

A New Main Street

Lloyd N. Morrisett

My father's sister and her family lived in Jerseyville, Illinois, a small town not far from St. Louis. Their house was two or three blocks from Main Street. When we visited there in the summers of the late 1930s and 1940s, my cousin Mary Ellen, a very pretty girl about my age, was my unofficial hostess. On soft summer evenings, we would often walk the two or three blocks to Main Street and visit the ice-cream parlor. That was the place to see and be seen, and I was glad to bask in the admiration my cousin received from other boys. The ice-cream parlor was also a gathering place for adults. The movie house and the bowling alley were not far away; and when the carnival came to town, it established itself on some vacant land adjacent to Main Street. During the day, Main Street was the town's business center; during the evening, it was the center of the town's social life.

As a young boy, I was taken by my cousin's charm, the taste of a good milkshake, and the beckoning adventures of a summer evening. Yet over the years, I have come to see how important Main Street was to the life of Jerseyville, Illinois. Main Street brought the town together. When people came to shop, pick up their groceries, or take in their cleaning, they would stop here and there to chat. In the evening, the movies, the ice-cream parlor, and the bowling alley drew people together. Sunday school and church meant still more trips to Main Street and more opportunity to greet friends and neighbors. In Jerseyville, as in small towns and cities all across the country, Main Street was a powerful contributor to a sense of community. The binding together it achieved began to diminish after World War II; and though often mourned, it seems impossible to recreate.

Despite the growth of our metropolitan areas, large movements of population, and the relocation and changing nature of the nation's

industries, people still need Main Street. New York, like many other cities, attempts to address this need by closing certain streets to traffic on specific dates for events like neighborhood fairs, charity bazaars, or holiday parades. Fifth Avenue in Manhattan is the street for many parades; the New York City Marathon route comprises streets, paths, bridges, and avenues in all five boroughs. None of these places is quite the same as a Jerseyville, Illinois "Main Street," but each represents to people the site of a community event. In Jerseyville, almost everyone in town could gather along Main Street to see a parade. Now such popular events as the Rose Bowl parade or the celebration of the Statue of Liberty's centennial are televised to make them available for everyone.

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Television, America's Main Street

Television has, in effect, become America's Main Street. Nowhere has this been more fully realized than in the telecasting of our great sporting events. As I write this, the National Football League playoffs are in full swing. Yesterday ninety-thousand people watched the Los Angeles Raiders defeat the Cincinnati Bengals in the Los Angeles Coliseum; seventy-thousand watched the New York Giants defeat the Chicago Bears at the Meadowlands. Most Americans did not mentally place these games in the Coliseum or the Meadowlands; rather they thought of them as games on television. Throughout America, sports fans knew they could turn to local network channels for the playoffs; about 70 million did so.

The National Football League understands that television is its playing field. The League's greatest income comes from television, and the game itself has been modified to fit the

needs of television. A most recent enhancement of the game — for viewers, at least — is the instant replay made possible by the game's marriage to television. Replay officials review questionable plays using video footage produced by commercial television cameras. Today Raiders' and Giants' fans can talk to their friends about the game more knowledgeably than if they had actually been in the stadium. They were able to study key plays in slow motion and from several angles. Television has transcended the limitations of place and overcome distance to create vast communities of loyal football fans.

Television and Presidential Campaigns

Television can, of course, convene people (electronically) for more serious — but no less satisfying purposes — than watching a football game and analyzing its plays. Every four years, political activity in the nation peaks in the campaign for the presidency and the national election. Television is capable of attracting people to the campaign and encouraging their involvement. It can present the candidates to the public in a variety of situations and circumstances, allowing an appraisal over time of their judgment, consistency, and stands on issues. It can reveal their past records and provide the perspective for a fair evaluation; it can also furnish the grounds for predicting their future effectiveness. Presidential campaigns, as we have known them, cry out for this kind of attention. Television, however, has yet to function as “Main Street” for these significant events.

Most political analysts contend that television has undermined rather than strengthened civic life. They point especially to the way the medium is now used in presidential campaigns. Unlike football, these contests have no agreed-upon ground rules; like football, they are driven by money. Responding to the constraints of network newscasts, candidates strive for simplicity, excitement, and good visuals. They offer slogans instead of substance, negative ads in place of statements of belief and purpose. Virtually no attempt is

made to educate voters or to address their concerns. What the public receives are the products of managed news and photo opportunities; what it is left with is the idea that one candidate is as bad as the other.

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Democracy Endangered

Candidates' irresponsibility, the complicity of the media, and the growing apathy of the voting public is causing our system of choice and popular representation to atrophy. It is a sad irony that this is occurring at a crucial turning point in world history, when emerging democracies are looking to the United States for inspiration and guidance. A provocative series in *The New York Times* described the situation candidly: “As America's democratic visions and values seem to triumph around the world, an unhappy consensus has emerged at home that domestic politics has become so shallow, mean, and even meaningless that it is failing to produce the ideas and leadership needed to guide the United States in a rapidly changing world.”

Two premises underlie this diagnosis of our electoral ills and also hold the key to a corrective course of action. First, a viable representative democracy requires informed, motivated voters. Second, the media play the central role in educating those voters.

In electing a president, the people of the United States are given the chance to evaluate the leadership of their country; when they cast a ballot for a presidential candidate they are judging the past and placing a bet on the future. If important issues are debated and clarified during the campaign, if the candidates talk honestly and constructively with each other and with the electorate, the candidate who wins can assume office with the support and understanding that are the necessary foundations for effective governing.

If, however, the presidential campaign is trivialized with slogans, cliches, and demagoguery, the winning candidate receives no mandate from the people on important political issues, and the people forfeit control over the governing process. The politician will have squandered an opportunity to begin to set a national agenda. The president, having to move from seeking votes to making policy, will operate then at the whim — as revealed by polls — of a cynical and disaffected public.

An uninformed, apathetic, and ignorant populace is a threat to democracy at any time, but never more so than at times of crises or revolutionary change. As a great power and the beacon to people everywhere seeking freedom, the United States today struggles to redefine its own economic, military, and leadership roles.

If our political campaigns fail to serve an edifying and educative purpose, the people must bear some of the blame. It is the citizens' responsibility to become informed, to ask challenging questions during political campaigns, to demand accountability from those who would presume to serve them, to insist that the candidates address their concerns and fears, and to respond to their hopes and dreams. Americans seem to have forgotten that the intent of a campaign should be to serve the electorate — as a source of information and ideas and as an aid to making a reasoned choice. It should not be allowed to become merely the means to the end delimited by packagers, pollsters, and politicians.



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Campaign Failures

David Broder, the noted columnist, has commented that “Most of the campaign is out of the voter's sight. Some voters may glimpse a presidential candidate for a half-hour in their hometown, but most will get everything they know about these candidates indirectly through the media.” Television is the main source of news for two-thirds of Americans; for half that number, it is the sole source.

The pre-eminence of television among the media has caused it to become symbiotic with politics; its mediating of campaign content and images also gives it enormous power. Lee Atwater, former national chairman of the Republican party, described in an interview how that power determined campaign strategy in 1988: “I tell you what you do in a campaign now. You get at a table... every morning at 7:00 and spend an hour-and-a-half figuring out what you're going to do to get on the news that night — to get in the news hole. What stunt you can pull that will give you fourteen seconds of news hole.”

Since television is where the people are, that is where campaign money is spent. The 1988 campaign cost the two main candidates approximately \$500 million; about half of that went to television. This huge expenditure underscored a four-decade old trend towards increased reliance on television for presenting candidates and winning votes. The trend is likely to continue because its results have been clear. Research conducted by the Markle Commission on the Media and the Electorate* indicates that besides the debates, the features of the campaign that were remembered most were the televised political ads.

Whether they encouraged or merely failed to question the form and nature of the '88 campaign, the media did a poor job of educating the American people. Many in the

*The Markle Commission on the Media and the Electorate. Data were compiled and analyzed under the direction of Bruce Buchanan, Associate Professor of Government at the University of Texas, who also served as Executive Director of the Commission. Results will be reported in a forthcoming book by Professor Buchanan, *Electing a President: The Report of the Markle Commission*.

media acknowledge this. Timothy Russert, NBC-News Senior Vice President, states further that “No one was satisfied with the 1988 coverage. The public felt cheated by the emphasis on flag-waving and furloughs, rather than on deficits and defense, drugs and education. The press felt manipulated by the staging and scripting of ‘photo opportunities.’ The politicians felt abused by the attention to verbal slips over substance.”

The campaign did indeed degenerate into slogans, ten-second soundbites, attacks, and photo opportunities. The dominant images — Willie Horton, hazardous waste [allegedly] in Boston Harbor, a visit to a flag factory, Dan Rather verbally sparring with George Bush, Mike Dukakis dazed by a hypothetical question about rape — had a lot to do with appearances and almost nothing to do with candidates’ qualifications or proposals for actually governing a nation.

The biggest losers in the battle of images were the public. Not taken seriously by either the politicians or the media, the American people responded in kind. Barely half the eligible voters even bothered to go to the polls — the lowest level of voting in sixty-four years.

It is no wonder that the electorate had so little stake in the outcome. The candidates spent little time trying to engage and educate them, or to begin building broad support for anything resembling a national policy agenda.

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Research by the Markle Commission confirms the view that the media contributed mightily to the trivialization of the political process. In a detailed content analysis of coverage by eighteen news organizations (the television networks, plus major newspapers and news magazines), the study found that

nearly 60 percent of the coverage dealt either with horse race aspects of the campaign (who was winning or losing, insider evaluations of strategies, and the like) or candidate conflict stories (the pot-shots that candidates and their staffs were taking at their opponents). By contrast, only 10 percent of the stories dealt with policy issues, such as the federal budget deficit, nuclear disarmament, or the environment.

1988 Presidential Campaign
Media Content Analysis
September 8-November 8, 1988

<u>Category</u>	<u>Percent of Total</u>
Campaign Horse race	36.1
Candidate Conflicts	20.8
Candidate Qualifications	19.2
The Electorate	9.7
Policy Issues	9.7
The Media	4.4

Based on content analysis of: New York Times, Washington Post, Christian Science Monitor, Wall Street Journal, Los Angeles Times, Newsweek, Time, US News & World Report, National Journal, New York Daily News, Chicago Tribune, Houston Chronicle, Sacramento Bee, ABC, CBS, NBC, CNN and PBS.

The research, unfortunately, also supports the assertion of Roger Ailes, George Bush’s chief media advisor, that the media were interested in only four subjects: polls, pictures, candidates’ mistakes, and attacks.

Political analysts, consultants, and politicians themselves understand the centrality of television to national campaigns. As a nation, we have yet to accept this reality. Candidates and their handlers have skillfully manipulated the medium to their ends and to the detriment of the democratic process. Now new ways must be found to use television to raise the level of political discourse, to inform and educate the public, and to contribute to what John Dewey called “a collective intelligence.” We need to make television America’s Main Street for presidential campaigns.

Some notable exceptions to the generally inadequate coverage in 1988 could provide some models for the Main Street concept. They include, on PBS, the *MacNeil/Lehrer NewsHour's* regular broadcast of segments of the candidates' stump speeches and the *FrontLine* special, "The Choice" (well-rounded biographies of the two major candidates); the *American Agenda* and *Nightline Campaign '88* series on ABC; *Inside Politics* on CNN; and C-SPAN's continuous programming. These programs succeeded despite little promotion and uneven availability across the country. They succeeded because they did what the politicians and the media too rarely did — they educated the public for political participation. The challenge for the future is to make programs such as these the rule, not the exception, and to make them broadly available to the entire electorate.

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The Role of Public Broadcasting

Just as cities designate special streets for particular events, we need to designate part of television as the place Americans can turn to to see presidential candidates, learn about the issues, and follow the events and direction of campaigns. The public broadcasting system has a unique opportunity to become that place, the nation's political Main Street. Public broadcasting would strive to give the campaign meaning for all citizens, provide information about the nation's problems and world affairs, and offer voters in-depth views of candidates and their programs. From their local public stations, people would learn what they needed to know in order to make informed choices at the ballot box. Committed to serve in this way, public broadcasting could become the principal campaign forum in presidential politics, the medium through which most significant aspects of campaigns are presented. It could become America's political Main Street.

The public broadcasting system can claim several distinct advantages that would enable it to assume this role. Unlike commercial television, its stations have both a public and educational mandate. What better way to fulfill both purposes than encouraging and preparing the American electorate to carry out its most important civic duty — voting for president. Taking the lead as America's Main Street could extend the system's mission in a significant way, as well as differentiate it from competing cable services. It would also enhance its reputation in Congress and among other sources of support. Public broadcasting already has a solid base of excellent news and public affairs programs on which to build; and apart from the commercial networks, it has by far the greatest reach and largest audience.

Potential National Audience:
PBS and Selected Cable Services

Network	Nat'l Coverage	Households
PBS	97.0%	87,600,000
CNN	56.0	50,100,000
C-SPAN	54.0	48,500,000
Discovery Channel	45.0	40,600,000
A&E	42.0	37,900,000

National Primetime Audience:
PBS and Cable Services

Network	Avg. Rating	Households
PBS	2.69	2,433,000
CNN	0.65	588,000
Discovery Channel	0.38	334,000
A&E	0.28	249,000
C-SPAN	N/A	N/A

Source: A.C. Nielsen NTI and NSI 1988-89

Public broadcasting's mandate, its experience, and its penetration make it our best hope for raising the level of both campaign practices and reporting. Campaigning is ripe for reform, making 1992 the opportune time for public stations to stake out their position as America's political Main Street.

On "Main Street" the same information, candidate appearances, and background education would be available to all; everyone would thus have access to the same campaign — not portions of it produced for specific regions or packaged to suit special interests. This would eliminate the problem of different people receiving different information on which to base their decisions. It would also preclude complaints by politicians that press intermediaries distort their messages.

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Public broadcasting's prominent position in the campaign could also begin to address the problem of soaring campaign costs. Politicians should feel less compelled to advertise if they can reach large numbers of people on a public channel. Campaigns might even be shortened. Now with the need for its special capacities greater than ever before, the public broadcasting system can distinguish itself by taking on a vital task that other outlets and media are unwilling to do or unable to accomplish.

Lloyd T. Morrell

Lawrence A. Cremin died suddenly on September 4, 1990. A member and director of the Markle Foundation since 1986, he was, at the time of his death, President of the Spencer Foundation and the Frederick A.P. Barnard Professor of Education at Teachers College, Columbia University. Dr. Cremin was an eminent historian of education, who had been awarded both the Bancroft Prize and the Pulitzer Prize. Larry brought wisdom, learning, and good humor to all his work with the Markle Foundation. He is greatly missed.

L. M.