NONVERBAL COMMUNICATION: AN ANALYSIS OF
“DEFINING MOMENTS” ON TELEVISION IN AMERICAN POLITICS

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Introduction

Political communication researchers have paid little attention to nonverbal communication in relation to media coverage of politics. They have instead focused on verbal communication. Adding credence to the opening statement is what Erik Bucy told the 29th annual meeting for Association for Politics and the Life Sciences held recently at Indiana University, Bloomington campus. Presenting a paper titled “Quantifying the Claim that Nixon Looked Bad: A Visual Analysis of the Kennedy-Nixon Debates,” Bucy, a professor in the Department of Telecommunications at the meeting’s host institution noted that most of research in media coverage of politics has focused on “what is said” but not “what is seen.” Ignoring nonverbal communication in research is surprising taking into account that “various nonverbal cues, especially the visual ones, are more important than verbal cues in affecting interpersonal judgments” (Patterson, 1992, p. 231). Burgoon et al. (1989) point out that there is greater deliberate attention paid to the visual than over their vocal cues, and the processing of visual information is much more efficient than the necessary sequential processing of verbal and vocal cues (p. 261). Additionally, (Burgoon et al., 1996) nonverbal behaviors are assumed to be more truthful and therefore more trusted (p.7).

There is no doubt that television remains the nerve center of nonverbal communication, not only in politics but also in related social-cultural activities. Television is very influential on American viewers. In 1989, for example, people in the United States spent four hours watching television (Kubey & Csikszentmihalyi, 1990, p. xi). Gitlin (2001) says that a decade later television set was on in the average American household more than seven hours a day” (p.15). Carpini and Williams (1994) point out that television “serves not merely as a source of information for future
conversations, but also as a regular ‘conversant’ in an ongoing discussion, and, ultimately, as the central forum for political discourse in the United States” (p. 787). From a political standpoint, television exerts enormous effects on viewers watching political debates. Hellweg et al. (1992) provide some assertions about television effects on visual perception of viewers in relation to televised debates: television’s proclivity toward visual messages has exerted a profound impact on American politics; television fosters a perception of intimacy with a source unattainable via any other communication modality except for interpersonal; and television’s emphasis on visual messages and its intimate communication have combined to undermine the verbal component of political communication, including presidential debates (p.74-77).

In televised presidential debates, newspeople are known to focus on a single defining moment. Journalists’ attention to defining moments is based on narrative relevance, conspicuousness, and extractability considerations (Clayman, 1995, p. 124). The focus on a defining moment, Clayman says is taken to “epitomize the debate in its entirety” because such a moment is “extensively replayed, quoted, paraphrased, referred, and discussed” (p.118). Lang and Lang (1989) stress that defining moments “undoubtedly affects what people remember about the original interactional event.” To paraphrase Clayman’s observation, such moments receive a lion’s share of attention in the news media. Highlighting some examples of defining moments in American politics, Clayman writes:

In 1976 it was Gerald Ford’s unexpected assertion that Poland was not subject to Soviet domination. In 1980 it was the way Ronald Reagan deflected Jimmy Carter’s attacks with ‘there you go again.’ In 1984 it was Lloyd Bentsen’s withering assessment of Dan Quayle: ‘Senator, you’re no Jack Kennedy’ (p. 118).

Purpose
This paper examines the power of nonverbal communication which is less considered in political communication research. Using a focus group, I investigated the pattern of themes emerging from discussions after participants watched clips about “defining moments” in presidential election debates involving John F. Kennedy vs. Richard Nixon (1960); Ronald Reagan vs. Walter Mondale (1984); Sarah Palin (2008); and Hillary Clinton (2008). Three themes emerging from this study such as “poor articulation of issues as a sign of incompetence,” “shiftiness as a sign of distrust,” and “emotion as sign in political inappropriateness” give a better understanding of the role of nonverbal communication in politics whose driving force is television. This paper also attempts to narrow the existing research gap between verbal and nonverbal communications.

**Literature Review**

In election campaigns (Hellweg et al., 1992) television stresses candidate image. Television images matter in politics because they have significant effects (Druckman, 2003, p. 559). These effects compel attention, increase arousal, and influence the persuasion process (Lanzetta et al., 1985). Through televised emotional displays of candidates, Lanzetta et al. add that viewers are able to “distinguish between different types of televised displays, and the ensuing affective reactions can translate into lasting feelings and attitudes about politics.” Moreover, Shields and MacDowell (1987) stress that televised nonverbal displays “have proved both disastrous and beneficial for those seeking or holding public office” in the U.S. politics (p. 78). These “disastrous or beneficial” aspects of nonverbal displays are what Clayman refers to as “defining moments.” The implications of defining moments are founded on such concepts as exemplification, nonverbal expectancy violations, and political inappropriateness in nonverbal communication. Such studies as Gardner, 2003; Zillmann et al. (1996); and Gibson & Gilman, 1994 have focused on exemplification. Burgoon & Walther, 1990; and Kaid et al., 1990 have carried studies about nonverbal expectancy
violations, while Bucy & Newhagen, 1999; and Bucy, 2000 have investigated political appropriateness.

**Exemplification Theory**

The concept of exemplification in leadership consists of “behavior that presents the actor as morally worthy” (Tedeschi & Norman, 1985, p. 301). In a related vein, Conger and Kanungo (1987) say that behaviors exhibited by exemplars elicit respect, affection, and devotion by communicating the leader’s high moral values and principles which are typically congruent with followers’ values and aspirations. Such behaviors, Shamir et al. (1993) say “inspire followers to engage in similar behaviors.” Gardner (2003) explored the extent to which a leader who claims to be either exemplary or pragmatic and is revealed to have a reputation for either deception or honesty is perceived to be charismatic, effective, and morally worthy. Also examined were the effects of message delivery and participants’ scores on the Romance Leadership Scale (RLS). Results show that a strong versus weak delivery produced higher ratings of leader charisma and effectiveness; exemplary versus pragmatic self-presentation yielded higher levels of perceived effectiveness and integrity; the strong delivery versus ethical reputation combination produced the highest levels of perceived leader effectiveness and integrity; and only high RLS individuals perceived the leader to be most effective when delivery was strong and least effective when delivery was weak (p. 503).

Still on exemplification, Zillman et al. (1996) conducted an experiment in which a news report on the plight of a minority of American family farmers was manipulated to create versions differing in the degree of precision of general information and in the use of exemplifying case histories. Selective exemplification featured only histories of failing farms, representative exemplification a distribution of histories of failing and successful farms proportional to their actual occurrence. Findings show that strong effect of exemplar distributions on issue perception. The
researchers explain that news consumers base their assessment of social reality more strongly on exemplification of individual cases in a population of events than on general descriptions of properties of that population (p. 440). Gibson and Zillman (1994) manipulated a news report on carjacking, presented in magazine format to create versions differing in exemplar distortion and precision of base rate information. Readers presented with exemplars of people killed during carjacking grossly overestimated the incidence of such an outcome (p. 603).

**Nonverbal Expectancy Violations Theory**

Nonverbal expectancy violations theory holds that positive violations produce more favorable communication outcomes than conformity to expectations, while negative violations produce less favorable ones (Burgoon & Hale, 1988, p. 58). Burgoon (1993) says that “‘expectancy’ in the communication sense denotes an enduring pattern of anticipated behavior” (p. 31), and Burgoon and Hale (1988) add that “violations of these expectations trigger a change in arousal, which heightens the salience of cognitions about the communicator and behavior” (p. 59). Burgoon and Walther (1990) reviewed the construct of expectancy and its relevance to understanding communication phenomena. They conducted an experiment to determine the expectedness and evaluation of three nonverbal variables: touch, conversational distance, and posture. Their findings show that “several behaviors are expected and positively valenced, while others qualify as positive or negative violations of expectations” (p. 232). In addition, they found that attractiveness influenced expectancies and evaluations. Kaid et al. (1990) analyzed the 1988 encounter between George Bush and Dan Rather on CBS Evening News as an attack-rebuttal sequence. The study investigated the effects of the Bush-Rather event on violations of viewer expectations. Rather was judged as the “winner” of the encounter by respondents who “viewed Rather and CBS as objective and fair” (p. 11).
**Political Appropriateness**

Inappropriate nonverbal behaviors can violate certain expectations about a presidential candidate. In interpretation, nonverbal political inappropriateness is very similar to nonverbal expectancy violations theory, the only difference being that the former adds the emotional element in violation expectancy. Frijda (1988) says that emotions arise in response to events that are important to the individual’s goals, motives, or concerns (p. 351), adding that “emotions are elicited by events appraised as real, and their intensity corresponds to the degree to which this is the case” (p. 352). Therefore, inappropriate nonverbal presidential reactions to compelling news events can be regarded as a type of emotional expectancy violation because they do not match what viewers predict will transpire in their visual field (Bucy & Newhagen, 1999, p. 63). On the other hand, emotional expressions which are in agreement with viewers’ expectations and are deemed appropriate.

In an experiment, Bucy and Newhagen (1999) investigated the effects of televised presidential reactions to compelling news events on memory, thought, and appropriateness evaluations made by subjects. Findings indicate that interactions for appropriateness evaluations revealed that subjects deemed message sequences consisting of positive news images followed by intense or positive presidential reactions as inappropriate (p. 71). Also, message sequences regarded as inappropriate will, as a violation of nonverbal expectations, prompt more thoughts in subjects than message sequences deemed appropriate. Bucy (2000) manipulated the appropriateness of presidential reactions to images of compelling news events to investigate how a political leader’s nonverbal behavior evokes response and trait attributions. Results indicate an evocative function for leader displays that nonperson-specific news images do not share, suggesting a critical role for appropriate nonverbal communication in politics (p. 194). Bucy further reports:
Inappropriate message sequences elicited negative emotions more intensely than positive emotions and produced uniformly lower trait evaluations, whereas appropriate sequences elicited positive emotions more intensely. Moreover, negative displays were evaluated as significantly more honest, credible, trustworthy, and appropriate than positive displays (p. 194).

The above literature about televised visual displays, exemplification, nonverbal expectancy violations and political appropriateness leads to this study’s research questions:

RQ1: Which themes associated with television nonverbal displays were identified in the four “defining moments” clips?
RQ2: Do the findings support claims that televised “defining moments” are disastrous or beneficial to candidates seeking elective positions?
RQ3: Do the findings support the widely held view that nonverbal communication is influential than verbal communication?
RQ4: What kind of candidates or behaviors favored by television nonverbal displays in the election debates?

Methods

The focus group used in this study comprised of five participants who were graduate students. There were three females and two males. Three were pursuing a PhD in mass communication, while the other two were journalism majors. Their ages ranged between 23 and 50. In as far as political views are concerned; three were strong liberals, one was liberal and one a centralist. Four of the participants identified themselves as Democrats, while one wasn’t affiliated with any party. All were White, and said they were “very interested” in the 2008 presidential election. For more details about the participants’ demographics, media consumption, and political interests, see Appendix 1.

The participants were shown four clips about “defining moment” during presidential election campaigns of 1960, 1984, and 2008. After watching a clip, the moderator asked the participants several questions pertaining to what they had watched. The discussions (not including time spent on watching the clips) took 45 minutes. The length of the clips ranged between 48
seconds and 5.18 minutes. See Appendix 2 for a complete list of questions used to guide discussion.

Here are the brief descriptions of the four clips:

- Clip 1: Footage of John F. Kennedy and Richard Nixon from 1960 during the first televised presidential debate. The former was the Democratic Party presidential candidate, while the latter was the Republican candidate.
- Clip 2: CBS news anchor Katie Couric interviews Sarah Palin about the economy during the 2008 presidential election. Sarah Palin was the running mate of John McCain, the Republican presidential candidate.
- Clip 3: Coverage of Hillary Clinton responding to a supporter’s question during the 2008 New Hampshire presidential primary for Democratic Party.
- Clip 4: Ronald Reagan addresses a question about his age during the 1984 presidential debates. He was facing Democratic Party candidate Walter Mondale.

Findings

There were three main themes which emerged during the focus group deliberations after watching the “defining moments” clips. These are “poor articulation of issues as a sign of incompetence,” “shiftiness as a sign of distrust,” and “emotion as a sign of political inappropriateness.”

The theme of poor articulation of issues as a sign of incompetence recurred during the discussion about the Couric-Palin interview, and the Kennedy-Nixon clips. This means people who were watching the Couric-Palin interview and the Kennedy-Nixon on television felt that the candidates were either articulate or inarticulate on issues at hand. Though articulation of issues appears more of a verbal action, however, it is the facial displays of debaters which depict them as articulate or inarticulate. In fact, Sullivan and Masters (1988) identify the verbal message accompanying the facial display (congruence of verbal and nonverbal affect as well as meaning) as one of the variables which effects of politicians’ facial display depend on. Bucy and Grabe (2008) note that “unlike attractiveness and other relatively stable aspects of appearance, facial displays are highly variable and reveal important moment-to-moment information about the emitter’s internal state” (p. 78).
Supporters of a presidential candidate expect him or her to perform well in debates, especially in understanding the problems facing the country. Such a candidate is also expected to be articulate in topics she or he addresses. Respondent E, however, felt that Palin was inarticulate in the way she responded to questions asked to her. Obviously, for a presidential candidate to prove inarticulate on issues of national importance violates expectations of those supporting his or her candidacy. As a leader, being inarticulate is disastrous and is tantamount to incompetence. Sarah Palin fits this bill. That is why respondent E felt let down because Palin didn’t meet his expectations. The respondent said that at times he couldn’t understand what she was saying. In addition, he said Palin was stammering and her arguments were “flawed.” That is why respondent B questioned Palin’s competence. Supporting this line of argument, respondent D wondered whether Palin was in the first place competent to be the Alaska governor. Because of how inarticulate she was, respondent A said she couldn’t support her. Here is what respondent E said about Palin’s articulation of issues:

**Respondent E:**
Particularly the part about globalization, she threw out the term under the umbrella of the economy. I would say the one thing I am left with from the entire interview is that there were a few times when I couldn’t follow what she was saying. I didn’t understand. It seemed like specifically trying to consolidate disjointed topics. She would answer the questions and she would be pulling from different three of four different areas, and I don’t know the comfort level with specific political language. It didn’t seem to be there. It seemed to be there for most of sentence, but there may be sort of stammering. It just seemed sort of scrambled.

In contrast, Kennedy was seen as articulate in issues affecting people. Respondent E talked positively about Kennedy, seeing him as an exemplary leader. He said Kennedy’s performance during the first televised presidential election debate depicted him as a “natural speaker” who was “flawless” in putting across his message to American people. This is in contrast to his views about Nixon whose performance he described as “disjointed.” Nixon was also described as “nervous”, something which might have contributed to his lack of articulation of issues. Respondent C said Kennedy’s performance improved his standings in the public opinion. She noted that “you
definitely got a sense of his personality which I think is something that people look for.” Said respondent E:

And when Kennedy started to answer his questions, the moderator had him stand up. What was interesting about that is when he did stand up; he sort of just took the position. It seemed pretty natural form. I think Kennedy came across me more as a natural speaker. And, I mean he had started to answer his question, and then mid-sentence, the moderator is like, OK, you need to go over to the podium, and he sort of got up, he went right over......and it was sort of flawless. Nixon was a little more disjointed......so.

I analyze the theme of shiftiness as a sign of distrust from two perspectives: Nixon’s facial displays and Palin’s inconsistency in answering questions. Of course, people who jump from one thing to another cannot be trusted. Participants’ reactions revolved around Nixon’s facial expressions, notably his eye movements. Respondent D said when Nixon faced cameras he appeared as though he was “attacking the winks of his eyes.” Respondent B said Nixon was sometimes closing his eyes as though he was avoiding the audience when delivering his remarks. This is a sign of distrust and people only have confidence with leaders who they can trust. Respondent E said Nixon had “shifty eyes.” Agreeing with her colleague C, respondent B said:

Yea, he did. And just the way he closes eyes and looked like he is trying so hard. I was little and I remember the debate. I mean I just remember that. What came across back then was how nervous he was. I just remember that came across to people, adults talking about how nervous Nixon seemed.

Defining moments are politically consequential or politically suicidal. Such moments can cost a candidate election victory or shutter his political career. Nixon’s “shiftiness” had its consequences too. Here is how participant B reacted to Nixon’s “shiftiness”:

**Respondent B:**

I think it hurt Nixon. I mean just the physical; you know appearance on how he behaved. It really hurt him. He was just really nervous and he just didn’t have that presence like Kennedy kind of was able to get to the audience.

Palin shifted from one topic to another. Instead of focusing on the topic asked about, most of times she switched to the topic she was comfortable discussing. This left many questions
unanswered and the audience felt frustrated by her behavior. Here is an exchanged between participant B and E:

**Respondent B:**
Prior to that it seemed she was throwing out words like globalization.....and different things which made no sense. But then when she talked about the mortgages it seemed she knew something about that and she felt more comfortable with that conversation. But prior to that, she was just talking in circles.

**Respondent E:**
I feel like she was sincere. There was one moment where she was talking about foreclosures and she was based on her comments, she was trying to put some of the responsibility on homeowners. And then when asked, so are you putting blame on them, are you blaming homeownership, she quickly backed away from that and went back to her predatory landing which is......I don’t know.

The theme of emotion was detected in the Hillary Clinton clip. The theme also fits well with the concept of political appropriateness. Respondents B, C, D and E said Hillary was emotional. Here are respondents C and E reactions.

**Moderator:**
So, what stood out in the clip?

**Respondent C:**
Emotions. She kind of got overwhelmed at some point. Specifically, the work for the like the nation. Her goals as a presidential candidate. She panicked.

**Respondent E:**
Agreed. The breaking in her voice......she recovered. I mean she didn’t start crying......but she was pretty clearly emotional.

However, participants had mixed reactions on whether Hillary’s emotional behavior was appropriate. Respondent D said if Hillary’s emotional show was engineered, then, her behavior “is worthy of some kind of an Oscar or Emmy.” But respondents A, D, and E saw the action as inappropriate. Respondent D said that “people like it when you keep it real” and E termed Hillary’s behavior “sexist.” Respondent A felt the action was “unfortunate.” But respondent B saw something positive about Hillary’s emotions: She reacted:

But she came off, I think showing a lot of emotion which she doesn’t usually show......showed another side of her that is usually not shown to the public. So, I think in a way it was good because it showed that side of Hillary that she has always to mask. I think in a way it was good. It showed that side that she usually has to contain and can’t show to the public. But she didn’t have total meltdown. She just like kind......I am really tired. You know it is the campaign trail......I am really feeling stressed.
Discussion

As noted above, “defining moments” in politics are given prominence in the news media, something which results in far-reaching implications on those vying for positions of leadership. In a nutshell, “memorable moments” can prove consequential to a person contesting for an elective position. Such moments leave an indelible impression in voters’ memories. They can either destroy or build someone’s political star. To use Lang and Lang’s observation, such moments “undoubtedly affect what people remember about the original interactional event.”

Findings from this study support the consequential nature of defining moments in election campaigns. In this focus group’s discussions, three themes emerged: poor articulation of issues as a sign of incompetence, shiftiness as a sign of distrust, and emotion as sign of political inappropriateness. These themes are related to the exemplification, nonverbal expectancy violations, and political inappropriateness in nonverbal communication. The findings also prove how powerful nonverbal communication is, despite the fact that most of research in media coverage of elections has primarily focused on verbal communication.

In the theme of “poor articulation of issues as a sign of incompetence”, participants saw Sarah Palin as fitting this bill. They felt she was inarticulate in addressing issues of national importance, for example, economy. Thus, she was viewed as not competent to serve as the vice president of the United States. In fact, a participant questioned whether she was even qualified to be the Alaska governor. Palin’s incompetence connects well with the concepts of exemplification and nonverbal expectancy violations. From participants’ reactions, Palin doesn’t qualify to be an exemplar. She, therefore, cannot be a source of inspiration to her followers. Because, she couldn’t articulate issues properly violates the expectations of her supporters, especially the Republicans. On the other hand, Kennedy’s ability to articulate issues saw him viewed as exemplar - a source of
inspiration to many Americans. The respondents’ reactions to Kennedy and Palin’s nonverbal displays encapsulate the argument by Conger and Kanungo (1987) that exemplars “elicit respect, affection, and devotion.” Their views, for example, reinforce the widely held belief that Kennedy won the first televised presidential election debate, courtesy of television medium. But he lost to Nixon, according to those who followed the debate on radio. Such is the power of nonverbal communication.

The theme of “shiftiness as a sign of distrust” emerged from the discussion about Kennedy-Nixon, and Couric-Palin clips. The deliberations here were about Nixon’s eye movements, which were described negatively. The negative reactions might explain why Nixon lost the debate. It also confirms suggestions that Nixon’s loss was “attributable to his five o’clock shadown” (Tiemens, 1978, p. 362). Nixon’s “shifty eyes” as described by one participant can be interpreted as a sign of “fear or evasion.” Bucy and Grabe (2008) say that fear/evasion displays are a sign of “subordination, avoidance, and inferior status” (p. 81). Indeed, another participant felt Nixon’s eye movements were an indication that he was nervous. To say the least, inferiority in leadership isn’t something which people like to be associated with. If Nixon exhibited elements of subordination, avoidance or inferiority, then, he acted unknowingly within the confines of negative expectancy violations, in the process dealing his presidential ambitions a devastating blow. That Palin was unable to articulate issues, instead wandering from one topic to another might make a strong argument why the 2008 Republican ticket was not seen as competent compared to Obama-Biden. So, McCain’s choice of Palin as his running mate might have done more harm than good to the G.O.P. election effort.

The “emotion as a sign of political inappropriateness” emerged during the discussion about the Hillary Clinton clip. Voters hold high expectations about candidates they support and
they are left disappointed when those whom they support fail to meet their expectations. Specifically, negative expectancy violations are seen as inappropriate and Hillary’s emotional burst in 2008 is a good example. Though, Hillary’s behavior is seen as inappropriate and violating her supporters’ expectations, the behavior has far-reaching political implications for her. For example, she might be viewed as not qualified to be the president. In fact, three participants saw Hillary’s action as not good for a leader. She can’t qualify as an exemplar.

**Conclusion**

There were varied reactions from all members of the focus group about the four “defining moments” clips. Four themes were identified during deliberations following the watching of the clips. These themes are: poor articulation of issues as a sign of incompetence, shiftiness as a sign of distrust, and emotion as a sign of political inappropriateness. Candidate John F. Kennedy was highly favored by the visual component of televised debates. Sarah Palin performed poorly in her interview, meaning nonverbal visual displays worked against her. Hillary Clinton’s emotional received a negative evaluation. Her behavior was regarded as engineered and inappropriate for someone vying for the presidency.

Watching the “defining moments” elicited varying reactions from participants and illustrated the importance of nonverbal communication, which has not been given enough attention by political communication researchers. Participant B’s response to the question on whether what they had seen in the Kennedy-Nixon clip was an example of effective communication explains the potency of nonverbal communication. She said:

> For the time, I think it was because it was very new. So I think it was very effective at that time because it was the first televised debate……very effective as you can see them, see them talking, rather than be just reading about something in the newspaper the next day, or you know, or hearing it on the radio but not seeing them sweating, being nervous, etc. You wouldn’t know they were being nervous. Very effective.
Also, participants’ reactions reinforce the consequential nature of televised nonverbal displays. As findings from this study and others show, those who ignore the power of nonverbal displays do so at their own political peril.

References


**Appendix 1**

**Focus Group Participant Information**

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<th>Variables</th>
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Appendix 2:

Questions for the participants.
1. After viewing this clip, what stood out for you – what did you notice?
2. Any other general comments about the clip we just saw?
3. Now, what happened here – is this an example of effective communication or not? Please explain your answer.
4. Do you think the candidate improved his or her standings in the polls because of this episode, or because of all the news coverage it might have received?
5. Did anything appear unusual to you in the clip just shown? If so, does it raise legitimate concerns about the candidate in question or is it largely a distraction?
6. Was the candidate right or wrong to behave in this manner – should he or she have gained or dropped in the polls on account of this performance?
7. Do episodes like this raise legitimate concerns about the candidate in question or are they largely a distraction?
8. What are the specific concerns raised by this clip?
9. What impact does an episode like this have in terms of your outlook about the candidate or your willingness to support him or her?
10. Does something like this have a long-term impact on your opinion of the candidate, or is it relatively short-term where you see it and forget about it?
11. What about cable news, YouTube, and the online bloggers – how would you describe their role in circulating these moments?
12. Is there anything you would like to add about the clip we just saw?