

The Huffington Post



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From *Mad Men* to McCain

Posted September 29, 2008 | 05:23 PM (EST)

Like many followers of AMC's *Mad Men* -- all 1.9 million of us -- I have loved the trip back to institutionalized sexism, nose-cone bras, mid-morning office cocktails, ever-present cigarette smoke and, most of all, to a seminal time in the development of modern advertising.

It was a time when selling moved from the earnest listing of product attributes to the dexterous manipulation of consumer emotion -- when you could counter the government's ban on cigarette health claims, by telling smokers that the tobacco is "toasted."

It struck me: while consumer advertising has moved on, political advertising is caught in a curious time warp -- combining modern technology with the unfettered, unregulated ability to say that black is white, down is up and the opponent hates puppies.

As consumers have grown harder to fool in their product choices, protections have increased. The Federal Trade Commission says you cannot mislead consumers by "representations made or suggested by statement, word, design, device, sound, or any combination thereof ..."

As I watch the McCain campaign sink into a Rovean mire of half-truths and outright lies, those FTC prohibitions look like the lead paragraph in a McCain strategy manual.

You can't advertise one price and charge another. You can't call something low-fat when it's not. You can't even run an ad for a treatment for toenail fungus without two pages of qualifiers.

You can, however, say that Obama wants a government-run health system, when the truth is he wants government subsidy for a market based system. You can also say that Obama is against offshore drilling, when he said in his campaign speech that offshore drilling is one of the many energy avenues to explore. And taking deceit right into the homes and hearts of American parents, you can say Obama wants comprehensive sex education for kindergarten students, when what he really proposed was giving kids the knowledge they need to recognize predators and improper touching.

So the shadowy image machinery hums along at a time when we have never had a greater need for -- and hunger for -- truth and transparency.

The question is: why?

One answer is that it is the death flails of a campaign in deep trouble after an especially bad week: where Obama was the consensus winner of the debates; McCain rode to the rescue of Washington and, by most accounts, just got in the way; and the Palin narrative blew up in front of Katie Couric and the nation.

But there is another answer. A question has been posed on HuffPost: Does McCain think the American people are stupid?

He doesn't think it; he's counting on it. This is a country where four in ten US adults still think Saddam was involved in 9-11, and half still think Iraq had weapons of mass destruction. One fifth of us can't even find the U.S. on a world map. Close to one in five believe the sun revolves around the earth. I wish I made that last one up. I didn't.

I'm encouraged that the media has accepted the role of truth police in ways we haven't seen in previous elections. The likes of Jon Stewart are gleefully eviscerating lies and misstatements. Laughter, it seems, may truly be the best medicine. When the media knows it can be the butt of the joke, it raises everybody's game.

I am also concerned that even as the lies are exposed, parsed and ridiculed, the McCain campaign keeps on lying anyway -- apparently believing that you can't fool all of the people all of the time, but you just might be able to fool enough of them to win an election.

We figured out that toasted tobacco can still kill you; just like we learned that a president will lie to build support for an unnecessary war. As we count down the final weeks, this may be the election where enough of us will take those lessons to heart. Maybe this is the time, we will look beyond what the candidates say -- and see who they are.