

THE ★ MEDIA ★ AND THE ★ MESSAGE MERCHANTS ★

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Political communication is an art as old
as the election process itself but one largely neglected
by academicians. Only with the undeniable impact
of television has the media's role in politics
gained legitimacy in the classroom.

★ By Kathryn Jenson White ★

continued



As Ronald Reagan's nickname, "The Great Communicator," suggests, political communication and the importance of the media to successful campaigning are hot topics these days. Remarkably, however, the study of political communication has been recognized as a legitimate scholarly pursuit only in the last ten years or so. In the past year, the University of Oklahoma has taken major strides toward establishing itself as a clear leader in this relatively new field of study.

"We have always recognized that communication is important to politics. Thomas Jefferson had his own newspaper, as did Alexander Hamilton. What hasn't been recognized by scholars is the impact of the media role. Political scientists traditionally have focused on institutions like the presidency or congress. Also until we got into the electronic media age after World War II, political communication was mostly in newspapers, and newspapers were the province of journalism schools."

These explanatory words come from Dan Nimmo, who left a joint appointment in the departments of political science and communication at the University of Tennessee to join the faculty of OU's department of communication in the fall of 1985.

The author of many books on issues in traditional political science and in political communication, Nimmo believes the academic neglect is over. He is especially excited that the University of Oklahoma is rapidly establishing itself as a major force in the new field with its recently established Political Communication Center, of which Nimmo is now a part.

The center became a reality in 1983, when the department of communication happily made room for the new program in Kaufman Hall. Department chair Gustav Friedrich and faculty members Lynda Lee Kaid, Katherine Hale and William Carmack were instrumental in the formation of the center and in effecting what they call the "coup" of successfully recruiting Nimmo, probably the foremost

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The University of Oklahoma had to compete with the Smithsonian Institution for the 25,000 radio and television tapes of campaign advertising assembled over the past 30 years by Julian Kanter, who is now the OU collection's archivist.

scholar in political communication in the country.

The population of the center grew in January 1986 when the determined group of communication specialists purchased the Political Commercial Archive and hired Julian Kanter as its archivist. The archive, which contains some 25,000 radio and television tapes of campaign advertising collected by Kanter over the past 30 years, has become the showpiece of the Political Communication Center. Getting the archive was coup two without a doubt, accomplished by outmaneuvering the Smithsonian Institution, no lightweight competitor.

Several factors led Kanter to choose Norman over Washington, D.C., as a new home for himself and the nationally known collection, but probably the most decisive was the existence of the center itself.

"I was very much attracted by the concept of a multi-disciplinary facility working in political communication," he says. "It's been my view for a long time that political commercials should have academic interest for people from

political science, history, journalism, social anthropology, communication and perhaps other fields. We don't have all the disciplines involved at this moment, but the center is young and growing, and everything takes time."

Norman also offered Kanter a place to contribute to education—which he has always wanted to do—and a lifestyle less hectic and costly in many ways than that of the nation's capital. Another reason for the Smithsonian's loss and OU's gain is Kanter's desire to continue to work with the archive.

"The archive no longer belongs to me; it belongs to the University," he explains, "but in terms of my feelings toward the collection, it is my baby. I created it. I nursed it for 28 years. I brought it here so I could devote the rest of my working career—which I hope will be a long one—to working full time on it."

Kanter's commitment to and enthusiasm for his work are shared by other members of the center.

"We started working on the center several years ago," Friedrich explains, "with the idea of putting together in



one place what no other university had been able to assemble, a comprehensive center for studying political communication. We wanted to incorporate the points of view of as many disciplines as possible.”

Given the primary charge of the University, the center first had to develop a strong academic base. Since they already have a dedicated faculty and clear student interest in the undergraduate and graduate degree programs with an emphasis in political communication, that goal is well under way. The degree programs provide students with a strong theory and research focus, along with practical communication skills they can use working on political campaigns, on the staffs of public officials and in research agencies and the media. Students who graduate with the political communication emphasis are also, of course, well prepared to face one of the more important aspects of gaining and holding public office.

Presenting an academic journal that would publish important research in the field was the center's second goal. The journal actually was already in existence, since Kaid has been editor of the *Political Communication Review* since 1978. A respected professional publication with a growing readership, the *Review* is sponsored by the Political Communication Division of the International Communication Association.

Third on the center's list of requirements was to sponsor research projects that would serve the state and academic community. This led to the fourth objective, obtaining a body of research material that would make OU's Political Communication Center the undisputed leader in the field.

Kaid conducted research with the archive when Kanter housed it in his Highland Park, Illinois, home. "I had thought about the collection for a long time. I had talked to Kanter as early as 1978, but then he wasn't interested in selling it.

"When we formed the center in 1983, though, we got really serious. I knew we had to have a resource of that

kind if the center were to succeed, and Kanter's was the best there was. When we started, it seemed a pretty big dream to try to get the best, but that's what we set out to do."

The acquisition of the Political Commercial Archive and Kanter assures OU of a well-developed network of individuals who will continue to donate materials to the collection he started in 1956, the year he worked as a volunteer in the television department of the Adlai Stevenson presidential campaign. His interest in political commercials grew from a childhood interest in politics and a career in televi-

sion broadcasting that was to last 21 years.

"I began in television in 1950, so by 1956 I had friends at stations across the country," Kanter explains. "I managed to get 1952 and 1956 campaign commercials in '56. In 1960, I really began to expand my efforts. I would call friends across the country and ask them to send the commercials when the campaign was over. At that time, and for a number of years thereafter, no candidates ever asked the television stations to return their commercials. The stations just threw them out." *continued*

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John F. Kennedy's effective management of television advertising and free exposure spelled the difference in his narrow victory over Richard M. Nixon in the presidential election of 1960. The historic Kennedy/Nixon televised debates brought the candidates into the nation's living rooms as nothing had before.



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In 1964 Lyndon B. Johnson defeated Barry Goldwater with the aid of a commercial showing a poignant little girl endangered by the threat of nuclear weapons.

One man's trash is another man's treasure, indeed.

In 1978 many producers of campaign commercials began to copyright their work, but that has not increased too much the difficulty of obtaining new materials for the archive. The real obstacle to acquisition, according to the archivist, is that once a campaign is over, the disposition of the commercial tapes is a very low level priority.

"If it's been a losing campaign," Kanter says, "the immediate objective is to shut down every expense-generating aspect in the shortest time possible, usually 12 to 72 hours. If it's been a winning campaign, candidates immediately begin to convert to preparing to serve in office.

"Where the commercials are is a tough question to answer. Some are out at stations and won't be returned for three to six months. Staff members often don't have time to hunt them down, even though they made a commitment during the campaign to make sure I get a full set of commercials."

Although he must constantly expand his sources to include more indi-

viduals from the campaign, production and broadcast areas, Kanter, with a determination the Canadian Mounties would appreciate, usually gets his tape. He freely admits that one reason for his great success is lack of competition.

"To my great surprise—and I cannot explain it—until very recently there has been no institution or private individual other than me who has been pursuing the collection and preservation of these materials. I don't know why there has been such a widespread failure to recognize the historical and academic importance of these ads."

Kanter knew from the beginning what a mother lode he had to mine, and he dug in with enthusiasm. Today the collection has commercials from every state, radio tapes from as early as 1936 and spots from the first year television was used in a political campaign. This latter group consists of 1950 commercials for William Hart Benton, a Connecticut senator who, appropriately enough, left a career in advertising to assume public office.

The archivist is also proud to claim that the collection holds sole copies of

many campaign commercials. One present objective is to dedicate the time and legwork necessary to unearthing older pieces to broaden the historical base as much as possible while the archive continues to grow with modern examples of the art of political advertising.

According to Kanter, during every four-year period voters in the United States fill around 450,000 elective offices. Obviously the potential for growth of the collection is immense, but Kanter views the prospects realistically.

"Although the Political Commercial Archive is an unparalleled collection, it is only a small part of what has been done," he admits.

He has favorites, of course, and near the top of the list is the 1952 Eisenhower for President campaign. "While these commercials may seem primitive by modern standards, in 1952 they weren't. They were innovative, well thought out and designed to fit the specific political needs of the candidate."

Kanter also appreciates the 1984 Reagan campaign. "It had the most beautiful set of ads for a campaign ever. They took the visual techniques used in creation of product and service advertising and applied them to a political end. In 1988 I don't expect to see advertising that visually beautiful but practically bare of content.

"In '88, we are going to have two non-incumbents, so they are going to need less gloss and more substance. Reagan '84 was designed to reinforce the perception many people already had: that things were going well, that the country was in good hands, that the president was a nice man of integrity and compassion in whom they could continue to place their trust and confidence."

Although he denies that television is a miracle worker that can win campaigns singlehandedly, Kanter knows well how very powerful it is. He believes, for instance, that neither John F. Kennedy nor Jimmy Carter would have been elected president without their very effective management of



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Political Communication Center advisory council chairman Leroy Bridges, far right, meets with faculty members, from left, Dan Nimmo, a nationally renowned expert who arrived at OU this year; department chair Gustav Friedrich; Regents professor William Carmack; and assistant professors Katherine Hale and Sandra Ragan. Not pictured is center coordinator Lynda Kaid.

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television advertising and free exposure.

With the arrival of Kanter and the Political Commercial Archive in January 1986, the center is on the way to realizing all four of its major goals. Now the faculty is working with a 16-member advisory council, whose chairman is Leroy Bridges of Yukon, administrative officer and legislative affairs specialist for the State Department of Mental Health, to formulate policies for the center's growth and development.

Other advisory council members are Carl Albert, McAlester, former speaker of the U.S. House of Representatives; Patience Latting, former Oklahoma City mayor; Clela Deatherage Mitchell, former state representative; Hannah Atkins, former state representative and past delegate to the United Nations; Marty Hauan, former press secretary for Governors Johnston Murray and Raymond Gary; and Janet Taliaferro, political consultant, all of Oklahoma City; Mary

Barry Goldwater was a very charismatic man, but his personal magnetism was not enough to avert the landslide which returned Lyndon Johnson to office.



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Having learned well the television campaigning lessons of 1960, Richard Nixon narrowly defeated Vice President Hubert H. Humphrey in 1968, then buried his 1972 presidential opponent, U.S. Senator George S. McGovern of South Dakota.

Louise Symcox, Norman civic leader and daughter of former U. S. Senator Josh Lee; and Phil Kidd III, treasurer of the Norman Chamber of Commerce.

Also serving are Drew Mason, faculty member of the political science department at Central State University in Edmond; Neal McCaleb, former state representative from Edmond; J. C. Kennedy, Lawton, former chairman of the Oklahoma Democratic Party and past delegate to the United Nations; Jim Monroe, Idabel, publisher and editor of the *McCurtain County Gazette*; Denzil Garrison, former state senator from Bartlesville; and Clyde Wheeler of Laverne, legislative consultant for a Washington, D. C., based firm.

Carmack, a Regents professor of communication, says of the advisory council and the faculty members working with them, "We are also formulating ideas for programs, institutes and seminars that would bring in guest speakers to provide a rich educational experience for our students and to get us the kind of notice that will allow us to be successful in seeking more funding."

To develop its full potential, of course, the center needs money, and in difficult financial times there is little fun in funding. The centerfiles

are no strangers to the challenge of getting others to contribute, however, so they are not cowed by present financial problems.

Hale remembers that finding the purchasing power to obtain the Political Commercial Archive was no small achievement. "We knew we couldn't raise all the necessary money in the time we had since the Smithsonian was really coming on with their offer, and we were afraid we'd lose the collection. But we thought that if we did enough, the University would have the faith in us to help us follow through."

Enough in this case meant putting together a complicated package of private, state and University resources to bring both the archive and Kanter to Oklahoma. Several advisory council members worked with local legislators Lee Cate, Nancy Virtue, Carolyn Thompson and Cal Hobson to secure a \$250,000 special appropriation which will be matched by private gifts over the next few years to purchase the archive; the first \$100,000 already has been matched. The University, meanwhile, employed Kanter as archivist and adjunct professor.

With its successful academic program, respected academic journal and unique collection of research materials, the Political Communication

Center is gearing up to provide students, scholars and participants in politics knowledge about a subject that profoundly affects the lives of Americans every day. Its members are eager to develop the center's potential so it can contribute to the University, the state and the nation.

"Financially, I guess we've done this at the worst possible time," Kaid admits. "But one of the things I feel good about is that we didn't let that stop us from getting the archive, something that would have been lost to the University forever if we hadn't gone after the collection when we did. We may have to rely more heavily now on private funding, but I know we can do it."

Hale agrees. "This program is an investment, not just an expenditure. We are proud of the University for making the commitment, for showing such farsightedness. We also have made a commitment to the University and the legislature to bring in as much outside support as possible." But most importantly, the members of the center and its advisory council have committed themselves to the students who will benefit from the University's new program.

With that kind of commitment by these dedicated strategists, this campaign is sure to produce a winner.