

## **The incredible shrinking sound bite**

*It's not just a modern problem—and may not be such a bad thing after all*

In the summer of 1992, just as George H. W. Bush, Bill Clinton, and Ross Perot were gearing up for their presidential campaign, CBS announced a new policy for its nightly newscast. From now on, the network would not use any soundbite—that is, any footage of a candidate speaking uninterrupted—that lasted less than 30 seconds.

CBS was reacting to some troubling news: Daniel Hallin, a professor at the University of California, had just published research showing that the length of the average TV soundbite had dropped from 43 seconds in the 1968 presidential election to a mere 9 seconds in 1988. And this drop had led to lots of handwringing—from professors, from journalists, and from politicians themselves. “If you couldn’t say it in less than 10 seconds,” Michael Dukakis complained about the previous campaign, “it wasn’t heard because it wasn’t aired.”

And so CBS, the network of Murrow and Cronkite, pitched its new extended-soundbite policy as “an experiment” and “a public service.” It was also a savvy bit of marketing, as the network’s first segment, which centered on a 34-second clip of Perot, earned plenty of praise.

If you’ve watched any political coverage since 1992, you know what happened: CBS’s experiment failed. This week, as Congress’s 112th session begins, the shrinking soundbite stands as a rare enemy of Republicans and Democrats alike. Whether they’re running for President of the United States or for city council, politicians can count on seeing their words broken into ever smaller pieces. We might debate whom to blame—when Hallin asked a TV executive about 9-second soundbites, he replied, “the politicians started it”—but we can’t dispute the trend. In recent presidential elections, the average TV soundbite has dropped to a tick under 8 seconds. A shorter, dumber, and shriller political discourse, it seems, has become another hazard of modern life.

But new research suggests that the specter of the shrinking soundbite is anything but new. In fact, quotations from politicians have been getting shorter for more than a century. According to a new article in *Journalism Studies* by David M. Ryfe and Markus Kimmelmeier, both professors at the University of Nevada, newspaper quotations evolved in much the same way as TV soundbites. By 1916, they found, the average political quotation in a newspaper story had fallen to about half the length of the average quotation in 1892.

One way to spin this, of course, is that we’ve been getting dumber since 1892 instead of since 1968. But Ryfe and Kimmelmeier also suggest that the truth is more complicated. The soundbite, they argue, stems less from a collapse in standards or seriousness than from the rise of a more sophisticated and independent style of journalism—which means the soundbite might not be such a bad thing. After all, letting politicians ramble doesn’t necessarily produce a better or

more informative political discourse. Hallin made the same point back in 1992, but Dukakis and co. passed right by it in their excitement over those ugly statistics. And that's one of the ironies here: the best research on soundbites has itself been turned into soundbites.

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When people complain about soundbites today, they tend to invoke other modern vices: a lack of time, a glut of opinion, gaudy graphics, Twitter-sized attention spans. But none of this existed in the nineteenth century, when people still got their news from newspapers—messy, text-heavy publications with lots of columns and tiny type. Journalism was itself an under-developed and highly partisan profession. A political story would often begin with a short paragraph describing the speaker and the setting, then turn to paragraph after paragraph of direct quotation. The journalist interjected only asides like “then the candidate said” or “he continued.” There was little or no fact-checking.

Slowly and, Ryfe says, for a variety of reasons, this began to change. Political power (and the energy of campaigns) started moving from parties to candidates. At the same time, newspapers started attracting more advertising dollars, more readers, and more competition for both. These larger shifts rippled through even the smallest piece of journalism. Reporters went out and reported, instead of waiting on letters or telegrams, and their articles became longer and more complex. Since newspapers now felt less dependent on political parties, they could take candidates' words and combine them with context and analysis.

But this meant cutting those words down to a more manageable size, which meant quotations had to shrink. Ryfe says he spent three years collecting and analyzing nearly 5,000 newspaper stories from the late nineteenth and early twentieth century. He found that, over time, the length of the candidates' direct quotations dropped from an average of 1.71 column inches in the 1892 election to an average of 1.08 column inches in the 1916 elections—a change he calls “only one chapter in the longer story of journalism's professionalization.”

It makes sense, then, that Ryfe's pattern resembles the one Hallin found in TV news. Much like newspapers at the end of the nineteenth century, newscasts in the 1960s and 1970s were going through a transformation. For the first time, network executives saw their news operations as potential profit makers, and viewers and marketing analysts both agreed that, to get the biggest audiences, they needed more glitz, more structure, and more speed. At the same time, reporters, under the influence of Vietnam and Watergate, were becoming more skeptical and more cynical. It all added up to a more active journalism—which meant, on TV, a journalism that was more interested in exposing and analyzing political image-making than in passively transmitting those images.

The most measurable casualty in all this was the soundbite. Hallin watched the tapes of old newscasts with a stopwatch in hand, but the differences struck him immediately. In 1968, Cronkite and CBS did a segment on Hubert Humphrey and Richard Nixon that used five quotations from the candidates with an average length of 60 seconds. Cronkite said things like: “Humphrey was asked about the battered state of the Democratic party”—and then let Humphrey talk about exactly that for 49 seconds.

Twenty years later, that sequence seemed unimaginable. Peter Jennings and ABC did a segment on Bush and Dukakis that used 10 soundbites from the candidates with an average length of 8.5 seconds. Still, the changes between 1968 and 1988 were both complex and gradual. Hallin remembers that, when he first began presenting his research, people didn't believe him until he would show them some clips. "It was something that happened without anyone being aware," Hallin says, "without anyone making a decision."

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But have these changes been a bad thing? There are plenty of reasons to distrust soundbites and the journalism that produces them. First, and most obvious, we miss out on the variety and authenticity of seeing people speak at length, and in their own words. Short snippets work best with coverage that focuses on gaffes and catch-phrases. Sometimes, it feels like we get more of the journalists than of the politicians.

But none of this is necessarily the soundbite's fault. Another trend Hallin noticed was that as networks shortened their soundbites, they also changed the substance of their political coverage. They started using more in-house experts—pundits who looked less at what people said than at how they said it. TV news became more about strategy and the parsing of strategy—about buzzwords like "expectations" and "momentum"—than about the issues that presumably lie at the heart of politics. Journalists wanted to turn campaigns into larger narratives, and there was no easier narrative than covering politics as though it were a sport. Indeed, Ryfe found that the same thing happened with nineteenth-century journalists, who, as they professionalized, also "became handicappers of the political process."

If you're worried about our political conversation, then, soundbites may be more a symptom than a cause. And they do come with benefits. Hallin has argued all along that television news in the 1960s and 1970s, which many take to be the genre's "golden age," was never actually that good. Stories were dull and disorganized; soundbites would be followed by a couple of seconds of dead air. Early newspapers, in their time, were no different. The *Boston Globe's* first issue, in 1872, devoted much of its front page to transcriptions of church sermons. What Hallin and Ryfe were measuring, as much as anything else, were two different forms of media figuring out what worked.

The choice, in other words, may be between shrinking soundbites and no soundbites at all. Consider CBS's abortive attempt to revive longer soundbites. In the summer of 1992, the network's producers immediately found themselves throwing out useful soundbites simply because they weren't long enough—and struggling to find suitable replacements. The new policy ended up leading to *more* interpretation and paraphrase and less airtime for candidates. A few weeks in, CBS tried relaxing its requirements to 20 seconds. By Labor Day, though, the network had abandoned it altogether. At the end of the election, the length of the average soundbite had settled back in at around nine seconds.