

# Media wrestles with candidates

More interesting than the final presidential debate was the way the press covered it. ABC News deployed a platoon of their top reporters — a spin patrol patrol — to comment on the comments made by partisan observers who are in attendance solely to make positive comments about their guy's performance.

This was followed by what Peter Jennings termed a "snap poll," an instant commentary on what approximately 500 viewers thought about the debate that had ended moments ago. It's only a matter of time before one of the networks devises a "running poll." Numbers indicating the approval rating of each candidate will appear on the screen throughout the night, fluctuating up and down as they trade jibes.

The increasing sophistication of broadcasters' methods — snap polls and on-the-air use of such previously arcane terms as spin patrol and sound bite — is indicative of the broad changes in how campaigns are presented to the public and how the networks cover them.

The electronic media has brought about the "message of the day" and hourly photo opportunities, staples of the two campaigns that will be around for years to come.

But because of the increasing sophistication in packaging a candidate and controlling the events surrounding him, networks have

been placed in a bind: If they simply report on what happened, they might just as well stamp "free political advertisement" on the evening news and walk away.

Instead, reporters give the facts and then interpret them for the viewers. To do any less would be misleading. As their ability increases to analyze and scrutinize these new forms of politicking, the networks will create a level playing field. As networks and their audiences become more sophisticated in dealing with what's being tossed to them, electronic electioneering will become a useful tool in grappling with the issues.

—Michael Giltz



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10/1988