

A Guide to Effective Fact Checking On-air and Online



The Need for Ad Watching in 2012

From December through early August, 10 third-party groups spent just over \$108 million in ad dollars on the presidential contest, over half (51%) of it on 35 ads containing deceptive or misleading claims.

From December 1, 2011, through June 1, 2012, 85% of the dollars spent on presidential ads by the four top-spending third-party groups known as 501(c)(4)s was spent on ads containing at least one claim ruled deceptive by fact-checkers at FactCheck.org, PolitiFact.com, the Fact Checker at the Washington Post or the Associated Press. To see a print summary of findings, visit www.flackcheck.org/on-air

THE ANNENBERG
PUBLIC POLICY CENTER
OF THE UNIVERSITY OF PENNSYLVANIA

FACTCHECK.ORG
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THE PROBLEM

By airing ads in news, reporters risk advantaging one candidate over another and increasing the impact of the ad's unexamined misinformation.

SOLUTIONS

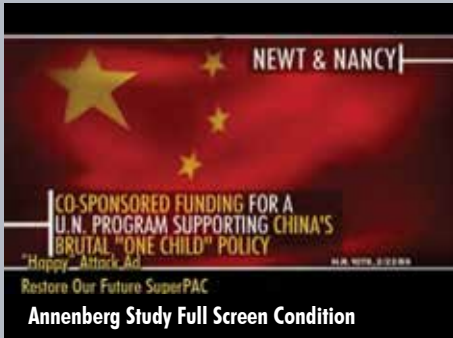


When airing stories about the effect of ad buys or ads, minimize the impact of any individual ad by showing multiple ads at the same time.

A multi-ad matrix minimizes the likelihood that the message of any individual ad will bleed through.



An experiment conducted by the Annenberg Public Policy Center found that respondents exposed to a nine-ad matrix in a news piece on campaign spending were less likely to believe a false claim about Newt Gingrich than were those who saw the same broadcast with a full screen re-airing parts of the super PAC ad attacking his candidacy.



When debunking deceptions in ads, avoid airing the analyzed content full screen.

Unless the viewer has had sufficient paid exposure to an ad to recall it from that context, an ad that is aired full screen without a disclaimer will be remembered as news rather than as an ad.



To increase retention of corrections, ad watches should
preview, distance, disclaim, displace, and recap

Preview

How to do it:

- 1) Title the fact-checking segment in a consistent fashion.
- 2) Include the station or network's logo.
- 3) Make such stories a regular feature.



Distance:

Visually establish that news is analyzing ad

Boxed ad

Distinctive background



Boxing content in a television screen

Distance the audience from the political ad. How to do it:

- 1) By boxing the ad content in a screen.
 - Set the boxed ad off from its background so that it does not look like a regularly broadcast ad.
 - The background should create a clear contrast.
- 2) By canting the screen.
 - Canting the screen undercuts some of the evocative power of the ad's images.
- 3) By disrupting the flow of the analyzed ad. Do not play ad in its entirety. Stop and analyze after each deceptive claim.



Canted screen

Canted screen

GOOD
EXAMPLE



Disrupting ad

July 27, 2012.
WFAA, Dallas/Ft. Worth, Texas

Distinctive
background

Disclaimer:

Clearly identify the ad as political content

Disclaim the content of the ad by identifying it as political content being analyzed by news. How to do it:

- 1) Identify content as political ad using contrasting print in a distinguishable font and color (white, yellow and red test well against most content).

This ID or disclaimer should intersect the content of the ad. When the disclaimer does not intersect the boxed ad, viewers tend to perceive that it is part of the ad itself.

- 2) Identify the ad's sponsor on screen or clearly highlight it within the news piece.

Because the names of third-party groups mean little to viewers, identify them by indicating their ideological bent (conservative "Crossroads GPS" or pro-Obama "Priorities USA," pro-Romney super PAC "Restore Our Future").

- 3) Place the station's logo and/or the logo of the feature (e.g., "Reality Check," "Truth Test," "Ad Watch") on the screen.

ID as ad



GOOD
EXAMPLE



July 16, 2012.
KNXV, Phoenix, Arizona

Sponsor of ad

Sponsor of ad



GOOD
EXAMPLE

July 25, 2012. WFTV, Orlando, Florida

Logo of feature

Station logo

Displace:

Clearly impose corrections and conclusions on ad



Reporter's conclusion



Clear verbal statement



1) With print

- By putting reporter's conclusions on screen.
- By using clear labels (e.g., "False," "Misleading." For additional labels see page 7).

2) With pictures

- By rolling the ad's image off the screen, or

By wiping the ad's image, or

By squeeze zooming the ad's image.

- By putting the universal warning sign over the ad's image, or

By displacing the ad's images with corrected images, or

By showing the full context from which the distortive print or picture is drawn.

3) Vocally

- By fading down the audio so that the reporter's words dominate the ad's images.
- By segmenting the ad into units interrupted by corrective print so that ad's power can't build.
- By having reporter speak the corrections as they are synopsized on screen.

Recap:

Summarize central corrections

Audiences will see the manipulative ad many times, the corrective news once. Recapping key points increases retention.



The 2012 Cronkite/Jackson Prize

The Cronkite/Jackson Prize will honor the best local and best national broadcast or cable reporting on political ads. It joins the list of distinguished honors under the umbrella of the University of Southern California's Annenberg Walter Cronkite Award for Excellence in Television Political Journalism. The prize will recognize TV journalists' best practices in reducing deception and confusion in political ads in 2012. It is named for former CBS News anchor Walter Cronkite and Brooks Jackson, who pioneered the broadcast "adwatch" and "factcheck" form of stories debunking false and misleading political statements while at CNN and is founder of APPC's award-winning FactCheck.org.

For directions on nominating your news organization's fact-checking reporter for the Cronkite/Jackson Prize, go to
<http://www.cronkiteaward.org/the-2013-awards.html>

Patterns of Deception to Flag in Ads

Deceptive Dramatization: Audiences recall pictures more readily than words. Pictures tied to a dramatic narrative have a special power. As a result, visual dramatization is a potent means of deception. Because political ad makers know that reporters are reluctant to call out the inferences invited by pictures, they often construct scripts containing accurate words but misleading images.

Distraction: While our attention is focused elsewhere, we may be uncritically absorbing misinformation. Attention-grabbing visuals, a strong narrative and forms of humor are powerful means of redirecting attention.

Guilt By Association: Guilt by association is usually defined as “the attribution of guilt (without proof) to individuals because the people they associate with are guilty.” In political ads, pictures of the attacked are juxtaposed with pictures of those the audience despises in order to falsely assert, based on some superficial similarity, that the two are ideologically, temperamentally or biographically similar. Alternatively, these forms of visual guilt by association are used to imply that because the two individuals were once seen together, or worked together in some capacity, they endorse each other’s views.

Hearsay: Asserting that something must have occurred because someone told someone that it has.

Insinuation: An indirect often negative implication, also called innuendo. Because it works by implication, insinuation permits consultants to deny that the meaning heard by the audience was intended by the ad.

Misappropriating the Credibility of News: By sourcing their claims to reputable news media, political ads try to appropriate the credibility viewers grant the news. The move misleads when an incomplete citation elicits the assumption that the cited content comes from a news article or the newspaper’s editorial page, when instead the quote was authored by a partisan source and appeared in an op-ed, column or letter to the editor.

Misplaced Referent: Ad makers often capitalize on the potential ambiguity of pronouns such as “we,” “you” and “they” to take the words of opponents out of context.

Out of Context: By ignoring parts of a statement or the context in which a statement was made, political ad makers distort our sense of what an opponent said or meant. When a selectively edited statement is repeatedly aired, we remember it as if it actually happened in the way shown in the ad.

Visual Vilification: Visual vilification occurs when an unflattering photo of an opponent is featured or an actual photo altered to underscore an attack.

See FlackCheck.org’s Patterns of Deception page for illustrations from 2012 ads.

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