

Election Debate is Always News

The Reports of Political Television Programs in Finnish Newspapers

PEKKA ISOTALUS

Nowadays, every election seems to be a media happening. A central part of any political campaign takes place in the media. As Blumer and Gurevitch (1995: 3) have stated, media has gradually moved from the role of reporting on and about politics to that of being an active participant in the political process. Both voters and politicians have become increasingly dependent on the media and on the messages they provide. Now the voters receive most of their information concerning the candidates through the media, and the politicians aim at communicating to their voters through the media. Television debates, in particular, have gained an important position as news items proper.

Political television debates are treated as news items, because they are so widely viewed. Today, they are clearly one of the largest forums of political discussion. For example in Finland, a two-thirds of voters use to watch them (Moring & Himmelstein 1993: 71). It has been suggested that the debates may influence the voting behaviour of certain voters (e.g. Benoit & Wells 1996, Hellweg et al. 1992, Moring & Himmelstein 1993, Pesonen et al. 1993). However, it can be argued that the television debates reinforce rather than change the opinions of voters. In any case, we may safely assume that the debates seem to have some kind of influence at least in the voting behaviour. They may arouse an interest in the election and the campaign, inspire political discussion among the voters and increase the interest in voting. It is obvious, however, that also the debate news will have an effect on how the voters see the

election, the campaign, the candidates, and the importance of the programs themselves.

This study examines how Finnish newspapers write about the political programs in television: what is reported as news, which points are focused on and what kind of images the newspapers seem to reinforce. The material for the study was collected during the 1995 parliamentary election campaign in Finland.

Television Debates on the Agenda

According to the agenda-setting theory, the media will control the agenda by selecting certain issues for a prominent coverage. The prominence, subsequently, will determine which issues are judged as important (e.g. McLeod et al. 1994: 137). During a campaign, for example, voters have a tendency to consider the items that are frequently reported by the media as important political issues. The agenda is thus set by the newspapers as well as by the television debates. The political television programs, however, do not only create the agenda, but seem to be an integral part of it, because they are often represented as items in the news broadcasts and also, in the newspapers of the following day. Thus the influence of the programs, the questions of the journalists, the answers of the politicians, and the nature of the discussion have all become news. The political television programs have gained a central role in the campaigns, because the media pay a great attention to them. At the same time, the voters gradually learn to regard the televised political discussions as important, because they reason that what is in the news must be important.

*Department of Communication, University of
Jyväskylä, P.O. Box 35, FIN-40351 Jyväskylä*

Particularly in the United States, much research is carried out on how the media cover the elections. The media reports have been shown to focus on the campaigning as a game, at the expense of the substantial issues (e.g. Clayman 1995, Hall 1987, Morello 1991, Patterson 1980). The report on the political television programs, for example, may be compared to the reports on horse races. The most important issue is the question of “who won”.

Morello (1991) has analyzed editorials from six major American newspapers commenting on the presidential debates since 1960. First, he noticed that although the editorials usually mentioned that there are differences between the candidates, they did not clarify them in any detail. And, although the candidates and their issue statements were commonly assessed, the criteria were often rather deficient. Unexpected behaviours, especially blunders, were much written about. Further, the editorials offered many commentaries about the personal style and the debate performance of the candidates. Although these impressions were individual perceptual judgements, they were stated as facts. And although the editorials complained that too much emphasis was given on delivery, at the expense of substance, at the same time the commentators rushed forward with their own judgements that were based on their impressions of style. Morello (1991) summarized his results by saying that the media obviously have failed to serve the debate viewing public by de-emphasizing the importance of policy issues in political campaigns. Also, as Clayman (1995) has shown, the newspapers use to define a given moment of debate as a highlight on which they focus their news. It seems that any dramatic conflict is often chosen as the highlight in the news of political debates.

Both the news and the commentary of the newspapers can be seen as important because they seem to have an effect on the opinion of the voters. The evaluations of the candidates that are made immediately after the debate may differ from the evaluations made on the following day. The news about the debates in the newspapers, thus, seem to have an influence on who is considered as a winner of the debate (Patterson 1980). Therefore, the news will serve as adaptors of the public opinion and may also have an effect on the voting behaviour.

The news will also have a direct influence on the image of the politicians. Television has traditionally been regarded as a creator of images. The power of television is based on the ability of the viewers to

see what kind of person the candidate really is, and on the possibility to form an impression of him or her. However, the newspapers also have an important role in building the images. The news, particularly those concerning the television debates, usually concentrate on persons (Birdsell 1994: 133). In newspapers, the evaluations and descriptions of candidates are, nevertheless, based on the opinions of the journalists. The voters' image formation is thus based on those evaluations, impressions, and descriptions of candidates that are made by a journalist. In any event, the image has become increasingly important in political communication. This can be read as a sign of change in the political culture.

The Finnish political culture has been observed to change rapidly during the last few years. The findings include the following: the voters have become less dependent on the political parties, the importance of the television is increasing, the role of the image is more central in the voting decision, the personification of politics seems to be growing, the political journalism is becoming more confrontation-seeking, the entertainment values have entered the domain of electoral politics, the campaigns have gained certain “American” characteristics, and, finally, the politics is becoming increasingly superficial in character (e.g. Isotalus 1995, Isotalus & Pörhölä 1994, Kanerva 1994, Moring & Himmelstein 1993, 1996, Pekonen 1995). The changes that have been observed in the political culture of Finland seem to resemble those found in other democracies around the world (Mancini & Swanson 1996). Mostly, these changes seem to be interrelated. They are also reflected in the reporting of the political campaigns and television programs.

Often, television is accused of changing the Finnish political culture. The role of the newspapers is not discussed as much. It is obvious that newspapers could help people to learn more about the political issues involved and clarify the candidates' position in regard of those issues. They also could help in pointing out the differences between the political parties, and, moreover, they could analyze the arguments more carefully. In addition, newspapers could assume the role of an inspirer of public discussion. On the other hand, it would be even more easy for newspapers to emphasize the notion of the superficiality of politics by focusing on the winners and losers only. They also can go on stressing the importance of image rather than the importance of substance.

Method

This study examines how the newspapers wrote about the political programs in television during the 1995 parliamentary election campaign in Finland. The analysis was based on four Finnish newspapers: *Helsingin Sanomat*, *Iltaalehti*, *Ilta-Sanomat* and *Keskisuomalainen*. *Keskisuomalainen* is a regional paper published in Jyväskylä, covering the area of Central Finland. *Helsingin Sanomat* is the largest newspaper in Finland, being the most important nationwide newspaper. *Iltaalehti* and *Ilta-Sanomat* are both afternoon papers.

The articles concerning the television debates were collected so as to cover the period from two months before and a week after the election. All articles, news, commentaries, cartoons, or letters to the editor, in which any political television program was mentioned, were included. In all, the papers contained 90 articles which handled, at least in some respects, the political television programs during the campaign. The articles were analyzed using a qualitative content analysis.

Newspapers Report Differently

Every week, within the period covered, at least some items concerning the political television programs were published. The programs were discussed as early as two months before the election and before the first program was actually seen. Most items, however, were published during the two weeks that preceded the election. The reports stopped shortly after the election. However, a couple of “postscripts” were published.

The afternoon papers published the majority of these articles. *Iltaalehti* published 31 and *Ilta-Sanomat* 25 articles. In *Helsingin Sanomat*, 24 articles appeared, and in *Keskisuomalainen*, 10. In all papers, about a half of the articles were treated as news. One quarter of the articles were considered as a commentary of the editors. About one-sixth of the articles appeared on the television pages. Additionally, there were some cartoons, letters to the editor and commentaries that were not written by the editors.

Keskisuomalainen, as a regional paper, seemed to have different profile. Its articles concentrated more on substance issues, there were no photographs and they reported more frequently about the programs of the commercial television company than others. *Helsingin Sanomat* seemed to be slightly less substantial in its reports than *Keskisuomalainen*, because it also wrote about the issue

of winning. The afternoon papers were keenest in writing about the game elements of the campaign. The reporting of the political issues discussed in the programs varied. Also, their reports were more often concentrated on the game, the winners, and on occurrences before and after the broadcast in the studio. The afternoon papers illustrated their reports with many pictures. Consequently, the reporting style of the papers clearly differed.

All political television programs were not reported similarly. The panel discussions of the Finnish Broadcasting Company were written about more frequently than those of the commercial company, MTV3. However, the three dyadic debates between three party leaders, organized by the commercial television, were reported more closely than all the other programs. The attention given to the dyadic debates seems to indicate that the papers are especially interested in those programs that involve both confrontation and dramatic elements.

News Creates a Narrative

As a whole, the reports that described the political television programs seem to form a narrative, that develops chronologically. Before the first program, news started to appear in which the forthcoming programs were publicized. The most fascinating question seemed to be to speculate which parties were to be allowed to participate in the programs. Much was written about this issue in papers. The papers were also interested in the possible innovations in the format of the programs.

The first turning point in this narrative was the broadcast of the first political television discussion. The journalists did not seem to be content with this program, because the major party leaders did not participate. Thus the criticism of the programs started immediately after the first broadcast, and was presented by politicians and journalists alike. Martti Ahtisaari, the president of Finland, also criticized the political programs, which is quite unusual procedure in Finland.

The reports turned more lively once the dyadic debates started. Their main theme seemed to be the television performance of two politicians, Mr. Esko Aho, and Mr. Paavo Lipponen. At the time of the election, Aho was the prime minister of Finland and also the party leader of the Centre Party of Finland which held the majority position in the cabinet. Paavo Lipponen was, and still is, the party leader of the Finnish Social Democratic Party, the largest opposite party at the time. Clearly, the two politicians were seen as personifications of the cabinet and the

opposition respectively. Also, the communication styles of these party leaders are very different. Mr. Aho is considered as a fast and fluent speaker, and a good television performer. In opposition, Mr. Lipponen is described as a slow speaker and somewhat clumsy as a television performer.

The media often sees the campaigning as a contest between the cabinet and the opposition. Commonly, the political issues are personified. This is what happened also in the reports of the present study. The confrontation between Mr. Aho and Mr. Lipponen was regarded as one of the most essential items. The role of newspapers seemed to be essential in the construction of this idea. The confrontational position was based on the debate broadcasted in previous autumn, in which Mr. Aho was judged to have beaten Mr. Lipponen. The papers mentioned this former debate quite often.

Because of the different communication styles of the two party leaders, it was predicted that their debate was to be the determining moment in the campaign. Mr. Aho was supposed to win the debate because of his generally good performance. Thus he was predicted to gain more votes to his party, although the political polls anticipated a loss of votes. Beforehand, the debate was described as the culmination of the campaigns and the papers clearly tried to increase a tension before for the debate. In their own words, they asked questions like “Will Aho beat Lipponen a second time?” or “Is this the critical moment?”.

The debate itself, however, was a disappointment for the papers, because it was not considered hectic enough. The lame atmosphere of the debate was considered to be a wilful attempt at harmony between the party leaders, so that it would be possible for them to co-operate in the cabinet after the election. The debate was also evaluated as weak because of its lack of confrontation. Also, the other programs with more participants were sometimes reported as an encounter, or a duel between these two party leaders. The newspapers told that Mr. Aho and Mr. Lipponen argued in front of the cameras. Moreover, their personal relationship was described as reserved.

The climax of the journalistic narrative was, however, the grand panel discussion of the Finnish broadcasting company three days before the voting day. It was the only program which was reported by every paper. At the end of their narrative, the papers wrote about the programs that reported the results.

Debates as Shows

The analysis clearly indicates that the political issues were not primary in the news reports. Although the political issues that were discussed were usually mentioned, they were rarely presented as major news. A particular political issue was a central element in four news reports only. Some news did not mention any of the political issues discussed.

The most common topic was the speculation of who will be present in the program. The success of the candidates in the programs was also often presented as a headline. Frequently, the news reported how the discussion proceeded, how its atmosphere was, and what kind of phases there were in the discussion or in the program. Moreover, it seemed to be easy to get in the news by criticizing the programs. Television performance was sometimes considered as the most important item of a debate. The papers also liked to write about what happened in the studio before and after the program, about the atmosphere and about the attitudes of the candidates towards each other. The afternoon papers, in particular, sometimes asked the participants to evaluate the discussion or to comment on the opinions of the viewers right after the discussion itself.

Further, the commentaries did not tell about the political issues discussed, or the content of the arguments made. The political programs were evaluated in a similar manner than other television programs. The television performance of the candidates and the central role of television in the campaign were also repeatedly commented.

Thus, the political issues do not seem to be primary in the political television programs, but instead, the show and the performance. Also, the analysis of the headlines confirmed the importance of the show element. While only every third headline dealt with the substance of programs, as many as two-thirds of them were focused on the performance aspect. Iltalehti, for example, did not have any headline that would have focused on a political issue.

In general, the political issues were poorly handled in the news. Nevertheless, they were taken under scrutiny and were analyzed more closely to find out which issues were ultimately included in the news. The opinions of the three major party leaders were clearly regarded as being much more important than those of other party leaders. Some news concentrated only on the opinion of these three leaders.

If participants disagreed on an issue, or had an argument about it, the news threshold was more easily passed. Any talk dealing with the next cabinet or with a given person was reported – without an exception. It was also typical to mention the less serious questions that were often asked at the beginning or in the end of a program. In addition, my results show that the four newspapers chose different issues from the discussions to report.

To sum up, the newspapers do not seem to consider the political issues discussed as worth reporting. The analysis also shows that the most important criteria in selecting the issues conclude the dramatic element and the possibility to personify an item and thus arouse the public interest. The social and political relevance of the issues was not as important.

The Newspapers as Image-Builders

The reports of the newspapers centred around well-known personalities and focused on the three major party leaders: Mr. Aho, Mr. Lipponen, and Mr. Niinistö. (Mr. Niinistö is the party leader of the National Coalition Party.) Hardly anything was written about the other party leaders. The articles included several descriptions of these three major figures, and they were generally described using rather similar adjectives, irrespective of the paper. The newspapers evidently aimed at building a given image of the party leaders.

By reading the newspapers, a voter can be hypothesized to have formed a positive image of Esko Aho. He was generally described as an excellent performer, both fluent, competent, and quick-witted. He was also said to be very fast in his reactions, to the extent that he was supposed to have had to restrain himself. The only negative adjective of him repeated in the reports was “arrogant”. Nevertheless, his image can be said to be strongly positive.

In opposition, the image of Paavo Lipponen was quite different. He was described as being sedate, slow, feeble, easily irritated, clumsy, and stiff. His media skills and performance skills were evaluated as poor. Journalists claimed that he was not able to clarify his meanings and that he spoke at a level too general for television. To sum up, his image appeared to be very negative in these articles.

The descriptions of Sauli Niinistö were fewer in number. He was said to be a fairly good performer, both fast and logical. He was also described by such phrases as “a nimble terrier”. Some journalists claimed that he was imitating Mr. Aho. However, Mr. Niinistö may be regarded as a winner of the “ex-

pectations game” (see Hellweg et al. 1992: 95-98). This was his first experience of election programs as a party leader and the pre-debate expectations were low. After the first debate, the press reported a “better than expected performance” of his, which also emphasized his positive image.

Most of the estimations and descriptions of politicians were based on the opinion of the journalist. In this way the journalists seemed to confirm each others’ opinions. The descriptions were rarely based on an opinion of a program viewer, or an expert of some area.

The images are formed also by the pictures that are published of politicians. Thus more pictures were published of the three party leaders than of the other party leaders. Pictures of Mr. Niinistö were fewer in number and they were also usually rather neutral. In contrast, the pictures that were published of Mr. Aho and Mr. Lipponen clearly aimed at forming different images. Mr Aho appeared in positive pictures. For example, he often smiled in pictures. In opposition, Mr. Lipponen was shown also in some photographs that were negative in character, and in which he seemed to be angry or unhappy. Elements of confrontation were also visualized in pictures, as, for example, in showing the politicians standing opposite each other.

Criticism of Programs

The commentaries of the political television programs included much criticism and suggestions as to the quality of the programs. Without exception, the journalists considered the programs as boring. About everything was criticized in these programs. Both the television presenters and politicians were criticized, and also their questions and answers. It was also complained that there were too many parties within one program, as the programs normally had a representative of 11-18 parties. The suggestions for the improvement of future programs were also common. For example, better presenters, more sensible questions, or more entertaining elements in the show were wished for.

The newspapers seemed, however, to have a strong faith in the power of the political television programs. They clearly considered that a successful appearance in a program could be directly seen in the results of voting. In some cases, the journalists had convincing arguments on how the television, especially the television performance of the candidates, may be a critical factor. Also, the changes in the political polls were often explained as being due to the television programs. Also, some criticism was

expressed about the influence of the programs, but these critical comments were rare. In these cases a researcher, a journalist, or a politician pointed out that the effects of the television programs were often exaggerated, or that the programs did not seem to be as important in this election as in earlier ones.

Conclusions

To sum up, the newspapers seem to write much about the political television programs during the campaigning. Especially the afternoon papers are interested in them, as they obviously increase their sale by writing about them. The news about the programs thus seem to interest the readers. It seems reasonable to argue that the papers write about the political television programs, because they are prominent events of the campaigns. Moreover, they may also have influence on the results of the election. Alternatively, it may be argued that by writing about these programs the newspapers increase the importance of these programs, and this, in turn, makes it more important to write about them. The process thus seems to be circular.

The results of the study show that the political television programs have been set permanently on the agenda, and that they belong to the most frequently discussed items of the election. The programs are also considered to be important, in the sense that they are used to explain the changes in political polls. Surely, the manner in which the newspapers report about the programs also affects their readers' opinion of them. Presumably, the voters gradually learn to regard the programs as important, because the papers write about them extensively. This supposedly increases viewing rate of the programs, which, in turn, increases their possibility to influence the voters.

It is reasonable to ask why the political television programs have so great a news value. The results suggest that the newspapers regard the political issues as unimportant, but the show itself and the persons in it – especially their television performance and the possible confrontations – as more central. By reporting like this, the papers implicitly communicate that the political television programs are not forums in which an important policy is expressed, or in which essential information is given for the voters to make their decision. Instead, they emphasize such factors as performance and winning the debate. This style of reporting thus suggests that the newspapers seem to see the programs only as vehicles of influencing the candidates' image. The

commentaries also emphasize the image more than the political issues.

The manner in which the Finnish newspapers write about the political television programs seems to resemble that of the American papers (see e.g. Berquist & Golden 1981, Morello 1991). The reports concentrate on the persons, and their success in the discussion is important, while the political issues are secondary. Also, differences between the candidates are only passingly mentioned without giving an explanation of them, or specifying them. The evaluation of the candidates is based on the opinion of the journalist only, and television performance is given much attention to. Equally, the dramatic elements in the discussions are those that will get in the news. The papers also try to develop a sense of drama by reporting on the critical moments of campaigning, or by speculating about the participants of the discussion. Therefore it is not only the television company who wants to produce dramatic programs, although the television is commonly seen as one of the dramatic media (e.g. Esslin 1982). Similarly, the newspapers seem to prefer those programs which include dramatic elements, because the harmonious discussions and debates were considered as failures. However, the Finnish newspapers seem to differ from the American ones in some aspects at least. The Finnish papers do not always try to name a winner for the debate, although some articles did this as well. In all, the reporting of the political television programs seems to have many "American" characteristics, which also supports the results of earlier studies in which the Finnish political culture has been seen to become more Americanized (see Moring & Himmelstein 1993). Thus, Finland seems to be among other democracies in which the political campaigning is becoming increasingly Americanized (see Mancini & Swanson 1996).

As the present results show, it is not only television which superficializes the politics. Also the papers seem to have an important role in this process. In addition, the images are formed by the newspapers as well. On the other hand, it may be that the newspapers have adopted some of the features of their reporting style from television. They may have imitated some typical forms of television or, its media logic, in their reports of the political television programs (see Altheide & Snow 1979). Moreover, although the television is an image-orientated medium, the roots of image campaigning are clearly not in television. The image-campaigning is more based on the political reality than the media through

which the campaigns are communicated (Rudd 1986).

The newspapers' reports of the political television programs show well how the media increasingly tend to report each others' doings. This also supports the central role of media in politics. The media have become active participants in politics, and not only reporters of it (see Blumler & Gurevitch 1995: 3). Furthermore, the reporting style of the newspapers stresses the power of television in politics, because it emphasizes the role of the medium. If the reports would focus on the political issues, it is obvious that the role of television would not be so important, because in that case the arguments could be made anywhere. The news, however, stress the role of television, the performance of the candidates, and the nature of the program, and this, in turn, increase the weight of the medium. The results also indicate that the journalists have confidence in the remarkable influence of the programs.

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