

Winners of the First 1960 Televised Presidential Debate Between Kennedy and Nixon

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As part of a survey conducted the day after the first Kennedy-Nixon presidential debate by a Philadelphia commercial research firm, Sindlinger & Co., telephone interviewers asked respondents which candidate had won. They found that radio and television audiences differed in their assessment. Television viewers scored Kennedy as the winner, whereas radio listeners gave Nixon the edge (*Broadcasting*, 1960). Two other "data-based" investigations came to similar conclusions. Today, researchers reviewing the evidence cannot come to agreement about the effect. An exploration of the issue in a broader context may help the discussion.

First, it may be interpreted that these research results underscore the "power" of television. Simply stated, the finding may suggest that what a candidate looked like was more persuasive than what he or she said.

The second interpretation (the flipside of the first) contends that people who listened only to radio paid attention to the words and the ideas presented. Not influenced by appearances, gestures, or other nonverbal behaviors, the audience became interested in the candidates' views on issues. This position has been taken by Rubin (1967), who theorizes that radio listeners concentrate "almost too much on the words of a speech or debate, while . . . television viewer[s] concentrate] too little on the words and too much on the appearance of the speaker" (pp. 51–52). From this argument one must conclude that Nixon had the more convincing positions on the issues discussed, since paying attention to words logically implies that all words were heard, Kennedy's as well as Nixon's. The problem with assertions of this kind, of course, is that each

Sidney Kraus is a professor in the Department of Communication at Cleveland State University. For an earlier version of this article, see Kraus, 1995. The writer acknowledges the research efforts of David L. Vancil and Sue D. Pendell. They have provided an excellent critical account of several arguments surrounding radio and television audiences' reactions to the first Kennedy-Nixon debates in 1960. The writer also owes a debt of gratitude to Michael Schudson for his exploration into the subject and his willingness to share his views. This writer came to a somewhat different position than they did. Research of this kind is difficult since the data in question are fugitive, leaving historical events open to different interpretations. The author is also indebted to Jody Kraus, Al Gollin, Warren Mitofsky, and two anonymous reviewers.

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is merely an individual's opinion, or a critic's evaluation. The assertion may be objectively measured only by an individual's perceived credibility of the asserter.

These interpretations of the reported reactions of the two audiences to the first 1960 debate have pervaded the debate-and-television-effects literature for over three decades (Hellweg, Pfau, & Brydon, 1992, Lang & Lang 1984; Mickelson, 1989; Ranney, 1983; Twentieth Century Task Force on Presidential Debates, 1979). Recently, however, the finding has been questioned. Indeed, in some quarters, it is dismissed as a myth that has been accepted by scholars and others all these years. Vancil and Pendell (1987) forcefully argue that these representations of differing radio and television audience reactions perpetuated a myth largely "based upon unsupported anecdotes of the first Kennedy-Nixon debate" (p. 26). These representations may have been fortified and enhanced by the "Camelot" image of Jack Kennedy. Schudson (1994), a communication researcher at the University of California, San Diego, argues that Rubin "gets it wrong. . . . TV vs. radio is not the same thing as picture versus words (image vs. arguments). It is pictures (plus words) vs. voice (plus words)." Would it be more accurate to say, pictures plus words and voice vs. voice plus words?

Which view are we to believe? Is the Sindlinger finding fact or fiction? Because of the historical importance of both the finding and the Kennedy image, it may prove worthwhile to review the events, studies, and comments leading up to the recent disagreement.

In addition to the Sindlinger study, I will evaluate the reports of two other major sources for the finding— McGill (1960) and Mazo (1962). I will examine arguments questioning the legitimacy of the finding, and I will analyze other accounts and reactions similar to those of the three major sources. Finally, I will attempt to put the issue in a perspective useful for future researchers and debaters.

The McGill (1960) report was conducted in the tradition of "reporter-on-the-street" (or on-the-spot) interviewing, established by Samuel Lubell¹ (1962) and Studs Terkel (1967, 1970, 1974). After the debate, McGill, a reporter for the *Atlanta Constitution*, interviewed a small number of respondents, some of whom listened to the first debate on radio and others who viewed it on television. McGill found that radio listeners recorded Nixon as the debate winner, viewers gave the debate to Kennedy, and he reported that finding in the *Atlanta Constitution*.

In 1960, Mazo was the national political correspondent for the *New York Herald Tribune*. He became an advisor to Richard Nixon and was covering the Southern Governors Conference in Hot Springs, AR, when he observed the

¹ Lubell was a political and public opinion analyst writing from New York City. He was known for his column, "The People Speak." He began his reactions to the 1960 debates with the following: "On the morning after the first TV debate I was interviewing in Freeborn County, in southern Minnesota. Near Bancroft one young farmer was fixing his plough when I drove into his farmyard. Asked whether he had heard the debate, he nodded and volunteered, 'Before I tuned in I was afraid neither man was fit to be president. But they both handled themselves well. The country will be secure with either man.' The reaction of this farmer points to one definitely constructive contribution of the TV debates—they made both candidates and the election result more acceptable to the electorate" (Lubell 1962, p. 151).

reactions of 11 governors and others (staff, reporters, relatives, etc.) during the broadcast of the debate. Because the telecast was delayed one hour after the debate began, the group first tuned to radio and switched to television when it came on. According to Mazo (1962), the governors' reactions when they listened to the candidates differed from when they watched them: "Nixon was best on radio simply because his deep, resonant voice conveyed more conviction, command, and determination than Kennedy's higher pitched voice and his Boston-Harvard accent. But on television, Kennedy looked sharper, more in control, more firm" That statement by Mazo has been quoted widely (e.g., Lasky, 1963, p. 479; Martin, 1983, p. 223; O'Donnell, Powers, & McCarthy, 1972, p. 213–214; and Vancil & Pendell, 1987, p. 19).

Schudson adds his own interpretation of the Mazo account:

the governors did not hear just words, logic or argument on radio, they heard a deep resonant voice versus a higher pitched voice with a Boston-Harvard accent (and what [Mazo] didn't say, that a Boston-Harvard accent sounded in 1960—certainly to me as untraveled 14-year-old Midwestern kid—weird, maybe effete, and certainly satirizable . . . remember Vaughn Meader and The First Family and numberless others. (Schudson, 1994)

Sindlinger conducted five quantitative surveys of the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon debates. A description of the Sindlinger debate study appeared in a listing of the 1960 debate research by Katz and Feldman (1962)—"The Debates in the Light of Research: A Survey of Surveys." Among the 31 debate research projects identified was that of Sindlinger & Co. A brief account of that study was reported, unsigned, in *Broadcasting* magazine, a trade journal written primarily for professionals in the broadcasting industry. Accompanied by graphs and tables, and headlined, "Debate Score: Kennedy up, Nixon Down," the article included the following:

Radio vs. Tv (sic). Kennedy supporters may be grateful that television was invented before the "Great Debates" took place. The Sindlinger research showed that Mr. Kennedy was routed by Mr. Nixon on radio.

In answer to the question who won the debates, 48.7% of the radio audience named Mr. Nixon and only 21% picked Mr. Kennedy. Among those who watched the debates on tv, 30.2% named Mr. Kennedy the winner and 28.6% picked Mr. Nixon.

According to Sindlinger projections, the total television audience was about 4 -1/2 times the radio audience—270 million viewers of tv to 61.4 million listeners to radio. (Broadcasting, 1960, pp. 27–28)

The first debate survey questions were affixed to Sindlinger's omnibus study,² a weekly telephone marketing survey.

² Sindlinger (1995) could not locate the storage box that included the questionnaire schedule and the press release that was sent to *Broadcasting*.

The results of these three studies—in effect, the finding of the differences in responses of the two debate audiences—are disputed by Vancil and Pendell (1987) in a splendidly researched article and superbly challenged by Schudson (1995). Vancil and Pendell argued that both the McGill and Mazo analyses were essentially anecdotal: They did not use objective, scientific procedures in their “studies.” They argued that the reader, especially the social scientist, is not provided with basic information about how the sample was selected or its representativeness, and would not be able to generalize the findings to a larger, but similar, group not studied.

Vancil and Pendell (1987) noted that McGill did not report the sample size; no party preferences of respondents were indicated; and no predebate candidate preference was provided. “Nothing about the McGill ‘survey’, in sum, suggests an effort to meet even the most rudimentary standards for a poll of the national radio audience” (p. 19).

They allowed:

Mazo’s account is a legitimate personal reaction to the debate but it is unimpressive as evidence for the general response of radio listeners . . . it shares all the weaknesses of . . . McGill’s . . . when it is considered as evidence in support of any alleged response of the national radio audience. (p. 19)

Schudson agrees with the position taken by Vancil and Pendell, and maintains that with respect to politics, the Kennedy-Nixon debate is one of “three key episodes contribut[ing] to the general [tele]mythology.” The other two are “Television’s graphic portrayal of the war in Viet Nam [and] the unprecedented popularity of President Ronald Reagan” (Schudson, 1995, p. 116).

Considering the Sindlinger study in detail, Vancil and Pendell (1987) “find serious flaws in the size and composition of the radio audience sample,” especially with issues associated with partisanship, and they note a “lack of evidence for a Kennedy defection” (p. 20). They report that in an interview with Sindlinger’s wife, she stated that the “1 November 1960 issue of *Omnibus Activity* was the only Sindlinger publication of the polling data on the four Kennedy-Nixon debates” (p. 20). Blending together the two published accounts of the Sindlinger study—*Broadcasting* (1960) and *Omnibus Activity* (1960)—Vancil and Pendell (1987) attempt to discredit the reporting of the sample size by indicating that

Since Omnibus Activity contains essentially the same figures as Broadcasting on the size of the radio and television audiences, but consistently refrains from presenting any polling data on the perceptions of the radio audience alone, perhaps the Sindlinger staff recognized weaknesses in their sample of listeners. (p. 20)

Vancil and Pendell admit that although “[They] have no direct evidence that the 1960 [Sindlinger survey staff] thought the radio audience sample was unrepresentative . . . [they maintain] . . . it is nevertheless interesting that it was not published by Sindlinger” (Vancil & Pendell, 1987, note 7). Vancil and Pendell

are on less shaky ground when they indicate that reliable national surveys have sample sizes ranging from 1,000 to 4,000.

Anecdotal Evidence

One need not have a large representative national sample to conclude that Nixon looked ill and appeared to be sluggish. In contrast, one could easily see that Kennedy looked fit and lively during that debate. One need only be a part of the American culture, observing normative behavior, with a minimal memory of the appearance of public figures, to be able to make those assessments after viewing the first 1960 debate. Indeed, today, it would be difficult to view the television tape of that first debate without noticing the difference in appearance between the two presidential candidates. The reader is invited to view the ABC News cassette of the 1960 first debate. The striking difference in candidate appearance is apparent in even this edited and electronically “cleaned” version. It should be noted that in summing up the first debate, the voice-over announcer asserts: “Some surveys indicate that those who heard the debate on radio declared Nixon the winner, while those who watched on television saw Kennedy ahead” (ABC News, 1989). Numerous observers who watched the first debate that night did note the difference in appearance.

Political observers Mazo and Hess (1968) recognized that

there was [a] contrast between how the candidates looked—the handsome, healthy Kennedy and Nixon, who appeared, wrote the Baltimore Sun’s Thomas O’Neill, “like a picture on a post office bulletin board.” The . . . problem was partly technical, having to do with lighting and new tubes in the TV cameras; partly [Nixon’s] perpetual “five o’clock shadow,” which is evident even five minutes after he has shaved; and partly because he lost ten pounds during the campaign. (Make-up and four milk shakes a day improved his appearance for the rest of the debates.) . . . for days afterward . . . Republican officials descended on Nixon to see for themselves if he was as “sick” as he had appeared on the television screens. (pp. 235–236)

After an extensive search through correspondence, newspaper accounts, and Nixon archives, and after conducting personal interviews, Ambrose (1987) concluded that Nixon’s political staffers and Republican supporters were critical of his appearance in the first debate. Immediately after the debate Nixon’s supporters made comments like these:

Your makeup betrayed you. You are supposed to look mature but not old. Last night you looked old, tired and pale while Kennedy looked tanned and fresh. . . . [Nixon] looked tired and ill. [He should] slow down for a while and regain his strength. . . . The first order of the day is to fire the makeup man. Everybody in this part of the country thinks Nixon is sick. Three doctors agreed he looked as if he had just suffered a coronary. . . . Henry Cabot Lodge, watching from

Texas, blurted out at the end of the debate, "That son-of-a-bitch just cost us the election!" (p. 575)

Ambrose determined that both the press and

the bulk of the people . . . the majority who watched on television . . . concluded that Kennedy had "won" . . . What was most notable about these reactions was that a majority of those who listened on radio concluded that Nixon had won. This pointed up his most serious problem, one that he had not anticipated—his appearance, especially in contrast to Kennedy. (p. 575)

The analysis of Nixon's condition in the latter part of the 1960 campaign was referred to twice by Nixon himself (Nixon, 1962; 1978). Nixon recounts the time from mid-August when he began a 50-state in-person campaign through the day of the first debate. He banged his knee against a car door. Later, it became infected, requiring injections of penicillin and other antibiotics. Motivated by Kennedy's lead in the polls, he continued to campaign with the pained knee. He continued to adhere to the demanding schedule, had a fever, and was in and out of the hospital. He arrived in Chicago and had additional meetings, fulfilling previously made commitments; finally, he got to bed at 1 a.m. on the morning of the debate. He addressed the carpenters' union in the morning and reviewed notes for the debate 6 hours before the telecast. Nixon was in bad shape, and his condition continued to worsen. Nixon (1978) concluded:

When I arrived at the studio I was mentally alert but I was physically worn out, and I looked it. Between illness and schedule, I was ten pounds underweight. My collar was now a full size too large, and it hung loosely around my neck.

Kennedy arrived a few minutes late, looking tan, rested, and fit. My television advisor, Ted Rogers, recommended that I use television makeup, but unwisely I refused, permitting only a little "beard stick" on my perpetual five o'clock shadow

It is a devastating commentary on the nature of television as a political medium that what hurt me the most in the first debate was not the substance of the encounter between Kennedy and me, but the disadvantageous contrast in our physical appearances. After the program ended, callers, including my mother, wanted to know if anything was wrong, because I did not look well. (p. 219)

That experience—the hectic campaign schedule, his poor health and appearance, his exposure on television, and the audiences' reactions he believed helped defeat his bid for the presidency—all brought about a new political campaign philosophy. The reformation of his campaign philosophy and strategy began shortly after the 1960 campaign. It was first articulated in print in March 1962. Nixon wrote *Six Crises* in six months—the 1960 campaign was the last of the six to which he referred. Nixon (1962) said:

Looking back on it all . . . I have reached these general conclusions: The campaign was too long . . . a candidate must save himself for major events—and his staff must never forget this. . . . My third conclusion is one I have reached regretfully. I believe that I spent too much time in the last campaign [1960] on substance and too little time on appearance: I paid too much attention to what I was going to say and too little to how I would look . . . what must be recognized is that television has increasingly become the medium through which the great majority of voters get their news and develop their impressions of the candidates . . . the fact remains one bad camera angle on television can have far more effect on the election outcome than a major mistake in writing a speech [which is later criticized by analysts]. (p. 422)

Those resolutions formed the nucleus of a campaign philosophy that ultimately carried Nixon to success in his 1968 bid for president. As Nixon (1978) recounted:

I scheduled a four-hour telethon. . . . Some of my advisors had thought such a costly and tiring effort was not needed, but I overruled them. I remembered 1960 and felt I should do everything possible that might make the difference in a close election. It was my best campaign decision. Had we not had that last telethon, I believe Humphrey would have squeaked through with a close win on Election Day. (p. 329)

It is apparent that Nixon's experience in 1960, particularly that of the first debate, made a lasting impression on him and his advisors. In their reactions, they and others weigh in heavily on Nixon's appearance contrasted with that of Kennedy's as a significant reason for Kennedy getting the better electoral response to the first debate, and perhaps to the election. Those reactions return us to the first interpretation of the finding: What a candidate looked like was more persuasive than what he said.

Research on the Visual Dimension

Since the beginning of the television era in the latter 1940s, educators, social scientists, and commercial researchers have been interested in the effects of television on persuasion and learning. Academic journals in psychology, advertising, and communication, among others, have been replete with cognitive studies that examine visual aspects of communicating a message.

Reviews of early debates effects research (e.g., Katz & Feldman, 1962, and Sears & Chaffee, 1979) demonstrated that voters and viewers learn about the candidates and the issues from viewing televised presidential debates. Some recent research revealed mixed results about such learning (Buchanan, 1991). Discussions about the visual dimension of television often fail to deal with those effects in a totally acceptable manner. Until we are able to do some multivariate research with large-scale representative samples, over several presidential elections

(providing the kind of scientific attention that the Columbia and Michigan studies gave to elections), we are left with a plethora of discrete studies, propelling social scientists and debate chroniclers to, in effect, aggregate findings on debate effects. Given the current practice of funding and conducting research, it is inevitable that ambiguities in media effects research exist.

There is an abundance of evidence, disjunctive though it may be, demonstrating that television accentuates the visual dimension in that often, physical appearance dominates viewers' attention. One particularly interesting discussion in this regard may be found in Hellweg, Pfau, and Brydon (1992), who provide at least two dozen major assertions about television effects on visual perceptions of viewers as related to televised debates. Given the small number of studies that support the listed effects, some social scientists may claim that the assertions should be presented as hypotheses needing further empirical testing. This is an important admonition. Still, I find several of their pronouncements compelling. Seven of them are pertinent for this discussion:

1. "The visual component of television communication dwarfs the verbal dimension" (p. 73).
2. "As a result of its visual component, television communicates a unique type of message" (p. 73).
3. "Because television communication relies more heavily on [pictorial symbols], it requires less active involvement by receivers in message processing" (p. 73).
4. "Television's proclivity toward visual messages has exerted a profound impact on American politics" (p. 74).
5. "Television alters the manner that influence is exercised, requiring candidates to adjust to the idiosyncrasies of adapting their communication techniques to the basics of television" (p. 77).
6. "Television's emphasis on visual messages and its intimate communication have combined to undermine the verbal component of political communication, including presidential debates" (p. 77).
7. "Television devalues content in campaign discourse, instead stressing candidate image, a by-product of the importance of the visual emphasis in television communication" (p. 79).

These latter two hypotheses were virtually ignored in Vancil and Pendell (1987). Instead, they suggested that, "Even if viewers disliked Nixon's appearance, the relative importance of this factor in viewers' selection of a debate winner is a matter of conjecture" (p. 17). Indeed, given their evidence on the appearance vs. substance interpretation, any scholar's guess is as good as another's. Without reviewing all of the studies that could be amassed to support the dominance of image over issues in televised debate and television effects research (e.g., Kraus, 1962, 1979; Kraus & Davis, 1976; O'Keefe, 1975), I would argue in favor of the first interpretation offered earlier. Namely, Nixon did lose the first debate in 1960, and the loss was, in large part, due to his illness and his slovenly appearance on television. Fifteen years after the debate in question, it was suggested "that voters' perceptions of candidate images are at least as predictive of vote as is party identification" (O'Keefe, 1975, pp. 147–148).

However, that Nixon won on radio while losing on television is a more complicated effect to explicate. One thing is certain, however: It is not easier to reject the hypotheses than to accept it; the Sindlinger survey report failed to provide methodological information that could confirm or reject its findings. The point here is that simply omitting the necessary information in a report does not necessarily mean that the finding was faulty. Certainly, the writing of it is, but, is the finding in error? The data are fugitive (see note 3). For those who insist on having what is evidently not available in order to believe the finding, there is no convincing otherwise.³

Essentially there are two issues. The first is this: “[Does] the visual dimension of televised debates in the contemporary period . . . [exert] considerable influence apart from the words that the candidates communicate?” Pfau calls attention to three of his studies that are part of a “growing body of evidence . . . [supporting that] claim . . .” (Pfau, 1994).

Pfau and Kang (1991), in an experiment utilizing the 1988 Bush-Dukakis Winston-Salem debate as the stimulus, argued that televised political debates are unique television events in which candidates’ with “a softer, warmer communication, similar to communication in an interpersonal context” (p. 117), enhance their influence among television viewers. They conclude:

The most important findings of this investigation concern the role of relational communication [i.e., largely nonverbal, visual communication] in the process of candidate influence in televised debates. Past studies and most media commentary operate on the assumption that, to the extent that political debates influence receivers at all, they do so via their content. Hence, most debate analyses focus on what the candidates say during a debate [and not on their nonverbal behavior] . . . [C]ooperative attitude, equality, the absence of a superior attitude, warmth, interest, similarity, friendliness, sincerity, and honesty [were] responsible . . . [for] the likelihood of [subjects] voting for either candidate. (p. 124)

This finding supports previously held views that relational messages in the first Bush-Dukakis debate convinced viewers that Bush was more likeable than Dukakis, counterbalancing the effect that Dukakis’s arguments were more persuasive than Bush’s (Oft-Rose, 1989).

Following up on that study, Pfau (1991) once again found that relational and nonverbal messages (and content) contribute to the influence of televised debates on viewers. The findings in this study “would clearly imply that people who hear debates will indeed respond differently than those who see and hear them” (Pfau, 1994).

³ In an otherwise forceful letter, responding to an earlier draft of this article, Vancil (1994) argues that “the Sindlinger survey did not report any Nixon radio victory; that is the claim in the unsigned *Broadcasting* piece.” In my telephone interview, Sindlinger (1995) was unrelenting on the data analysis. He insisted that “[His company] stands behind the data. Nixon did in fact better Kennedy on radio.” I read him the pertinent paragraphs and asked him if he took exception to the article in *Broadcasting*. He replied, “What else would you conclude?”

Pfau and Eveland (1994) found that relational cues were picked up by television debate viewers in 1992 and were in part responsible for the influence on their perceptions of the candidates. Voters make judgments about the trustworthiness, sincerity, caring, and other relational variables by observing the nonverbal behavior of candidates in televised debates.

The second issue is more difficult to determine than the first: Is it likely that a radio audience listening to political debaters will arrive at a different overall assessment of the effort than a television audience viewing the same debates in the same time frame?

A strong case against the omnipotence of television over radio—of pictures/words over voice/words—is made by Schudson (1990, 1991), who argues for considering two problems heretofore ignored. First, Schudson (1995) believes that radio is not a distortion-free medium and, “Might . . . have exaggerated Kennedy’s Boston accent as part of his nature and therefore put people off. . . . A medium like radio that separates the human voice from the body is not necessarily a guardian of rationality.” Second, Schudson posits that television imagery is not as superficial as it has been made out to be. He suggests that it is “possible to argue that the insecurity [Nixon] showed betrayed his manner and motive in public life” (pp. 117–118).

Schudson’s (1991) overall explanation is that viewers will believe what they are told to believe. When test audiences for a commercial were shown fishermen frying hamburgers, but were told they were frying trout, the audience “overwhelmingly” believed that trout was in the pan. Schudson maintains that, “The ability of verbal cues to trump the visual is forgotten, while the contrary lesson, that a picture overrides ten thousand words, is regularly retold” (pp. 114–115).

Scholars and political observers may find it difficult to choose between the arguments presented here. Certainly each has merit warranting serious consideration. The literature is sparse and provides little guidance. There is a gap in the research that compares television audiences’ vs. radio audiences’ reactions to news and public affairs programming. A brief discussion of that research, however, may prove useful.

The Research Gap and the Need for Theory Construction

Attempting to test the Sindlinger finding, Pendell and Vancil (1990) conducted an experiment with 550 college students from public speaking classes at a “mountain-west university.” They showed a CBS film of the 1960 Kennedy-Nixon debate to one group while another listened to the audio only. The authors found that viewers and listeners alike picked Kennedy on the question of “who won?” There were differences in both groups’ perceptions of Nixon, however. Political affiliation played a part in measurements of perception of Nixon and in those undecided about the winner of the debate. Though an interesting idea, the experiment could not duplicate the conditions of the 1960 event. Audiences in 1960 attended to the debate with certain prior experiences

relating to the debaters. Those experiences cannot be replicated. Questions about the age of the subjects, subsequent historical events passed down from one generation to another—Kennedy's assassination, the Camelot legacy generally, Watergate, the resignation—and Nixon's funeral, all combine to question both the reliability and validity of the study's conclusions. Finally, it is entirely possible that the Sindlinger finding could be esoteric to that debate and the configurations surrounding it, while not applicable to current debates.

Experimental research about the differences in responses of listeners and viewers of the same event need to be tested with future presidential debates and political affairs programming. In doing this, we need to develop a theoretical framework to make comparisons of visual and audio effects as a result of audiences attending to the same content. We ought to measure responses of current and relevant radio audiences.

It is important to recognize that field studies on the differences in audiences' reactions to radio and television broadcasting of the same program are almost nonexistent. Given that it is difficult in field research to find radio audiences tuned to debates and compare their responses with a television audience, we still need laboratory settings to simulate conditions. We have certainly cited instances in the literature where media elites in their assessments and critiques of news events and debates have mediated and influenced the reactions of television viewers (Kraus & Davis, 1976; Kraus, 1988). For the most part, studies of the two broadcasting (and narrowcasting) mediums have concentrated on their respective effectiveness in teaching, informing, or persuading given audiences.

The comprehensive assessment of radio's effectiveness was interrupted by the end of World War II and the advent of commercial television. Both the methodology and the assessment tool to evaluate radio programming effects upon groups of listeners, and surveys in general, had been an ongoing development of Columbia University's Office of Radio Research. Established with a grant from the Rockefeller Foundation in 1937, the Office's research on radio's effectiveness appeared in many publications. Not satisfied with the then-current methodology (questionnaires) to study listeners, CBS joined with Columbia University in developing a different method for conducting a series of listener research studies. Hollonquist and Suchman (1944), using the Lazarsfeld-Stanton Program Analyzer, identified three types of listener reactions, "distinct psychological phenomena related to the perception and judgment of radio programs" (p. 320). These listener reactions were termed *anticipatory*, *carry-over*, and *lagging*. The research team determined that radio listeners had "developed certain expectations," had been "affected by what has preceded in the program" (pp. 320–324), and judged the program sometime after it had begun. To the best of my knowledge, none of the research teams at Columbia, however, compared the effectiveness of visual media (e.g., newspapers) with that of radio. Arguably, Columbia's most lasting contributions were the development of the Lazarsfeld-Stanton Program Analyzer and the panel method (repeated interviews with the same people) "to test the effectiveness of radio propaganda." Sixteen years before the Kennedy-Nixon debate, Lazarsfeld and

Stanton (1944) predicted that, "As time goes on, it becomes increasingly evident that the field of radio research will ultimately merge with the study of magazines, newspapers, films, and television into one broader discipline of communication research" (p. vii).

The Pendell and Vancil (1990) experimental study notwithstanding, we have not accumulated a body of research that compares radio effects and television effects on cognitive behavior. Therefore, it is difficult to make generalizations about the relative impact of radio and television. Experimental studies designed to test hypotheses discussed above may help resolve the issue. The few studies that are available may not resolve the present issue.

Iyengar and Kinder (1987) found that a television statistical report on unemployment influenced audiences' views about unemployment more than an audiovisual item about an unemployed person. This finding goes against common knowledge of television production standards: An audiovisual display is more "spectacular" and ostensibly, a more dominant "influential," but in this experiment was the weaker of the two displays (pp. 36–42). On the face of it, the finding could be dismissed as an anomaly, but the Iyengar and Kinder experiments were carefully prepared and some explanation is warranted. Schudson (1995) insists that:

There is a way to understand [Iyengar and Kinder's] results. . . . When people see a television story on the plight of an individual family, they do not automatically generalize to the state of the nation. Indeed, the form of the vignette encourages them to discount the story as unrepresentative. . . . These viewers are not "visually literate"; they do not follow the visual logic by which one instance of poverty or unemployment is meant to represent the general phenomenon. (p. 116)

Iyengar and Kinder (1987) were testing two ways in which information (news) may be presented on television—as "vivid case studies" (i.e., audiovisual presentation of unemployment) and as "pallid abstract concepts or general trends" (i.e., statistical report of unemployment). They allow that "the failure to confirm the vividness hypothesis . . . may reflect a flaw in design" (p. 39).

To what extent can Schudson's explication of Iyengar and Kinder's verbal triumph over the visual be applied to the Sindlinger 1960 finding? It bears somewhat on the variables involved, but both the context and the medium of communication are different. The debate finding occurred in a political campaign comparing radio with television. The laboratory finding (unemployment story) was observed when subjects viewing one videotape version of an unemployment story were compared to subjects viewing another videotape version of the story. One would surmise that a sound track was involved with both versions in the experiment.

Other studies about television news add to our knowledge about the effectiveness of one medium over another. Crigler, Just, and Neuman (1991) investigated audience reactions to visual and audio messages presented as television news. They found that television visuals alone were not as effective as the

combination of television visuals and audio in yielding cognitive and affective audience responses.

Subsequently, Neuman, Just, and Crigler (1992), conducted an intricate multi-method series of studies about the presentation of five salient news issues through various media. They designed experiments that examined the effectiveness of audience members learning about the issues from the media (network TV news, newsmagazine, newspaper) and through different modalities (video, audio, print):

In these experiments, television coverage of the news stories was decomposed into an audio-only condition and also transcribed and typeset to simulate print media. The verbal text of the news stories was the same in each condition and variation was limited to the mode of communication (audio, print, and audiovisual). (p. 35)

Contrary to the position that print is superior to television, Neuman, Just, and Crigler (1992) found that both television and magazine coverage brought about “significantly higher levels of learning than newspaper coverage” (p. 82). Moving somewhat closer to our present concern, Neuman et al. utilized three of the five salient issues to observe which modalities prompted the most learning among audiences. They failed to find any significant differences in learning about the issues among audiovisual, audio-only, and print conditions. They suggest “that the differences we do find in comparing television and print media are more the result of journalistic conventions . . . in each medium than the physical modalities of communication by audio and moving images versus text” (p. 83).

I would hypothesize that the information processing of how much subjects have learned in an experimental newscast is profoundly different than that processing to determine who won a televised political debate.

In any event, it is clear that we need to build theory based on some well-crafted studies. Those studies will be difficult to mount, and, ultimately, we may be unable to settle the issue to everyone’s satisfaction. Myth or not, the 1960 Sindlinger finding persists. Journalists’ assessments of the debate today do not indicate any controversy over who won in 1960. On the contrary, in reviewing television’s role in campaigning, for example, journalists and politicians continue to pass on the finding. One recent review by two veteran journalists declared that, “Many people who tuned into the first debate on radio rather than on television thought that Nixon had the better of it” (Donovan & Scherer, 1992, p. 26). Dan Quayle (1994) wrote:

Back in 1960, a survey of people who heard the Kennedy-Nixon debates on radio instead of seeing them on TV found that a majority thought Nixon had won. They were focused on the words, on the substance of what was being said, and not on the imagery, which worked so powerfully in Kennedy’s favor. I had a slight case of this discrepancy myself, when George Shultz and Henry Kissinger, who were both traveling outside the country and unable to watch

the debate, read a transcript. Now, I'm not pretending these were totally unbiased observers, but they both were struck by how the text they'd read didn't square with what the media and the polls were saying. "You won this debate," George Shultz told me. "Don't let anybody tell you any differently." And George Shultz was not somebody who indulged in hyperbole.

Whether I won or lost overall—the way a debate might be scored on points—is something serious observers can still argue about. (pp. 62–63)

How true! Still, Nixon continued to lose the first debate and the election because of his appearance: "Nixon lost a TV debate, and the Presidency, to John F. Kennedy in 1960 because of a sweaty upper lip" (Frankel, 1994, p. 30).

Sindlinger and Polling

In an attempt to gain more information about his reputation, the sampling procedures he used, and the like, I interviewed Albert Sindlinger by telephone in August 1995. Also, I consulted with several colleagues attending two professional meetings in 1995: the International Society of Political Psychology (Washington, DC), and the American Association for Public Opinion Research (Ft. Lauderdale, FL). During the former I gave a preliminary paper on the current topic (Kraus, 1995).

In several of my discussions, Sindlinger's reputation as a controversial polling figure surfaced. He was described as a maverick, an innovator; a disgruntled former Gallup employee, as good and as bad as other pollsters of his time, an expert on telephone polling, a poor methodologist, an astute observer, and a liar. Evidently, this last attribution germinates from an argument between Sindlinger and Gallup. Wheeler (1976) notes that Sindlinger began his formal survey research career with Gallup in the 1940s. Sindlinger accused Gallup of deliberately rigging Thomas Dewey polls in 1948, writing favorable headlines before data were analyzed, and changing the data to fit the headlines. Sindlinger claimed that was what happened, but it backfired. Gallup insisted, "He's a goddamned liar! Never once in my life did I talk about a political poll with Sindlinger. He's a guy who can't tell truth from falsehood."⁴ (pp. 42–43).

There appears to have been a running feud between Gallup and Sindlinger. Some of it is recounted by Wheeler (1976). Disputes ranged from reasonable disagreement on methodology to distrust and animosity toward each other. Gollin (1995) alerted me to a controversy among Sindlinger, Lou Harris, and Gallup, relating to the release of poll findings on the West Coast in 1968.

⁴ Sindlinger was with Gallup during the 1948 election between Truman and Dewey. Sindlinger insists that Gallup wanted to be a kingmaker; was on the phone with Dewey "constantly;" and rigged the findings in favor of Dewey. "Sindlinger swears that the headlines of a Dewey landslide were written first, then the survey results were adapted to fit them." Worried that Gallup's efforts on behalf of Dewey would backfire, Sindlinger "left the firm before the election." Gallup denies Sindlinger's accusations. "Sindlinger has the reputation of being extremely outspoken. . . . Gallup, by contrast, is almost universally respected by his colleagues" (Wheeler, 1976, pp. 42ff).

Gallup wanted the American Association for Public Opinion Research (AAPOR) "to investigate 'current' [1968] differences in published poll results on the presidential race between Harris and Sindlinger polls compared to his own firm" (Gollin, 1992, p. 186).

These disputes, and other differences were evident as part of the growing pains experienced by AAPOR in its continuing desire to set and enforce codes and standards of conducting, releasing, and reporting poll results. Those discussions were prelude to the founding of the National Council on Public Polls (NCP) in May 1969. It is important to note two different aspects of concern— the gathering and analysis of polling data, and the disclosure of them. Although pollsters were involved in both aspects, the media were primarily concerned with the latter, that is, up until they became pollsters themselves.

The reputation that persists, however, and that most of my colleagues remember or knew from personal experiences, is that Sindlinger was controversial, a master of telephone interviewing, and built his company on commercial and political omnibus telephone polling. Market research was the bread-and-butter of the business; politics was a continuing interest.

Sindlinger had just turned 88 when I first interviewed him, and he was still prepared to argue about telephone interviewing and sampling, but he told me that he first used sampling in a theater that he managed. Interested in the audiences' reactions to the films, he "would sample people in the lobby and the rest rooms. I had a woman with a microphone in the ladies' room and a man in the men's" (Sindlinger, 1995).

Sindlinger was the first to systematically use the telephone to conduct survey interviews. According to Wheeler (1976):

[While] most of the major pollsters—Gallup, Harris, Yankelovich—depend almost entirely on personal interviewing . . . Sindlinger . . . only uses the telephone. Starting at seven o'clock every night of the year, his operators dial randomly selected numbers throughout the country and run through a quick litany of questions on the economy and politics.

Sindlinger says that his system has two great advantages. First, it allows an instantaneous reading on public opinion. Second, it permits him to monitor the work of his interviewers. "Ask the other pollsters if they ever listened to their interviewers. They can't. I can monitor every damn interview my people make. I know that my questions are asked the way they ought to be, and I can hear for myself what the response is." (p. 11)

In the early 1960s, Sindlinger used area probability sampling. In my 1995 telephone interview with him, he described how his firm sampled the respondents for the survey that included questions about the Kennedy-Nixon debate:

We conducted an area probability sample that included 386 counties. Every state was included. We used a procedure that accounted for the population in each state. For example, Nevada, I believe, had the lowest population and New York the highest; Nevada may have gotten one interview perhaps and New

York got 40 or so. I don't remember the exact numbers, but the point is that population was an important ingredient in sampling. Within each sampling unit, we developed a random procedure for selecting the respondents phone numbers from telephone books. Over 400 interviewers were used. Those calls were made before WATS lines were available nationwide. In fact, I was responsible for convincing AT&T to go national with WATS. I estimate that on that evening in November 1960, we had 25 to 35 percent completed calls; I can't remember exactly. Nevertheless, it can be demonstrated that our accuracy rate is among the highest in the business.

Sindlinger's track record of predicting outcomes based on his telephone surveys is impressive. Two examples of Sindlinger's accuracy in polling were his predictions for the auto industry. His surveys in the 1960s consistently showed that consumers wanted smaller cars. The big three automobile manufacturers insisted that only college students would buy a Volkswagen-type car. Sindlinger was right. In the early 1970s, results of Sindlinger's telephone surveys forecast that auto sales of new cars would decline. General Motors, not persuaded by Sindlinger's prediction, commissioned its own research, and then funded a massive advertising campaign. Once again, Sindlinger research proved to be accurate.

Since its inception, and continuing today, individuals and groups have had certain misgivings about the reliability of public opinion polls. In the 1930s, as a result of the prediction by *The Literary Digest* that Alf Landon would defeat Franklin Roosevelt, politicians wanted to investigate pollsters. The 1940s included two significant events—Senator Gerald Nye's bill to require polling disclosures and record keeping, and the *Chicago Tribune's* headline announcing that Dewey defeated Truman. During the mid-1960s and into the 1970s, polling received heightened attention by advertisers, media, corporations, politicians, and Congress, and pollsters disagreed among themselves about sampling and interviewing methods.

After several attempts to introduce a "truth in polling" bill in 1972, Michigan Congressman Lucien Nedzi and his subcommittee on libraries and memorials, held hearings attended by pollsters and politicians. During those hearings, which included testimony about the First Amendment, the electoral process, and a variety of views about polling methodology, "Gallup and Harris were critical of telephone interviewing. . . while [Dan] Yankelovich and Sindlinger maintained that it could be as reliable as personal interviewing in some situations, and perhaps more so" (Wheeler, 1976, p. 256).

In the debate tradition, a winner is chosen from among the debaters. The debate about who won the first 1960 debate will undoubtedly continue. Interested scholars will choose the side that they feel amasses the best data, argument, and presentation of the issues. I support the view that there was a difference in the audiences' perception of who won the debate over radio and who won the debate on television. I believe also that the Sindlinger data were gathered in a scientific manner, even though the reporting of the finding left much to be desired. Furthermore, we know that commercial trade magazine

editors may cut significant scientific copy for space and readership values.

I am reluctant to dismiss the Sindlinger finding on the basis of missing information. Anecdotal though it may be, my own observation on the night of the debate in 1960, and my consultations with scholars conducting debate research at that time convinced me that the finding was a credible one. My recent investigation supports that conclusion. Although others may disagree, constructing the argument and concluding differently, I believe the finding that Kennedy won on television while Nixon won on radio is not a myth.

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