“Democracy Begins in Conversation.”
- John Dewey, 1878

Attack ads, or negative ads, are political advertisements that criticize candidates for their positions and beliefs. These ads are scrutinized by political scientists and rhetoricians for their over-simplification of issues and their use of stereotyping to create a negative link between an issue and the target candidate. The strategic use of the attack ad is to align the target candidate’s views with a preconceived negative idea or emotion the electorate has towards an issue. This attempt to use advertisements as public spectacles to illicit strong emotional responses from the audience puts the attack within the realm of display rhetoric. A “traditional” ad that defines the issue being considered and outlines the position of the candidate is defined as political rhetoric. The differences between the two types of rhetoric are twofold:

- Political rhetoric looks to promote a discourse between opposing sides with the goal of realizing previously unknown information through compromise, while display rhetoric looks to entertain through the reinforcing of previously held ideas - neither asking for discourse or the search for new understanding.
- Political rhetoric almost always focuses on the speakers in an attempt to share their views on the issue, while display rhetoric focuses on the audience or the adversary in an attempt to attach an emotion with a topic.

Display rhetoric has traditionally been associated with entertainment. Appealing to the audience and eliciting emotion is the goal of all performers. Political rhetoric, however, was defined by the Athenians as “political” because it served the purpose of their direct democracy, which was lively, spirited, and efficient discourse meant to foster a well-educated governing body. True political rhetoric offers the same benefits to our own society: higher voter turnout, more qualified leaders, a less divided electorate, and more complex understandings of the issues. The effectiveness of display rhetoric at winning elections, however, has overshadowed the positive effects of political rhetoric on strengthening our society in the eyes of our leaders. Entertainment-like attack advertisements have proven too effective in energizing a political party’s base in this age of entertainment, where 99% of Americans watch close to five hours of television daily, while traditional ads that use political rhetoric are primarily only effective in creating discourse. While traditional rhetoricians believed that discourse fostered a stronger democracy, it seems that modern politicians are more interested being elected than strengthening society (State 2).
Display rhetoric acts as entertainment because it creates “affinity for competition... propensity to become a festival... proclivity to excess and exaggeration... and susceptibility to the propagation of dominant values” (Poulakos 63). Plato viewed this type of rhetoric, which he thought void of any meaningful content, as only useful for praise (Poulakos 72). He understood that the quest to find understanding and knowledge comes when an educated group strives to find consensus, or shared understanding. Rhetoricians in antiquity were adept at understanding the clear differences between display and political rhetoric. Today, however, a clear separation between entertainment and discourse has been removed. Candidates use rhetoric to praise the beliefs of the audience by belittling the opposing view. This allows the viewer the comfort of never having to challenge their own beliefs nor compromise with the beliefs of others. These entertainment-based advertisements are placed on television using music, provocative imagery, dramatic language, and tone. The advertisements in print use provocative imagery and language, like the image below.

To illicit a strong emotional response in a short time, attack ads forgo using reasonable and well-thought out definitions and ideas, but instead enlist the use of stereotypes (Jamieson 64). Stereotypes have always been used in entertainment as an easy way to quickly connect the audience to the story and control their emotions. From Shakespeare’s Shylock in the Merchant of Venice, a Jewish moneylender in medieval Europe, to Carlos Mencia’s stand-up character “Ray Ray,” an inner-city black youth fighting in Afghanistan who uses a military tank to perform “drive-bys,” simple and shallow representations of cultures, races, genders, sexual orientations, and other
groups is the easiest way to control how an audience views a character. Attempts to control the views, beliefs, and emotions of the electorate without using loaded language are not effective. As the following presidential advertisement from 1857 shows, ads that focus on the candidate and their platform don’t entertain.

![1856 Campaign Ad Listing the “Principles” of the Candidate’s ticket](photo source: Vintage Advertising 9)

Instead of addressing political issues and the candidates who support them as complex and respectable, attack ads use language that defines an issue or candidate as having one defining characteristic, and then attaches that “stereotype” characteristic to an undesirable group or idea. This approach was used by George Herbert Bush against Michael Dukakis, Governor of Massachusetts and Bush’s Presidential opponent in 1988. At that time, Massachusetts had a prison furlough program that allowed convicts weekend passes. The program had been in place since 1972 and was signed into law by a Republican governor. While Governor, Dukakis vetoed a bill that would have banned first-degree murders from receiving furlough passes. A convicted first-degree
mugger, Willie Horton, received a furlough pass and proceeded to commit armed robbery, assault, and rape. Bush’s campaign crafted multiple negative advertisements against Dukakis. None of those advertisements, however, addressed the fact that 33 states had similar programs. In fact, the Federal Bureau of Prisons currently allows 13% of its population out on furlough programs to aid in over-population and cost control (US Department of Justice 6). While Bush used the issue to stereotype Dukakis as weak on crime, the Federal Government, as exhibited by the Federal Bureau of Prisons use of furloughs, has never undermined the program’s legitimacy. Instead of using the Willie Horton case to foster a constructive discourse with Dukakis on what could be learned from the incident and how the program could be improved, with both candidate’s views getting equal coverage, Bush instead used stereotyping to create a connection between Dukakis and convicted murderers through advertisements like the following one.

"Is this your pro-family team for 1988?" – 1988 Bush Campaign Ad (photo source: Jamieson 131)

Once stereotype-based persuasion becomes the goal of any politically-motivated communication, the primary focus of its creator is to use “force and elegance of speech” to accomplish “one’s own purpose upon the weakness of men” (Enos 91). There is no want to engage in any real discourse or discover any hidden truth. Once display rhetoric is invoked, the speaker believes that their view is, ultimately, infallible. This use of rhetoric to spread infallible knowledge is vastly different than that of creating discourse and disseminating knowledge among the electorate, which is the pursuit of political rhetoric.

For instance, in the 1956 Presidential race, Democratic nominee Adlai Stevenson refused to wage a negative campaign and instead attempted to use political rhetoric. He focused on two issues:
abolishing the draft and replacing it with a professional army and the signing of a nuclear test-ban treaty. Adlai gave long speeches in which he attempted to outline why a professional army was more cost efficient than drafting soldiers and how nuclear tests were poisoning the environment and no longer yielding new scientific findings. Stevenson never attempted to paint Eisenhower as wanting to poison the environment, as a war monger, nor as someone bankrupting the government. In fact, Adlai often addressed both sides of the issues and outlined points of agreement and disagreement. The most negative of Adlai’s advertisements were timid compared to most, as seen in the following example.

While it’s easy to point out the differences between display and political rhetoric, that does nothing to remove the efficiency of display rhetoric as a form of persuasion. In the Florida Republican Primary of 2012, for instance, Mitt Romney spent over $2 million on advertising, buying 3,276 ads, 99% of which were attack ads (Liptak 1). The persuasion of Mitt Romney’s ads is hard to
deny, when you consider he went from a 36 to 34 point lead over Newt Gingrich in Florida on January 25th to a 46 to 32 point victory in that Primary on January 31st. Meanwhile, Gingrich fell from 34 points to 32 points while airing 1,012 ads that were 95% negative (Falcone 2). While there might not be a direct link proving causation between Romney’s spending and his victory, there does seem to be a correlation between spending, negative ads, and polling numbers.

While the argument for using display rhetoric to win an election is easily made, its use as a tool to strengthen democracy is not. For a democracy to function correctly, as stated by classical teachers like Aristotle and Plato and reinforced by the men who founded this country, like Benjamin Franklin and Thomas Jefferson, political discourse must take place among the people who choose their leaders. Political discourse should seek to find the best answers, not reinforce stereotypical beliefs and ignore the ideas of the opposition. If we are to accept that discourse-communities that use political discourse are more adept at creating sound societies, then we must look to support the type of rhetoric that is most efficient in strengthening that community, which is the general electorate.

Display rhetoric attack ads slowly debilitate our populace’s ability to make social judgment calls needed for discourse. Instead, social trends are often bolstered by stereotypes and display rhetoric. Negative ads in the 1800’s, for instance, focused primarily on aligning target candidates with minority races and religions, which worked to restrict a national discourse on the topic.

As display rhetoric reinforces stereotypes and restricts discourse, the inability to form widespread consensus or compromise grows (Paek 4). Compromise, a goal of political rhetoric,
Democracy Begins in Conversation

leads to consensus. Rhetoric that inhibits consensus, therefore, is neither political rhetoric nor supportive of our democracy.

Furthermore, there are segments of the US public that are growing weary of attack ads. Those people cite the pushing of partisanship, growing conflict, and loss of civility as the major causes of their disdain for the widely used and widely successful advertising (Greenberg 70). Partisanship, conflict, and lower level of civility are all fostered by simplistic views of reality and the issues. The stereotypes that are at the root of display rhetoric indirectly support sexism, racism, and other forms of discrimination. Research has found, for example, that men are seen as being naturally “aggressive, forceful, and independent” while women are seen as being “kind, helpful, sympathetic, and passive” (Fridkin 3). Those stereotypes are routinely played out in negative attacks ads.

The harmful effects of the attack ads on discourse are multifaceted. Not only do they propagate dominant, and not always positive, values, but they subvert the need to determine the unknown. Realizing previously unknown information is a primary characteristic of political rhetoric and acts to strengthen the society which implements such rhetoric. By accepting simple stereotypes, people remove any chance at learning new and hidden knowledge.
The female aimed attack ad study also found that wide spread gender biases were less likely to occur among Americans with a higher-education degree (Fridkin 17). This finding is important as 40% of graduating high-school seniors are projected to obtain a higher-education degree of some sort (Long 1). This is higher than the current 28% of Americans with a college degree (Symonds 1). Similarly, a study by Dr. Won Ho Chang of the University of Missouri’s School of Journalism shows that 86.5% of Americans self-report that they don’t believe negative attack ads (Chang, Et al 9). Yet, UCLA psychiatry professor Dr. Marco Iacoboni found that the majority of people who watch negative advertisements that target the candidate they support, lose apathy towards that candidate. This finding wasn’t self-reported, but was documented through the use brain-imaging technology (Borenstein 2). So, while most people say they don’t trust or believe negative attack ads, the science says they are affected by it. Studies show that people are less affected as their level of education increases, but that doesn’t answer the question as to why Americans are responding to advertising they self-report as detestable. The answer, according to findings from Dr. Ruthann Weaver Lariscy of the University of Georgia’s Department of Advertising and Public Relations, is because “about as many of us seem to be entertained by attack ads as are turned off by them” (Lariscy 1). From those findings, we can see that attack ads are only successful because they are entertaining. They work because populations with lower levels of education can’t differentiate between display rhetoric and political rhetoric.

For instance, during the 1988 Presidential Election, Vice-President George Bush was photographed at the Illinois State Fair riding around in a tank. Even though he was against expanding the use of tanks in our military and wanted to focus on expanding non-conventional military spending, Dukakis never developed any attack ads criticizing Bush for his opposition to conventional weapons and his seemingly hypocritical photo-op. Dukakis, wanting to highlight his own and very real support of conventional military hardware and tactics, also staged a photo-op with him riding in a tank. Bush’s campaign used the images from the event to craft an attack ad criticizing Dukakis on his “weak” stances on the military. Since Dukakis had spoken in caution against operations in Libya and Granada, Bush used provocative language to create a link between supporting a weak military and Dukakis. By the day of the election, many people had come to believe Dukakis was not supportive of the military, even though he actually wanted to expand the use of conventional military weapons.
Display rhetoric attack ads do not adhere to Isocrates and his view that political rhetoric should search for unknown knowledge. Display rhetoric delivers stereotypical information that entertains its audience and lowers empathy and leads individual members of our society to view their own knowledge as superior. They are not willing to accept that others know something that they don’t or that their personal views might be wrong, as their views are based on simple, stereotyped versions of the issues. Because of this, they resist the demand of the political rhetorician to find consensus (Paek 20). Too many people are making political and social decisions based on their viewings of attack ads and their belief that their insufficient knowledge is nothing short of omniscient (Ran 5). Furthermore, because viewers self-report as being distrustful of attack ads, they are more likely to view an ad against their candidate as more ludicrous than a positive ad for the other candidate.

The act of watching and absorbing the information from attack ads does not necessarily have to be a bad thing. In fact, according to Isocrates, display rhetoric has extrinsic rhetorical value. When used as a tool, display rhetoric can aid in the spreading of ideas, as entertainment is more readily viewed by large audiences than any other type of presentation. Using entertainment to spread information, however, is highly dependent on how the message’s intent. Since attack ads are so grossly over exaggerated through the use of stereotypes, those who view the ads might see them as an affirmation of their own beliefs and as a condemnation of others within the discourse community, not a single stream of information that should be viewed with caution and discussed with the other members of the entire discourse community (Ran 5). Using entertainment media to educate through stereotypical display rhetoric always comes with the risk of reinforcing personal stereotypes. Those reinforced stereotypes use our views and ideas—in this case, the idea of
entertainment—against us (Dardis 13). Useful display rhetoric in the realm of politics should focus on bringing awareness. Negative ads against the establishment, for instance, could work to demonize partisanship. Such a campaign might lead the people to discuss how to fix partisanship instead of which party is right. Such a conversation might work to bring political moderates back into the conversation of government. Currently, turnout among those with clear party affiliation has went up while turn-out for moderates has fallen sharply (Lau 9). Those who craft negative campaign ads are aware of this, as politicians actually create negative attack ads that are meant to polarize their party members from moderates as well.

This mass movement of rallying the soldiers along such strict ideological lines is having long term effects that stretch far beyond just one election. It has been argued that such high level of
display rhetoric has already transformed the political community of this country. That fact has led to a society that is used to and expects display rhetoric. If that is the political reality of today, then any chance of real discourse and consensus later on becomes less and less likely (Ran 6).

True discourse, which should present both sides of the issues and illustrate the strengths of each, thereby allowing the electorate to come to a consensus through discourse, never takes place. Instead, display rhetoric is used to vilify “foreign” and “otherly” ideas through stereotypical and, often enough, factually incorrect communication. That isn’t to say there is no hope. As our society becomes more educated, discourse will become more of a reality.

The discourse of the people is reflected in the government they elect. In 1998, for instance, 11 lawmakers retired from Congress. Their reasoning revolved around partisanship and what they cited as a broken system. That system is built upon the back of display rhetoric and the restraint of healthy discourse. True discourse stimulates the mind and encourages people to work together to find the best answer. As display rhetoric becomes the norm when discussing politics and developing strategies and laws to address our nation's issues, then those with no political expertise, but a skill at crafting stereotypical entertainment will continue to gather power to themselves. When that happens, “the entire society loses” (Tannen 47).
Works Cited

Borenstein, Seth. "This is your brain on negative ads". MSNBC: Techs and Gadgets 3 November 2006: 12. <http://www.msnbc.msn.com/id/15549677/ns/technology_and_science-tech_and_gadgets/t/your-brain-negative-ads/#.T4sNndmC1yU>


Appendix A

**Box A**
I shall be proud to number among my intimate friends any member of Squash family, especially the little squashes

**Box B**
Ise ‘quainted wid Missus Linkum. I is washed for her fore de hebenly Miscegenation times was cum. Don’t do nuffin new but gallivant round wid de white gem. ‘men! He-ah! He-ah! He-ah!

**Box C**
Mr. President! Allow me the honor of introducing my ver dear friend, Miss Dinah Arabella Aramintha Squash.

**Box D**
Gla-a-ang there 240s! White driver, white footmen, niggers inside, my heys! I wanted a situation when I took this one.

**Box E**
Ah! Horace its-its-bully, ‘specially de cream.’
**Box F**
Phillis de_ah dars Sumner. We must not cut him if he is walking.

**Box G**
Ah! My dear Miss Snowball we have at last reached our political and social Paradise. Is’nt it extatic?

**Box H**
Oh! You dear creature. I am so agitated! Go and ask Pa.

**Box I**
Lubly Julia Anna. Name de day, when Brodder Beecher shall make us one?

**Box J**
Most hextwadinary! Aw neva witnessed the like in all me life, if I did dem me!

**Box K**
Adolphus, now you!! Be sure to come to my lecture to morrow night, wont you?

**Box L**
Ill be there, Honey, on de front seat, sure!

**Box M**
And is it to drag nagur babies that I left old Ireland? Bad luck to me.

**Box N**
Mine Got, vat a guntry, vat a beebles!