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TV Tidbits Starve Democracy

By Kiku Adatto

MODERN-DAY political campaigns may be made for television but democracy is not. TV's tolerance for the languid pace of political discourse, never great, has all but vanished.

An analysis of more than 280 week-day network newscasts from Labor Day to Election Day in 1968 and 1988 reveals decisively that "sound bites" and political commercials — the junk food of political discourse — have become standard fare. Consider:

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The average "sound bite," or bloc of uninterrupted speech, fell from 42.3 seconds in 1968 to only 9.8 seconds in 1988.

In 1968, almost half of all sound bites were 40 seconds or more, compared with only one percent in 1988.

In 1968, the candidates spoke for a minute without interruption in 21 percent of all newscasts. In 1988, this never happened.

Another striking contrast between '68 and '88 is the increased coverage of political advertising.

Although political advertising played a prominent role in the 1968 campaign, as documented in Joe McGinniss's "The Selling of the President," the networks rarely covered political ads as news.

During the entire 1968 general election campaign, the evening news programs broadcast only three excerpts

from candidates' commercials. By 1988, the number had jumped to 125.

The networks showed the candidates' ads not only as breaking news but also as file footage, visual motifs and stand-ins for the candidates themselves. Nevertheless, in those 125 excerpts, the reporter addressed the veracity of the ads' claims less than 8 percent of the time.

Oddly enough, reporters who so readily transformed candidates' speech into short sound bites, were usually content to let the candidates' commercials speak for themselves. But this forsakes the responsibility of objective reporting. Showing campaign commercials without analysis renders reporters conduits of deceit.

Television's impatience with political speech and its permissiveness with political ads diminishes journalism and the democracy it serves. □