6
		Oct. 11****		26.8	27.5	37.6
		Oct. 17		25.9	26.3	37.7
1996	ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN, FOX	Oct. 6	Clinton - Dole	31.6	30.6	36.1
		Oct. 16 *		26.1	25.3	36.3
1992	ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN	Oct. 11 **	Bush - Clinton - Perot	38.3	35.7	62.4
		Oct. 15		46.3	43.1	69.9
		Oct. 19		45.2	42.1	66.9
1988	ABC, CBS, NBC	Sept. 25	Bush -Dukakis	36.8	33.3	65.1
		Oct. 13		35.9	32.5	67.3
1984	ABC, CBS, NBC	Oct. 7	Reagan - Mondale	45.3	38.5	65.1
		Oct. 21		46.0	39.1	67.3
1980	ABC, CBS, NBC	Oct 28	Carter - Reagan	58.9	45.8	80.6
1976	ABC, CBS, NBC	Sept. 23	Ford - Carter	53.5	38.0	69.7
		Oct. 6		52.4	37.3	63.9
		Oct. 22		47.8	34.0	62.7
1960	ABC, CBS, NBC	Sept. 26	Nixon - Kennedy	59.5	28.1	N/A
		Oct. 7		59.1	27.9	N/A
		Oct. 13		61.0	28.8	N/A
		Oct. 21		57.8	27.3	N/A

* October 16, 1996 does not include FOX, because of a MLB Playoff Game

** October 11, 1992 does not include CBS, because of a MLB Playoff Game

*** Some NBC and FOX affiliates aired the Pres. Debate on a tape-delay due to MLB Playoff games

****Fox is not included in this total, due to a MLB Playoff Game

Note: There were no televised Presidential debates for the years 1972, 1968, and 1964.

Copyright 2004 Nielsen Media Research

Source: Nielsen Media Research. 2004
http://blog.nielsen.com/nielsenwire/media_entertainment/top-ten-presidential-debates-1960-to-present/

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