

# Sound bites replace truth in modern politics, media

Eighty-three years ago Walter Lippmann published a brilliant, deeply disturbing book called “Public Opinion.” Bearing in mind that John Dewey called it “the most effective indictment of democracy ... ever penned,” Americans need to take what it says to heart in 2008 as they try to make sense of the latest race for the presidency.

Lippmann, who’d served in Woodrow Wilson’s White House and was well on his way to becoming a journalistic icon and consummate Washington insider, argues in “Public Opinion” that democratic leaders very often needn’t – indeed, shouldn’t – tell the simple truth.

In modern times, he explains (this was 1925), many public issues have become exceedingly complex. So much so, in fact, that it’s nearly impossible – as well as maddeningly time-consuming – for leaders to explain them to the public in order to elicit support for their policies.

And then? Then, Lippmann says, it’s not just excusable but right for the leaders – while preserving the forms of democracy – to use “propaganda” in lieu of truthful exposition to secure public backing.

Lippmann seems to regard this as a form of benevolent paternalism. Alas, benevolent paternalism easily becomes paternalism that isn’t benevolent at all. All too often, failure to level with the American people has been at the heart of policy failures that transparency might have prevented.

By now, nonetheless, this democratic version of realpolitik is taken for granted in politics. Especially that’s true of election campaigns – including this one – in which straight-talker John McCain and new-breed politician Barack Obama have already given ample evidence of being students of Lippmann.

Today, furthermore, this tendency to shade the truth is reinforced by a technological revolution that has radically changed the way media cover politics and political campaigns.

In brief, there has been a vast speeding-up in the way news gets disseminated.

This has much to do with what is still somewhat anachronistically called the news cycle.

There was a time not so long ago when collecting, writing, editing and disseminating news were functions organized around the schedules of a.m. and p.m. daily newspapers and, later, the TV evening news. Things moved fast, but at least the cycle allowed time for a modicum of fact-checking, editorial remediation and just plain, reflective thought.

The advent of 24-hour cable news and, in the last decade, of news-oriented Web sites and blogs has changed all that. Reporting the news is now a never-ending dash to be first on the tube or the Web. Accuracy and nuance have inevitably become victims of this craze for speed.

Here's an illustration. Not long ago, without bothering to check, a blogger posted an item about a writer I know that was simply false. When the victim complained, the blogger explained that he was responding to pressures generated by the news cycle. My friend, the man thought to himself, in your business there's no such thing as a news cycle any more. Aloud he simply said, "In the news business, it's a lot more important to get the story right than to get it first."

But avoidable mistakes aren't the worst problem. Beyond blogs and 24-hour cable news lies a sleazy Internet underworld of character assassination and lies, where shadowy figures seek - and sometimes succeed - in influencing events by deliberate mendacity.

There are honorable exceptions, of course, but to an alarming extent the reality of political campaigning today is sound-bite candidates joined at the hip to media desperate to be first with the story - any story - at the expense of informing the electorate about the issues and the office-seekers. Voter, beware.

Russell Shaw is a freelance writer.