

The Misinformation Machine

Dirty politics is a growth industry with few happy customers. In the run-up to Super Tuesday, television viewers nationwide had to endure an onslaught of negative and deceptive political ads.

For many in key primary and caucus states that meant sitting through up to 12 such ads an hour. And the vast majority of these ads **went on the attack**: The three political action committees buying the most television time this election season have spent more than **98 percent of their money** on ads that discredit one or another candidate, according to Kantar Media.

These attacks by their very nature are misleading. FactCheck.org, which tracks accuracy in political messaging, found that the "avalanche of negativity" in recent political ads also contained a fair share of distortions and lies.

In February, Restore Our Future, the pro-Mitt Romney Super PAC, pushed an ad portraying Newt Gingrich as a supporter of China's one-child policy, a claim that sent the **lie detectors at Politifact** spinning.

Meanwhile, the pro-Santorum camp fired a salvo in Super Tuesday states with an ad claiming Romney left Massachusetts \$1 billion in debt during his time as governor. **Also false.**

And it doesn't end with attacks on Republicans. An ad from the shadowy **American Future Fund** attempts to tar President Obama by listing dozens of former Wall Street executives allegedly serving under the president in the White House. One problem: Half of the people on the list never actually worked as Wall Street executives. As for the names of those financing the American Future Fund ad, the independent political group — like all other Super PACs and 501(c)(4)s — has no legal obligation to disclose.

The Real News Antidote

In this era of deceptive political ads, TV viewers don't receive enough of the antidote: the kind of hard-hitting reporting and election coverage that would help local voters separate political fact from fiction before they pick

a candidate.

A 2011 **Federal Communications Commission report** found that 33 percent of commercial TV stations nationwide air little to no local news coverage. For those that do air news, the picture remains dim. Nearly two-thirds of local stations reported staff cuts in 2009 as owners focused on maximizing their profit margins. This has translated into fewer reporters on the political beat and less objective reporting about electoral issues.

A 2010 report by USC's Annenberg School of Communications shows that in the average 30-minute local news broadcast, **less than 30 seconds** is devoted to hard local government news, including reporting on political campaigns. Meanwhile, it's estimated that political ads will air up to 200,000 times nationwide before viewers become voters in November.

But what was bad for viewers and voters on Super Tuesday has been a boon for local broadcasters. Even after the rise of the Internet, local broadcast television has remained our most influential communications medium. According to a Pew Research Center survey, **78 percent of American viewers** report getting their news from their hometown stations on a typical day — more than the number that rely on newspapers, radio or the Internet.

Collateral Damage

Where viewers go, so goes the money to influence their votes. Industry analysts report that local television station advertising revenue is "going gangbusters" in 2012 as changes to campaign finance rules will unleash an estimated \$3.3 billion in political ad buys across the country.

The media industry even has a term for this, "the Quadrennial Effect," which accounts for the surge in broadcast revenues every four years as national elections take center stage. The biggest beneficiaries are media corporations that control local broadcast television stations in battleground states. That group includes CBS Corp., Gannett Co., Media General and News Corp. All of these conglomerates have bought up stations in battleground states where cyclical election ad spending is concentrated.

What they don't want you to know, however, is that the broadcasters' rush to air political ads has caused collateral damage.

It is accepted wisdom among the campaigns and Super PACs that a political lie hammered repeatedly into the collective consciousness of the electorate will embed itself in the minds of many as truth. Spreading lies via an endless drumbeat of attack ads works especially well at a time when the press, by and large, doesn't question them.

And while all broadcast stations are legally entitled to reject outright any third-party political ad that pedals misinformation, few do.

Thus far in 2012, **FactCheck.org** hasn't found a single instance where a station has rejected a political ad for inaccuracy. "It's not to the advertisers or stations' competitive advantage to publicize this fact," says Kathleen Hall Jamieson, director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center, which runs FactCheck.org. "So the likelihood that we'll hear about this is low."

The irony, of course, is that stations pay a higher price for deciding to debunk political misinformation and pursue the truth. That's not the way media are supposed to function in a democracy.

They could correct course by spending some of their election-year profits on the kind of quality political reporting that viewers need before they go to the polls. They could devote more news coverage to exposing the wealthy individuals and corporations funding attack ads. They could **do a better job** of opening their own political files to public scrutiny to shed light on the Super PACs and independent groups that trade in deception.

But will they? With so much political ad money up for grabs in 2012, few broadcasters are willing to bite the hands that feed them. And that's bad news for anyone who believes the media should serve democracy and not merely profit from its demise.