



Make no mistake - gaffes have been around for generations

Joanna Weiss Globe Staff. Tami Chappell/reuters. 3, June, 2008

The parade of candidates' mistakes has been fast and furious throughout this campaign season, creating the impression that our future leaders are the most gaffe-prone in history.

In fact, campaigns have been seizing on opponents' misstatements for generations. What's different this time is speed - and the ever-intensifying vigilance of the gaffe police. The rise of blogs and 24-hour cable networks means that any gaffe, however small, can rise to prominence within hours, and the mainstream media can't resist the temptation to jump in.

And with the help of ubiquitous cameras and well-honed opposition-research machines, political parties have become more adept at compiling, packaging, and promoting their rivals' missteps. The Republican National Committee has staffers watching every Democratic media appearance - sometimes via Internet live stream - and disseminating mistakes, via press release, with lightning speed.

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In the modern hyper-heated media atmosphere, both parties hope that a thick-enough record of gaffes becomes part of an overarching narrative, said Robert Lichter, president of the watchdog group **Center for Media and Public Affairs**. Democrats hope to portray McCain as old and losing his marbles. Republicans hope to paint Obama as inexperienced and unqualified. And if reporters are likely to downplay a first or second mistake, Lichter said, they might still latch onto a pattern.

"Gaffes occur twice: the first time as tragedy, the second as farce," Lichter said. "You can't put words into a candidate's mouth, but you can make reporters hear the words in a certain way. That's the trick."

Cable news producers are feeling the barrage. "This is the most aggressive the campaigns have been," said Marty Ryan, executive producer of political programming for Fox News Channel.

The networks insist that they're onto the game, and that they vet propaganda and rumors before giving them play. Media watchdog groups from both sides of the political spectrum have raised quibbles about the networks' relative fairness. Ryan dismissed complaints: "Whatever the network is," he said, "somebody is going to disagree with how it's been played."

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