


## The political attack ad

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**Abstract:** During election campaigns the political spot has a clear objective: to win votes. This message is communicated to the electorate through television and Internet, and usually presents a negative approach, which includes a direct critical message against the opponent, rather than an exposition of proposals. This article is focused on the analysis of the campaign attack video ad purposely created to encourage the disapproval of the political opponent among voters. These ads focus on discrediting the opponent, many times, through the transmission of ad hominem messages, instead of disseminating the potential of the political party and the virtues and manifesto of its candidate. The article reviews the development of the attack ad since its first appearance, which in Spain dates back to 1996, when the famous Doberman ad was broadcast, and examines the most memorable campaign attack ads.

**Keywords:** political party; campaign ad; attack ad; advertising strategy; political campaign; political opponent.

**Summary:** 1. Introduction. 2. Methodology. 3. Origins. 4. Regulation. 5. The approach of the ad. 5.1. Positive approach. 5.2. Negative approach. 6. The campaign ad spot in Spain. 6.1. The 1996 elections. 6.2. The 2000 elections. 6.3. The 2004 elections. 6.4. The 2008 elections. 7. Conclusions. 8. Bibliography.

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### 1. Introduction

The dictates of Aristotle are still an effective manual for both new and experienced public figures. Regarding the confidence that the opinion leader -and especially a candidate- must transmit to the audience, the Greek philosopher warned that it was necessary for a speaker to ‘pretend’ the possession of three qualities, *phronesis* (wisdom), *arete* (virtue), and *eunoia* (goodwill) (Retórica, 1378a), which enable “the discourse to make by itself the speaker worthy of trust” (1356a). Nobody can deny the full validity of these admonitions in contemporary society.

Before and now, the key is the concept of “credibility”, a complex quality that very few leaders manage to achieve and which requires the concurrence of three elements which, centuries later, were identified by the Yale Group led by Hovland as: competence, reliability, and dynamism (Hovland & Weis, 1951: 635-650).

The Yale Group’s work, framed by the events surrounding the wars of the last century, is based on learning theories. Hovland and his colleagues formulated a number of principles about persuasion which made the effectiveness of the messages subject to recipients’ degree of learning and acceptance (Hovland, Janis & Kelley, 1953).

Much earlier, Machiavelli, Gracian, and Hume -in this order- examined the actions of public figures and the response of their respective audiences, in order to help improving the performance of the persuasive task and, in general, human relations. Machiavelli revealed the obligation of the public man to transmit an exemplary appearance –“Nothing is more influential for the appraisal of a Prince than [...] showing others an exceptional image of himself”-, and equated such need to the need of building “large enterprises” (1854: 94).

Certainly, image is an imperative for every politician desiring to win a position in government. And thus “A Prince -continues this author- must strive above all to transmit an image of grandeur and wisdom” (1854: 94).

The political leaders we know today must also undergo an inexorable test of visibility, as essential way to gain legitimacy among voters, whom they must persuade by transmitting a distinct and positive image. But the objectives of political parties are not limited to creating and transmitting a favourable and diverse image for their candidate, but also include simultaneously implementing a strategy of wear and erosion of the adversary, for which they use their best propaganda weapons and, especially, at present, the campaign video ad.

The spot became part of all election campaigns since its premiere in the USA, in the 1952 presidential campaign fought by General Eisenhower (Republican candidate) and Adlai Stevenson (Democratic candidate). For the first time politics applied commercial marketing techniques, which started the examination of all the strategies that could be transported to the area of political contests, provided their ability to influence the electorate was measurable.

The television campaigns where image is the most important element started to be produced at that time and are very common today. Marketing and audiovisual media inaugurated a relationship that has lasted until this day, and the spot is a priority among these tools of campaign advertising.

In Spain the use of this communicative resource dates back to 1977. However, the first spots created for those political contests are quite different from the current ones. In the first stages of the campaigns, parties made use of a unique approach in the party's leader spoke "on camera", and presented his proposals and electoral programme. This talking head format is used today, mostly, by political organizations with scarce financial resources. Beyond the budget, the major parties currently use purely cinematic productions, which sometimes even exclude the image of the candidate, who literally disappears as protagonist from the action.

In the first spots, the candidate outlined the entire programme or briefly addressed matters of concern for citizens. Each party spoke of itself, presented its proposals, set out its portfolio of solutions, and pledged a certain performance in case of winning the elections. After a series of campaigns, and once democracy was consolidated, the Spanish parties ventured to present videos clearly aimed at criticising or discrediting the political adversary. Today, the attack ad is a common practice, and is a shameful part of the overall landscape of campaign advertising.

## **2. Methodology**

The study presented here is the result of the analysis of the campaign ads broadcast for the successive elections to General Courts in Spain. The analysis included more than one hundred spots, broadcast from the elections of 15 June, 1977, to the elections of March 2008, which led to the IX Democratic Legislature of Spain.

To carry out this research, a database was created with File Maker Pro 8.5, which included the design of an analysis card for the cataloguing of materials. The analysis card considered the following information: main issue; approach of the message; typology; explicit content; implicit content; and narrative discourse analysis (audio, image and text; space, time, and movement), in addition to the date, type of campaign, and the video ad in each of the cases.

The content of this article focuses on the approach of the message in the attack ad, because of its special relevance for this study.

## **3. Origins**

The first attack ad was broadcast in the USA, in the 1964 electoral contest between Lyndon Johnson and Barry Goldwater. That video is remembered with the names of Daisy Girl, Peace, Little Girl or Daisy ad.

The New York Times, on 25 October 1964, called it "the most controversial spot of all times". It was aired only once, as part of the 1964 presidential campaign. There are no direct allusions

to the adversary in the ad, but it effectively used fear to deter voters from choosing the Republican candidate. Its promoters immediately proved its consequences. Not in vain, these kinds of arguments have been repeated since then, with better or worse fortune, in almost all campaigns.

The Daisy Girl ad opened with a medium shot of young girl in a spring field picking petals from a daisy and counting “one, two, three...”. At the exact moment in which the number ten is pronounced, the video zoomed to an extreme close up to the girl’s eye, which serves as a transition to the next scene, in which a man is making a countdown through a loudspeaker: “ten, nine, eight, seven...”. At the end of the countdown, there is a nuclear explosion, and the image is projected on the girl’s pupil. Finally, the Democratic candidate, Lyndon B. Johnson, states: “We have before us the challenge of building a habitable world for children, all God’s children, or else sinking into the darkness. We have to love each other or die”.

It is obligatory to remember –for the contextualization of the message- that the campaign took place during the cold war, and that the American population was especially sensitive to the effects of atomic weapons. It was Monday, 7 September, 1964. NBC aired the film *David and Bathsheba*, starring Gregory Peck and Susan Hayward. The *Daisy spot* was broadcast during the first break, with an audience of more than 40 million viewers. The spot denounced the alleged inability of Senator Barry Goldwater to govern the “nuclear finger”, thus emphasizing the pro-nuclear and reckless militarist image that inevitably accompanied the Republican candidate, and that the democratic Johnson had been encouraging.

Goldwater said that the intelligence of Americans had been insulted thanks to “a television that makes publicity by threatening everyone with the end of the world, unless the wise supporters of Lyndon made the nation entirely his”. “I am not concerned about knowing that the finger will be in the [nuclear] button of the United States -he continued-, I am concerned about the itching in the finger on the button of Moscow”.

Without a doubt, the message had effects on the American society, and the context, which is essential in creating a suitable atmosphere, helped here. Only two years had passed since the missile crisis -after the discovery of a Soviet nuclear missile base in Cuba- and three years since, in Berlin, John F. Kennedy warned about the importance of the civil defence against the nuclear risk.

It is also important to remember that Johnson had assumed the Presidential position in the same plane that transported the remains of John F. Kennedy after his assassination in Dallas. During his mandate he worked hard to gain legitimacy among voters that did not elect him. To achieve this, he hired the best advisers. Johnson needed to revalidate the resulting presidency by himself.

For his campaign, Johnson hired the Doyle Dane Bernbach (DDB) agency, whose team included Tony Schwartz, one of the most renowned creatives in American television at the time. The politician had a good team, but needed an impressive argument. As meet that need, the team created the Daisy spot, which contrasted effectively the image of a girl -always innocent and moving- with the drama of the atomic bomb.

In October 1963, in a press conference in Hartford (Connecticut), Senator Barry Goldwater –the Republican candidate- defended the power of NATO commanders in Europe to use tactical nuclear weapons in case of emergency. In May of the same year, in an interview with the ABC television network, the Senator justified the use of low-yield atomic weapons in Viet Nam to clear the forest, and thus visualize better the enemy. In the spring of 1964 the *Good House Keeping* magazine interviewed Goldwater’s wife, who naively confessed the two nervous attacks that the Senator had suffered in his youth while he was in charge of the family business. The image was already created and they only needed to find a visual and simple formula to boost it.

The Daisy spot was aired only once, but that was enough to cause an avalanche of reactions, starting with the formal complaint that the Republicans presented to the American Electoral Committee, which provoke the immediate removal of the ad by the Democratic Party. But the media impact was so high that all television and radio stations debated and created polemic about the controversial spot, all of which was free of charge for the Democratic candidate’s campaign. Does this reaction show that the effects of negative propaganda are greater than those usually generated by a message focused exclusively on the presentation of the candidate and his programme?

In those elections, 61.1% of Americans voted for the Democrats and 38.5% for Republicans. Apart from the difficulty of connecting this outcome with the broadcasting of the Daisy ad -as a direct effect-, the conviction of the experts about the influence that such experiment of negative propaganda had on the results is unquestionable.

#### **4. Regulation**

The legal framework that regulates the broadcasting of campaign advertising is different in each country, and ranges from legislations that give total freedom to the broadcasting of this type of advertising (which allows hiring any media, public or private, and the only restriction is set by the budget of each organization) to legislations, like the Spanish one, that subject the broadcast of campaign spots to a number of restrictions.

In Spain, political parties have at their disposal “free broadcast spaces” in public television, within programming considered suitable for this effect by the Central Electoral Board. TVE is

the only authorized television station to broadcast campaign ads, according to the 5/1985 Law of 19 June, of the General Electoral Regime (LOREG) [1]. On the other hand, the 2/1988 Organic Law, of 3 May, which regulates campaign advertising in private TV stations, establishes in the first section of its unique article that “Campaign advertising ads cannot be bought from private TV stations under concession”.

At the time of finishing this article, the Constitutional Commission worked in the drafting of a consensual text to revise the Electoral law. The reform would force private television channels to include campaign advertising spaces, but they would not be “free spaces”, but chronicles of elections day that would incorporate the results of the previous elections to the journalistic approach.

In addition to these legislation reforms and the controversy that may arise [2], in the 2008 general elections we verified how Internet started to disseminate -without restrictions of time and repetition- videos of political propaganda promoted by political parties and organizations that were independent, in greater or lesser extent, from the parties participating in the elections.

## **5. The approach of the political spot**

The propagandistic discourse of the political spot is a pragmatic logos; it has a practical purpose and seeks, in an undisguised manner, an objective. In contrast to information -an apophantic logos-, where the truth is the main category of ethical character -if there is no truth, there is no information-, the spot does not aim to inform the truth about something, because propaganda is, in all its modalities, partial, biased, and incomplete information.

The discourse contained in an ad is above all image, the capacity of presence. Obviously the persuasive rhetoric did not emerge with television- it was already invented, centuries ago-. Neither the persuasive aim of the political discourse can be described as new: we are only dealing with a different way of putting it into practice. But, the moving image certainly captures -like no other resource- the interest of the audience, and this is of great interest for the campaign’s creative members and the think tanks of each political institution.

The spot shows the primacy of the image, added to the practical disappearance of the argumentative rational discussion that used to characterise the political battle. The result is, in short, a discourse where the visual image predominates and is also associated more to the emotional rather than rational elements, which in principle is expected from the political discourse, which is always based on the exposition and defence of ideas. The predominance of the image, which is the technical support of the audiovisual discourse, leads to the capacity of seducing voters through the affective and emotional persuasion. The spots mainly present people and not political agendas and more emotional rather than rational discourses.

Political videos approach voters in three different ways: first, simply by showing the competencies and proposals of the candidate and focusing on his strengths and skills; second, by criticizing and, occasionally, degrading the opponent (the negative or attack spot); and third, by showing the audience a comparison between two or more political leaders, followed by a heightening of the own candidate.

Occasionally, a party can present, either simultaneously or consecutively, in the same electoral contest the three approaches in differentiated manners and in different spots or in many cases in spots combining more than one approach.

In all cases, the format is distinguished by its brevity, effectiveness and possibility of control over the message, by the producing party. Its intentional content can be oriented in three different ways:

1. Positive ad: promotes a political party or candidate. To do this, it uses the epideictic rhetoric, which is characteristic of praise and worship. It does not tend to make references about its opponents, and focuses on highlighting the attributes of the candidate, and presenting more or less concrete proposals.

2. Attack ad: is oriented to the disqualification of the opponent, and focuses on presenting explicit arguments against the adversary, which include negative material. They are usually not combined with positive messages about the sender party. Its orientation is unidirectional.

3 Contrast ad: it incorporates the two previous structures. It compares and contrasts two proposals in order to mark one of them as good, highlighting simultaneously or successively the defects of the opposite. Presents and is based on a manichaeist dichotomy of absolute and, of course, exclusive principles: good versus bad, us against others. However, thanks to its comparative structure, the public perceives this type of ads as more credible, informative and analytical than the purely attack ads. It could certainly be considered an attack ad, but since it does not present a discourse as explicit as the attack spot, it may be more effective.

Each of the three modes entails a different narrative. When we say an ad is negative or positive, we are talking about the kind of narrative proposal it presents and they tend to be mutually exclusive categories, especially the first two.

### **5.1. Positive approach**

A positive approach is when the ad's messages are not attacking the opponent. This approach is used by parties to say good things about themselves, to present its political position towards the country's problems, or presenting their candidate and the advantages of voting for them. In

short, this approach is used to speak on their favour and to present the proposals of their electoral agenda.

## 5.2. Negative approach

It is common during campaigns to see candidates attacking the opponents, either in meetings, ads or posters. The debates on television, for its part, often include indictments and complaints, followed by equally accusatory replicas, which are part of the political controversy.

Although not all expressions of attack propaganda can be considered negative, the truth is that it marks a change in the tactics of the election campaign, because it prefers to say negative things about the opponents when explaining its agenda. The data confirm that attacking an opponent pays off (Salmore and Salmore, 1989), because, although many voters reject this aggressiveness, “they can absorb data and sensations that may influence their vote” (Mazzoleni, 2010: 178-179).

As it has been already pointed out, the negative approach was first used in the US in the *Daisy Girl spot*, in the 1964 campaign contest between Lyndon Johnson and Barry Goldwater.



The use of this resource, even though it is common in the Spanish campaigns, should always consider the possibility of the boomerang effect which, far from achieving its goal of annihilating the enemy through diverse disqualifications -with more or less degrees of veracity-, awakens a sense of compassion among viewers towards the attacked party.



In Spain, the first clearly attack ad -and the most famous so far- was the video produced by the Spanish Socialist Labour Party (PSOE) in its 1996 campaign. This video became known the doberman, and it will be addressed later.

Ads of this nature resort to a direct and scathing criticism of the political adversary, whose presence occupies most of the ad. These types of ads position the political adversary in the “no”, in the “dark side”, in sadness. And thus they face “the Spain in negative” [3] that “they embody and the young, cheerful and new Spain -“in positive”- that “we” –the creators of the ad- defend and represent. This is the bipolarity indicated by Van Dijk (1978): some against the others, the yes -the positive- against the no -the negative.

The voice-over in the doberman video (PSOE, 1996) states that “there is a Spain in positive and another in negative”. A similar structure is seen in one of the 2008 pre-campaign ad spots, which had as protagonist a jinx: the candidate of the Popular Party (PP). The title of the spot, “Don’t be him”, added coherence to the message. This emphasis facilitates pertinent inferences -as desired by the issuer - for the configuration of meaning.

We must keep in mind that discourse forges consciousness, which is structured and increased in the communication act. Language, on the other hand, plays an important role in the acquisition of concepts, from the simplest thought to the most complex idea, which involves the connection of notions and words. On this basis, through its discourses, political advertising aims to create and fix in the conscience of citizens words associated with certain concepts, associating the positive ones to the “sender” -the political party in question- and the negative ones to the “others”, those that are not “us”.

Something influential in the attack ad, as in every audiovisual product with these characteristics, is the ability to surprise, which is understood as the capacity to generate excitement, thus fulfilling the appellative function of language, attracting the attention of the recipients, which is much higher if they are expecting something, if they are interested in they see, if the plot catches their attention, and if they want to know what will happen. For this reason the intervention of renowned filmmakers [4] is common in the filming of campaign videos: film directors who design campaign spots which are on occasions brief and fleeting but yet important audiovisual works. Politicians turn to film directors for their knowledge on persuasive tools in the audiovisual field, which is the language of the new voters. Contemporary voters enjoy and appreciate, not only the development of the idea, but also the changes of rhythm, suspense, the shots, the frames, the camera movements, the ability to surprise, the correct characterization of characters, the soundtrack, etc. The political parties face a viewer who is accustomed to watch. The new generations have been “trained” to watch, to such extent that Sartori affirms the existence of a “homo videns” (2008: 76) who, in many cases, only knows how to watch.

The election campaign is presented, sometimes, as a dialectical struggle whose key players are not present. It does not involve candidates participating in a face to face discussion, as it occurs in television, although the terms of the debate are so extremely negotiated that it hardly can be understood as a natural dialogue. In the case of the ad spot, it is a sort of conversation in which each actor presents his more or less consistent arguments, with the intention of achieving victory such debate. It is thus an instrument of persuasive nature which helps candidates to achieve the final victory at the polls, which is the real ultimate goal.

Aristotle, “the first to write about the art of winning the dialectical debate” (Düring, 2005: 122), remarked that eristic did not pursue the use of all resources to gain intellectually enrichment, but to achieve victory in any discussion or debate.

The political actors participating in election campaigns seek victory, and argue against the opponent to achieve their goal. The important thing is to achieve the ultimate goal, which boils down to beating down the opponent in the polls. All the arguments that can contribute to this end will be welcome. The election campaigns, like the Greek tragedy, present a battle between antagonist principles, embodied in forces of good and evil, which fight to gain control over voters, through words and images. The objective is to persuade more, earlier, and better than the other -just in time-, to unconditionally attract and position the voter in our side, which means to strategically positioning it “against the adversary”.

And so, political parties name the events in the way that best benefits them and establish the differences between “us” -the good- and “them” -the others-, who are not in our team, the adversaries, who will always represent the evils to come. Thus, parties identify the positive meaning with a party, a person, a candidate, and vice versa. Once the positive meanings are connected with our candidate, the opponent will be identified, automatically, with the negative elements.

## **6. The campaign ad spot in Spain**

Campaign ad spots were first shown in Spanish television after the change in the political regime. In the political transition that led to the promulgation of the Constitution, the first democratic elections—for the constituent Courts- and universal suffrage were held.

Political marketing techniques were introduced in the campaigns since the first elections, although quite rudimentarily at the beginning. Given that until June 15, 1977, and during four decades, no elections had been held and there was no freedom of association which was necessary for the establishment of political organizations, campaign communication resources could have hardly be used. Campaign advertising was broadcast since then in TVE, which apart from being the public television network, was the only TV station that existed at the time.

Examples of these first campaign ad spots are reduced practically to the modality known as talking head, which presents the candidate talking directly to the camera, sending a message generally in favour of the party or coalition he represents and often outlines a proposal. At this time the ads did not include, at least explicitly, criticisms to the political adversary. These first spots mostly made moderate and shy uses of propaganda tools. Parties were very didactic in their exhibitions, and their priorities included, in addition to the persuasive nature, the normalization of the electoral uses and convincing citizens to participate.

### 6.1. The 1996 elections

The first ad spots presented, as we have seen, positive approaches. This practice was altered for the first time in the 1996 campaign. The political spot acquired an incredible protagonist role after the PSOE decided to include in its designated paces on TV the Doberman video, which was loaded of negative elements against its political opponent, the PP. The campaign constitutes a milestone in the uses of audiovisual propaganda in Spain, and is the first spot with an approach clearly against the political adversary. Also, as it happened in the United States with the *Daisy spot*, the doberman video became a subject of political and media discussion. Thus the campaign spot become the protagonist, an object of study among political commentators, and occupied space and time in the media.

In previous campaigns, the parties had already criticised the opponent as political strategy, but in a more moderate way. The effectiveness of an aggressive and provocative approach that turned the spot into a much more valid and visible tool was demonstrated. Certainly, up until that time, propaganda videos had as protagonists their respective candidates, looking at the camera, with poor TV production resources, and presenting their proposals and commitments as leitmotif: the ruling party put an emphasis on the achievements of its government; and the opposition party focused more on the transmission of its programme than on criticising the opponent.

In this sense Dader (1999: 71) remembers the ban on “contrast and negative advertising, whether political or commercial” for many years, without the only exceptions that could result from the cracks opened by the vague law of unfair competition, *Ley 31/1991* of 10 January, and the 1997 European regulation for contrast advertising [5]. Dader narrates the controversy caused in 1996 by the broadcast of a TV ad in which the face of the PP’s candidate morphed into a Doberman dog, and associated the PP with the Civil War of 1936. Aside from the controversy sparked by the video’s questionable illegality –“and the video’s lack of fair play” (1999: 71)-, Dader emphasises the undeniable impact produced during the campaign.

The doberman video inaugurated in Spain the broadcasting of attack ads against political adversaries. The party that produced the video was holding Spain’s presidency, but the polls

announced an inexorable defeat in the elections. For that reason, the PSOE decided to venture to create this type of video that encouraged fear, just like Lyndon Johnson did it against Barry Goldwater in 1964.

The Doberman video lasts two minutes and thirty seconds saturated with tension and numerous narrative climaxes. It shows a “Spain in positive” represented by the PSOE, against the “Negative Spain” of the PP. The colour images corresponding to this “Spain in positive” transmit joy with the help of a pleasant and cheerful melody, while the “Spain in negative” is described and symbolised with a grayscale effect that is accentuated with a soundtrack that connotes discomfort, uneasiness, despair and fear. Since then, there are attack spots in almost all of the campaigns.



Voice-over:

[Black and white screen] “There is a Spain in negative, the Spain of the uncertainty and the recession [colour appears], and a Spain in positive”. [Black and white colours return] “They want us to believe that nothing is working, they want to confuse us and conceal the truth.” [Colour] “But most people know that Spain has improved, believe in it and its future, they enjoy living here”. [Black and white] “The right wing does not believe in this country, they do not like anything; they look back and opposed progress. That is why for most people the right wing is not the solution, but the problem”. [Colour] But there still is a Spain in positive, today’s Spain, the Spain that does not turn its back on anyone, but builds, lives and lets others live. To

help this modern, progressive and free country in positive, on 3 March vote PSOE, vote Felipe González. Spain in positive!”.



The elections results can hardly be adjudicated to the broadcast of a particular spot, because the number of factors that determine the final product can be unlimited. Similarly, it is really adventurous -if not bold- to connect an electoral victory to the result of a televised debate between candidates. But it seems unquestionable that the attack spot has become, in light of its provocative potential, one of the most useful tools, and even a usual resource for organizations not performing well in the polls. In its campaign of 1996, the PSOE lost the elections and the government.

## 6.2. The 2000 elections

In March 2000 the main parties, PP and PSOE, repeated in their campaign ads the same schemes used in the previous campaigns. The PP, now in power, presented a friendly spot focused on achievements and proposals, with expressions like: “Facts” and “Let’s do better”, which is characteristic of a party that governs and does not feel threatened by the polls. It was a serene and pragmatic presentation, which had a video-clip aesthetic. The spot showed very fast travelling movements, and as transitions between the different shots it used white screens with the word “more” in blue, which is the corporate colour. The video ends with a blue screen with the campaign’s slogan, and the words “forward” and “progress”..

Video	Audio
A young woman, pregnant, sat and then walking in an unfurnished house. She gets close to the bedroom.	Woman: When my son is born, the world will continue spinning. I will go back to work and everything will be the same, even though everything is different. I feel that my opportunities grow with my baby, and this is just the beginning. I want more!
Text over blue screen and picture of Aznar.	Voice-over: Vote Popular Party
Talking head over white background.	Aznar: To win the employment battle, in the past four years we achieved 900,000 jobs for women, and made progress in the conciliation of working and family life. But I know that we have much more to do. That is why in the next four years we want 700,000 women to get a new job. We have that opportunity and we must take advantage of it.  Party's anthem.

The PSOE, on the other hand, presented an attack ad against its adversary. The candidate in this campaign was Joaquín Almunia. The video uses a black background with white fuzzy text that becomes sharp later. The text against the PP is read by a voice-over announcer. Aznar is included in various scenes, always very serious, distant, dry, and unsympathetic. On the contrary, images of Almunia are full of light and happy colours, including red which is the party's colour. The text is the most important element in this video and prevails over other information on the screen.

In each campaign the duration of the spots is reduced, and they become more dynamic.

2000 General elections

Political party: PSOE. Time: 1 minute, 59 seconds

Voice-over: They have become popular by lying

Aznar: I do not have commitments with anyone, either personal or political.

Voice-over: Eleven persons appointed by Aznar manage two of every three shares listed on the market. They want everything.

Aznar: All Spaniards will pay fewer taxes.

Voice-over: Taxes have increased two points, but those earning more have paid 100 billion less. To most people Aznar is expensive.

Aznar: I also try to do all the necessary efforts, in terms of budgets, to improve the quality of public education.

Voice-over: There are now 25,000 college scholarships less than four years ago. For Aznar there are classes and classes.

Aznar: “We created more wealth and we can distribute it, and that is the most important thing”.

Voice-over: The benefits of the businessmen listed on the market have increased 80%, while the wages and pensions barely maintain their purchasing power. With the right-wing always the same people win.

Aznar: “We are growing more than twice as much as other European countries”.

Voice-over: Not in social spending. Spain has dropped to the last place in the European Union. It cannot fall any lower. We cannot continue with a right-wing President who lies and is far from the ideas and interests of the majority, who only wants to increase his power while weakening Spain. Now is the time to start a new stage. With Joaquín Almunia, a person close to your life style, a solid and firm President committed equally to all Spaniards. We are more in the streets to be more in the Parliament. Vote for your ideas, and with your vote let the progressive people govern. Joaquín Almunia.

We could say that any ad is a text (which comes from *textum*, fabric), a text with a general meaning, i.e. we are not only referring to the word, but to a whole interwoven by all of its elements. As Teun A. van Dijk has pointed out, each text has a superstructure. And communication occurs “in a social interaction where the speaker, through the enunciation, the text, intends to influence the listener in some” (1978: 21).

### 6.3. The 2004 Elections

The 2004 election campaign was marked by the attacks committed on 11 March in Madrid (11-M), three days before the elections of Sunday, 14. The election campaign was disrupted by the 11-M massacre, and all public acts as well as the broadcasting of ads were suspended.

In this campaign the spot presented by the PSOE focused on such topics as the Prestige catastrophe and the Iraq War. It featured a parade of people that carried in their hands a piece of paper with the word “No”, which were then deposited into an urn: “Not to the war; no to manipulation; no to discrimination; not to the ten-day contract; no to tar...”. Finally, on its second part, the spot showed the candidate, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, entering the House of Parliament and wondering: How long will the Iraq disaster last for?, How long will violence and discrimination last for?, How long will violence against women, job instability, manipulation and lies last for?, How long will the Government of the PP last for? We are on time to change this, we can reach an understanding with Europe again”.

While the PSOE focused its message, once again, on negative aspects and attacks against the political adversary, the PP, which in those elections was the ruling party but had a new candidate (Mariano Rajoy), presented a positive spot with a cheerful tune, and clear and bright colours. The PP’s video featured citizens of different ages, men and women, who were gathering and releasing messages whose central theme was unity: “Together, closer to full employment; together, more welfare; together, our voice is stronger; together, we will achieve more”. After a few seconds, a long shot showed the group of people forming the map of Spain. The second part of the spot featured the candidate talking to camera, surrounded by all the people and stating his message: “We Spaniards will have in the coming years the great opportunity to set our levels of employment, prosperity and well-being to the level of the most advanced European countries. To achieve this goal, the PP offers a team of men and women with clean hands, clear ideas and proven capacity, preparation and efficacy. For Spain, the best is yet to come. Together we can do it”. This is followed by a voice-over speaking the slogan and inviting people to vote: “Together, we will get more. Vote Mariano Rajoy. Vote PP”.

Again, the opposing party, the PSOE, made use of the attack ad to indicate the need for a change, and the ruling party, the PP, created a positive spot conveying an optimistic view, focusing on the future possibilities.

#### **6.4. The 2008 Elections**

In the 2008 elections there were numerous attack ads. The PSOE used a critical approach, but was not as aggressive as in previous campaigns. Its videos are characterised by the use of the “us against the others” and “us and them” dichotomies.

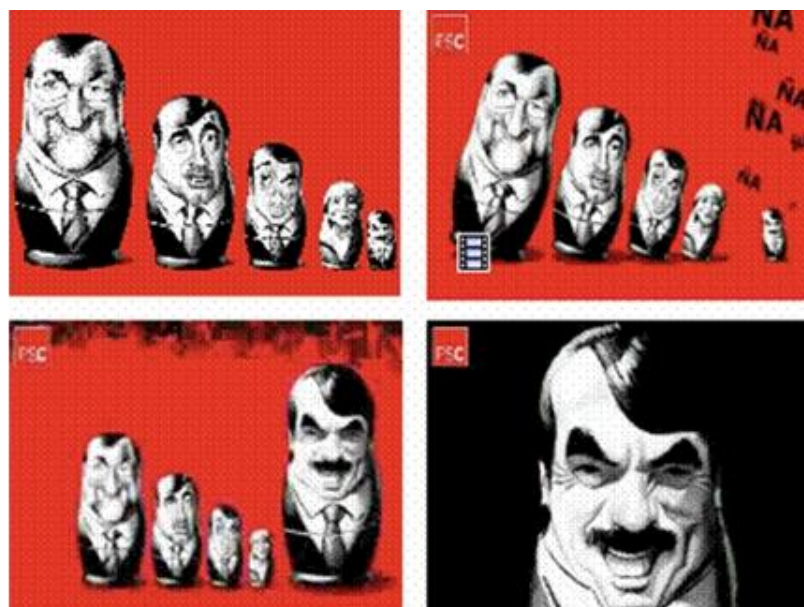
The PP, on the other hand, dedicated one of its spots to the economic and financial situation in Spain. This subject was addressed in a parody genre motivated by the refusal of the then President of Spain, José Luis Rodríguez Zapatero, to recognize the existence of an economic and financial crisis. In another of its videos, the PP presented a cards game with the picture of Rodríguez Zapatero. The cards form a construction that eventually breaks down, “because there



are things that fall by their own weight” (Spanish expression that means “things will take their course”). It is clear, again, that parties dedicate their available time to criticise the adversary, based on the widespread belief that the attack advertising produces stronger effects in the audience, and that negative messages get more attention.

The Socialist Party of Catalonia (PSC) outstands among all the organizations due to its repeated use of the attack spot. The fact that its attacks were aimed at the PP is interesting because, while the elections are national, its acronym is limited to Catalonia. In the 2008 campaign this relationship of opposites is sometimes established implicitly, and some other times is fully explicit in some of its spots. For instance one spot states: “If you don’t go, they will return”, which is the slogan of the PSC in this campaign. Those returning –the video shows- are Mariano Rajoy, Eduardo Zaplana and Angel Acebes. So this video emphasises the scheme of the opponents, the “others”.

The spot of the Russian dolls, presented by the PSC in this campaign, follows this line. This is a cartoon video about some dolls coming out of other dolls, like the Russian dolls. The largest doll represents Mariano Rajoy, the candidate, and the smallest represents the former President of Spain, José María Aznar. A lightning, however, turns Aznar -the smallest doll- into the largest one. The bottom of the Russian dolls is red, and the PP politicians are black. In addition to the connotations that can be derived from being “a doll” in politics, the video adds the clear analogy between the Aznar doll and Adolf Hitler. The audio track is reduced to a kind of onomatopoeia “ñeñe-ñeñe-ñeñe, ñaña-ñaña-ñaña...” sang by the dolls. This is accompanied by the background sounds of a storm with thunders, whose deafening sound increases as the Aznar doll grows.



Politicians use all the resources at their disposal to attack the enemy, as long as such action puts them in a better position. And thus they present messages that are innovative and strong enough to catch the public's attention and achieve their goals. The Eristic, understood as the art to win an argument [6], is implemented to achieve the ultimate goal. Truth is not important, and neither is, in many cases, credibility -cartoons are not real images. What is important is the effectiveness of the message, understood as the way to achieve a communicative inference suitable for our purposes.

The languages of advertising and politics speak continually of verisimilitude, and it is said that in audiovisual and TV messages credibility can substitute reality as proof of veracity, which is an argument that can be transferred to the political language. But the practice shows that the political spot also uses implausible elements. This story of the PSC does not aim to be truthful, but to get a message across in the political campaign that is effective to achieve the objectives: discredit the adversary. And this is achieved through an ostensive discourse that proposes to the audience the proper and intentional inference.



*Nines russes* is the title of the spot and represents a number of PP leaders, of which Aznar is the last character to come out of the dolls, to immediately acquire a clear fascist appearance. The spot has no text, or voice-over, or account, but only the “ñeñe-ñeñe-ñeñe, ñaña-ñaña-ñaña...” accompanied by apocalyptic music. This repetitive resource has the effect of a senseless discourse and a “blah-blah-blah” without content. The dolls repeat –at the same time- the same phrase. But just like silence has a meaning in the language of a Pentagon, film narratives, or any other audiovisual message, the “nonsense” of the message becomes the message. The apocalyptic music is also the message. Let's remember, they are the “no”, the sadness and darkness. Everything is connected and in perfect cohesion.

Music is used to get the audience's attention, to communicate feelings, and to persuade. Music is part -sometimes substantial- of the message. A squeaking door in a film helps creating a frightening atmosphere while an allegro tune connotes joy. In the *Nines russes* music is the message, together with the image and the text, the “no-text”, which represents the “absent” but

implicit, which also means something. It reiterates once again the messages of black vs. colour, the positive vs. the negative, the future vs. the obscurantism. This is a rhetorical redundancy that causes and reaffirms the inference.

“Sad weapons, if they are not words”, said Miguel Hernandez to suggest the possibility of considering language as a weapon, more in the sense of “means”, “resource” and “instrument” than in the specific sense of the offensive or defensive tool. The language used in election campaign ads is an instrument for appropriating the world, a resource for the articulation of the conscience, and a means of social communication, because it is through this message from where the proposed experience is structured.

In 1996 the PSOE broadcast the following message in a spot: there is a Spain in positive that represents the PSOE and another Spain in negative that represents the PP. The message does not seem to be new and only seems to change the presentation.

Regarding the visual aspects of this spot we can highlight its use of colour. The colours used in the political language are identified with the various political options, as in the case of red for the PSOE and blue for the PP. The rest of the parties appear more blurred in this respect. The Russian dolls video uses a red background (the colour of the PSOE and PSC), and puts the logo of the party always the left upper corner, except when the Aznar doll is enlarged by the ray and becomes a black character. Black vs. red represents the negative.

Studies in persuasive communication say that the speakers’ credibility increases when the audience perceives the speakers as concerned about the issues and thus advise candidates to pretend they care more about the future of the country than about winning or losing the elections, and more about general than individual interests.

But fear also works and parties use it because its efficacy is proven. In some cases parties presented arguments indicating the benefits citizens will get if they win -this is a message with a positive approach- and in other cases they resort to the negative approach and the use of fear, by presenting above all the disadvantages and misfortunes that will result if the “other” party, the adversary, wins. Parties try to convince voters of the advantages of being on their side, and to achieve this they previously have to make clear all the good things they represent -the “yes” vs. the “no”, “joy” vs. “sadness”, “future” vs. “past”, “prosperity” vs. “recession”- and avoid talking about the negative consequences that their victory may produce. This seems to be the constant message of the PSC’s spots, which end with the party’s slogan, where the inference is clear: “If you do not go (to vote on 9 March), they (the PP) will return”.



The pre-campaign video “Don’t be him” (PSOE) also presents a negative approach, by implicitly describing the leader of the PP, Mariano Rajoy, as a jinx. In a part of the video, the protagonist -always negative- arrives to tell a person: “it is cancer for sure”. This part of the video was removed from the Internet as a result of the claims made by the Spanish Association against Cancer. In this spot the PSOE associated its political adversary to sadness and darkness, and even more: pessimism, melancholy, disappointment, and bad luck. The resource is used once again in this election campaign because repetition helps them putting their message inside the head of the audience.

The protagonist of the video “Don’t be him” represents a negative view of the world and the most mundane things. Not in vain, he speaks the following messages: “Yesterday I saw her having dinner with another man”; “This makes you look a little fatter”; “At the end the boy dies”; “Doesn’t it taste a little weird?”; “You look bad”; “This is going to kill you”; “He will fail”; “It is cancer for sure...”.

Among the videos not promoted -at least directly- by political parties, but mostly created with negative elements, we can highlight the videos of the organization *Yo rompo* (I break) [with Zapatero], which is an organization that opposes the Socialist government and, in particular, the President. One of these spots, based on Orwell’s *1984* novel, presents automatons subjected to the will of the leader, Zapatero, who speaks through a TV screen. Certainly, Orwell based his work on thought-controlling procedures of the 20<sup>th</sup> century propaganda. And thus, *1984* is a complete catalogue of propaganda procedures, including: the creation of the enemy and its unique character.

In all its videos, the *Yo rompo* organization uses the cutting and ripping “Z” symbol of the El Zorro, which is identified with the “Z” of Zapatero.



The percentage of this type of spots is not insignificant, because as Canel (2006: 214-215) points out, although there is much debate among journalists and academics (D'Adamo and García Beaudoux, 2005), research studies appear to show that this type of advertising does mobilizes voters (Finkel, Steven and Geer, 1998: 579-595). Attack advertising is remembered more than positive advertising and memorisation is one of its main assets, in addition to the media impact and the corresponding rebound effect that some media produce on others in



relation to a particular news story. Aggressive videos are widely discussed, which multiplies their effects.



[“Can a democratic Mayor...”. “No...”. “No...” versus: “Yes it is possible”]!

In another PSC’s spot for the 2008 campaign, we verified that two thirds of the video are a montage of decontextualized images of PP leaders who say “no” to any proposal, resolution or progress. The ten last seconds of the spot are reserved for the PSOE candidate, Carmen Chacon, who -against the “no” of the PP politicians- represents the “yes”. The video ends with increasingly closer shots of the Catalan candidate at a rally in which she states: “Yes, it is possible, it is up to us”. There is a clear analogy with the famous “Yes we can” phrase coined by the US Democratic Party for its candidate Barack Obama in the 2008 presidential primaries.

## 7. Conclusions

The political party that creates an ad spot pursues an ultimate goal, which is to direct the government or remain there, according to the institutional position occupied before the election campaign. To this end, the campaign video is used as a tool to achieve maximum effectiveness, within its overall campaign strategy, in the attempt to persuade the audience, for whom they will build an appropriate narrative, by making use of the most suitable rhetorical resources. The

creator of the political spot –the party- are aware at all times of the multiplicity of the reception and the different expectations and interpretations that can be drawn from the message.

The political rhetoric that we know today –at the height in the Information Society- is aimed at an audience educated about the audiovisual media and, therefore, accustomed to the mass consumption of this type of messages. Thus, electoral communication, designed primarily to gain the support of potential voters, uses the spot as an adequate tool to persuade through television. Because television audiences are many and heterogeneous, it remains to be the best suited means for the transmission of such messages. And as a result television is today the medium most used by citizens -the potential voters- to obtain electoral information.

The political parties with larger campaign budgets are in a privileged position to commission the production of spots to specialized companies. These parties present more elaborate discourses, which follow the latest styles and create their own film and advertising techniques. In this regard, we observe that the central trend is the combination of the political and commercial spots, which is a circumstance that reduces the ideological content of the political spot. Moreover, in accordance with their financial resources, and the opinion of their respective think tanks, there is clear diversification of the communication strategy, which results in the development of various spots, aimed at different targets, and designed differently according to the features of each group, be they young people, unemployed people, pensioners, women, or contributors, among others.

In the process of achieving the final objective –obtaining the vote- there are various intermediate steps, including the search for viewers' commitment to the discourse. Political parties seek the identification of the recipient with the approaches of the spot, as well as -on occasions- with their leaders or representatives. Despite the brevity that characterizes the electoral spot, it will distinguish the positive universe -the good, right, opportune, convenient, etc.- from the negative universe. The next step is to connect the positive universe with them and the negative universe with the others. This is thus an intentional process that begins with the identification and commitment of the recipient, as necessary prior step to the decision-making process that is materialised in the ballot box. The data provided by the voting intention polls is crucial for political parties when planning the arguments of their campaign. Spots present a positive, negative or contrasting approach, depending on the results estimated by these opinion polls.

The attack or contrast ads are common in almost all campaigns. They serve to mobilise the electorate -particularly groups with common interests- and are more remembered than the spots with positive approaches. Experts advise moderation in the use of this type of ads, as an excess can produce an undesired effect.

It seems that generally in Spain the use of the negative approach is more common in left-wing parties (PSOE, PSC) than in right-wing ones, both in the percentage of use and the strength of the message against the adversary.

Obviously, the context in which the elections take place is decisive and fundamental. Contexts - prior to the texts- define, limit and materialize the interpretation of discourses; resolve potential ambiguities; and determine their meanings. Like images, texts are inseparable from their context, which is a basic notion held by the promoters -the parties- and the recipients -the viewers- to create meaning. In each electoral contest, before creating their campaign videos parties consider the situation that will be faced when the spot airs, as well as the presuppositions of the recipients that will influence the interpretation of the discourse. And thus, the attack ad should be considered in this specific context, according to its specific socio-political situation, always bearing in mind that a negative message directly against the political adversary should be restrained, because if it is unrestricted it can act like a boomerang.

As a way of exploration, negative attack advertising will find on the Internet its most appropriate sphere of development. Given the characteristics of the network -particularly its free and open access-, the dissemination of attack spots in the web is unstoppable. The new applications provided by telephone and telecommunication operators provide political parties a perfect field for the free distribution of political videos, without the time and space limits that the electoral legislation establishes for the campaigns of political parties in the traditional media (radio and television).

The use, operation and platforms of the Internet allow citizens -individually or in groups- to join such initiatives, participate in campaigns or pre-campaigns and, ultimately, to act as a corrective factor of the lines of the trends in public opinion.

Finally, the millionaire and systematic access of Internet users to social networks lead us to predict a prompt massive use of these networks by candidates and parties. In the case of individuals, social networks contribute to the legitimate desire of the citizenry to democratise Internet content and influence and participate in public life.

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## 9. Notes

[1] See articles 56 to 66 of the Organic Law 5/1985, of 19 June.

[2] The report of the Subcommittee establishes that “during elections private television stations must respect the principles of pluralism, equality, informative neutrality and proportionality, and are subject to the instructions of the Central Electoral Board for the public television stations”.

[3] See the PSOE’s *spot*, based on the song “Defender la alegría” (Defend the joy). The video was introduced by a platform of support to Zapatero (PAZ) in the pre-campaign for the general elections of 2008.

[4] An example is the series of videos produced by Isabel Coixet for the PSOE, in the 2008 election campaign.

[5] The directive 97/55/EC of the European Parliament and the Council of 6 October 1997 amended the Directive 84/450/EEC of the Council, of 10 September 1984, on Misleading Advertising, in order to include contrast advertising in this Directive. Subsequently, the European Parliament and the Council approved the Directive 2006/114/EC of 12 December 2006 on misleading and contrast advertising.

[6] The Eristic dialectic is the art of debating, lawfully or illegally, in order to win an argument. Not in vain, Machiavelli advised the Prince not to miss any opportunity to attack his rival to avoid the opponent would be the one to take advantage of every moment of weakness of the Prince.

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