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**LOOSE LIPS: BROADCAST
AND SOCIALLY MEDIATED
POLITICAL RHETORIC AND
THE SINKING OF THE 2012
SENATORIAL CAMPAIGNS OF
TODD AKIN AND RICHARD
MOURDOCK**
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There was a time after the 2012 U.S. Senatorial primary elections in Missouri and Indiana that many thought Republicans Todd Akin and Richard Mourdock would win their general elections in November—Akin in Missouri and Mourdock in Indiana. Those thoughts, though, were short-lived.

In August, Akin tried to explain his stance on abortion to a St. Louis television reporter by saying, "If it's a legitimate rape, the female body has ways to try to shut that whole thing down...I think there should be some punishment, but the punishment ought to be of the rapist, and not attacking the child" (Eligon & Schwirtz, 2012). Legitimate rape? Is there such a thing? That is what many Missouri voters were asking themselves as they pondered, "Did Akin really say that?" Two months later, Mourdock appeared on a televised debate and answered a question regarding abortion in cases of rape or incest. He said, "I came to realize that life is that gift from God. And, I think, even when life begins in that horrible situation of rape, that it is something that God intended to happen" (Republican Candidate Defends..., 2012)—another rhetorical snafu that had Hoosier residents scratching their heads.

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Akin's and Mourdock's comments went viral on social media as well as in broadcast and newspaper reports resulting in mixed opinions from the public (both candidates later apologized for their statements). Yet, the two men remained in their respective races.

The phrase, "Loose lips might sink ships," was coined by the U.S. Office of War Information in its attempt "to limit the possibility of people inadvertently giving useful information to enemy spies" during World War II (*The Phrase Finder*). Since then, this loose-tongued rhetoric has come to take on various meanings, including that of irresponsible speech. Mistakes seldom arise when sound bites, without scripts, are uttered on television or radio. These statements do not become misquotes in newspapers. They are the actual vocal transmissions of those speaking. They are not manipulated utterances.

It is often difficult for those who have made these statements to correct themselves without notice. Once broadcast audiences have heard a remark, the words typically are etched in stone. Even when the deliverer of the message insists, "What I meant to say," he finds it a problem to recant and fully recover.

This essay examines the campaigns of Todd Akin and Richard Mourdock and argues that the broadcast and socially mediated rhetoric of both candidates cost the two their respective elections.

Past Performances

Over the years, speeches, interviews, and other rhetoric have contributed to the downfall of prominent politicians. In 1973, President Richard Nixon went on national television and uttered the words, "I'm not a crook," when referring to his role in the Watergate scandal and allegations that he profited from his public service (Kilpatrick, 1973). Nixon resigned from office before impeachment proceedings could begin. When his successor Gerald Ford gave Nixon "a preemptive pardon for any and all of his Watergate crimes" (Fulsom, 2012, p. 168), the former president was off the hook for good. However, that action cost Ford dearly. Many Americans insisted the pardon "ended Ford's chances for re-election to the presidency in 1976" (*The History Place*). Jimmy Carter defeated Ford in the next election.

In 1987, Colorado Senator Gary Hart was the front-runner in the race for the Democratic presidential nomination. When the media confronted Hart with allegations of womanizing, he told them, "Follow me around...it will be boring" ("The Gary Hart Story"). When *The Miami Herald* accepted Hart's invitation and discovered that he had spent the night with model Donna Rice, the candidate dropped out of the race ("Gary Hart and Donna Rice").

One year after Hart's departure, another candidate seeking the Democratic presidential nomination made a rhetorical blunder that led to a negative outcome. Delaware Senator Joe Biden adapted a speech delivered by British Labor Party leader Neil Kinnock for his own campaign speech. Sometimes Biden would "credit Kinnock when he quoted him. But at some point he failed to offer the attribution" and called Biden's lifting of Kinnock's statements not simply a turn of a phrase but outright plagiarism "that would qualify any student for failure, if not expulsion from school" (Greenberg, 2008). In the same race for the White House but on the Republican ticket, George H. W. Bush appeared on national television to say, "Read my lips; no new taxes" ("Top 10 Unfortunate..."). Although he became the next president, he did indeed raise taxes and Bill Clinton used Bush's words to claim the White House in 1992 ("Top 10 Unfortunate...").

In his second term as president, Clinton told the American public, "I did not have sexual relations with that woman, Miss [Monica] Lewinsky" (Sapir). The U.S. House of Representatives in 1998 impeached the chief executive on charges of lying under oath to a federal grand jury and of obstructing justice when indeed Clinton had engaged in a relationship with the White House intern ("This Day in History," 1998).

And more recently, 2012's GOP Presidential nominee Mitt Romney spoke in a video that went viral to millions of viewers. In that video, Romney said that 47% of Americans who do not pay taxes "believe they are victims and that they think they are entitled to health care, to food, to you-name-it" and that, "My job is not to worry about those people" ("Loose Lips Sink Ships"). Those remarks contributed to Romney's loss to Barack Obama.

Rape, Lies, and Rhetoric

Johnson (1998) writes, "Rape is called the most underreported violent crime in America." He adds, "No other major category of crime—not murder, assault, or robbery—has generated a more serious challenge of the credibility of national crime statistics (n.p.)."

Rhetoric and the subject of rape did not start with Akin's and Mourdock's comments in 2012. Reports combining the two have made their way into American households for years through the media. In 1977, Cathleen Crowell, a 16-year-old fry cook at a seafood restaurant near Chicago, told police that 22-year-old Gary Dotson, a high school dropout, had raped her in the backseat of a car. Dotson was found guilty of the crime and was sentenced to 25–50 years in prison. Six years later, he was released when Crowell admitted that she had lied because she "feared that she might have become pregnant through

consensual sex with her boyfriend the previous day" ("Gary Dotson: The Rape That Wasn't"). In 2003, Illinois governor George Ryan pardoned Dotson of the crime, years after DNA proved his innocence ("The Illinois Death Penalty Experience").

Three years after Dotson's pardon, lying and rape came into the forefront again. Crystal Magnum told police that three Duke University lacrosse team players sexually assaulted her at a home where she was performing as a stripper at a team party. The charges against the athletes were later dropped. Bridget Whelan and Matthew Burns of WRAL.com wrote, "Her story about the incident was so inconsistent that state officials later declared the players innocent, saying there was no credible evidence against them" (n.p.). In 2012, former International Monetary Fund chief Dominique-Strauss-Kahn, who at one time was also a French presidential hopeful, was cleared of a rape charge when the accuser retracted the allegations. Prosecutor Frederic Fevre said, "From the moment the victim declares she is consenting, there is no case for rape" (Samuel, 2012, n.p.). This incident followed Strauss-Kahn's 2011 charge of sexual assault on a hotel maid in New York but that case "collapsed because of doubts about the alleged victim's testimony" (Samuel, 2012, n.p.).

Claire McCaskill vs. Todd Akin

Incumbent Democrat Claire McCaskill took office in 2006, becoming Missouri's first woman elected to the U.S. Senate. As a former prosecuting attorney, McCaskill vowed "to bring Harry Truman's no-nonsense style of accountability back to Washington" ("Missouri's Senator Claire..."). One of the wealthiest members of the Senate because of several housing businesses she owned with her husband, McCaskill claimed to be a moderate and even avoided attending the Democratic convention (Boyer, 2012, p. 18). On the issue of abortion, she insisted that it "should remain safe, legal and rare in the early term" ("On the Issues: Claire...").

Todd Akin received a degree in engineering and went to work for a steel mill company when he decided to seek a graduate degree in divinity. After completion of that program, Akin vowed that a life in politics was waiting for him. Boyer wrote, "God's the boss," Akin maintained, and "that attitude has defined his political career" (p. 20). The conservative Republican went on to win a seat in Congress in 2000 and kept that title until 2013. A pro-life advocate, Akin had support from such groups as the Missouri Right to Life PAC and numerous pastors and Christian leaders ("Todd Akin for Senate"), to unseat McCaskill in November. But, when Akin made his remark about

it was all downhill from there. Those words were all it took for Akin not to claim victory. While Newt Gingrich and Rick Santorum supported him, Romney, vice presidential candidate Paul Ryan, Senate Minority Leader Mitch McConnell, and members of Missouri's Republican Party urged Akin to withdraw from the race (Boyer). But, to no avail. Even when he started losing financial backing, Akin had no intention of getting out.

McCaskill used Akin's televised comments to her advantage by running ads "featuring victims of rape who were appalled by Akin's wrong-headedness on the matter" (Boyer, p. 20). McCaskill had more money than Akin and could capitalize on her opponent's rhetorical blunder. Her campaign exposed broadcast audiences and social media consumers in Missouri almost daily to the "legitimate rape" statement. These ads contributed to the cementing of McCaskill's victory. And in early November, Akin conceded defeat after capturing only 39% of the vote.

Richard Mourdock vs. Joe Donnelly

For over 35 years, Republican Richard Lugar had served in the U.S. Senate, "an Indiana icon regarded as one of [the Senate's] leading statesmen on international affairs" (McAuliff, 2012). But, in 2012, a newcomer to national politics, Richard Mourdock, arrived onto the scene. He had served as Indiana's State Treasurer since 2007. So, issues such as abortion, gun control, and foreign affairs were typically not on this licensed professional geologist's daily agendas. But, despite his lack of experience on the federal front, Mourdock captured a landslide victory by defeating Lugar in the GOP primary and was trying to assist the Republican Party in re-gaining control of the U.S. Senate. But, when he made his infamous statement in a televised debate about intended rape, Mourdock's campaign lost its momentum. After his statements were seen and heard repeatedly on television and through the social media by not only residents in Indiana but by Americans nationwide, he tried to clarify his remarks. Mourdock maintained, "God creates life, and that was my point. God does not want rape, and by no means was I suggesting that He does" (Berg, 2012, n.p.). Unapologetically pro-life, Mourdock was in favor of stopping federal funding for abortion and claimed that, "*Roe v. Wade* represents a serious misreading of the original intent of those who established our Constitution" ("About Richard Mourdock...").

Republican New Hampshire Senator Kelly Ayotte did not help Mourdock's cause when she canceled a trip to Indiana after the candidate's debate appearance. Even Lugar refused to campaign for Mourdock ("Republican Senate Candidate Defends..."). Yet, not all members of Mourdock's party

abandoned support of his campaign. Romney did not agree with the candidate's comments but still backed him in the race ("Republican Senate Candidate Defends...").

Democrat Joe Donnelly was not a newcomer to Congress when he captured his party's nomination for the U.S. Senate seat. He had represented Indiana's 2nd Congressional District since 2007. A businessman and attorney by profession, Donnelly had run a small printing shop and a law practice before entering politics ("About Joe Donnelly"). Although he did not run on the GOP ticket, Donnelly insisted he was independent of President Obama, "routinely voting against Obama-Democratic budgets because of overspending" ("Joe Donnelly for Indiana"). In addition, Donnelly bragged that he had voted with Republican House Speaker John Boehner nearly "60 percent of the time over his lifetime" ("Joe Donnelly for Indiana").

When Mourdock uttered that rape was something that God intended to happen, Donnelly knew he would probably defeat his Republican opponent by just those few words alone. Donnelly supported allowing abortions only in cases of rape, incest, and to save the life of the mother and added that "God would never intend for rape to happen" ("On the Issues: Joe Donnelly...").

Donnelly triumphed over Mourdock by 5% points to claim victory in the general election.

Twenty-Four-Hour News, Social Media, and the Blogosphere

Jamieson (1988) notes that television is the medium where political speakers are more likely to be heard than any other environment. She writes, "The person who can synopsise an issue in a clear, concise, dramatic statement that takes less than thirty-five seconds to deliver is more likely to be seen and heard on broadcast news than those who lack that talent" (p. 90-91). In 1980, Ted Turner launched CNN as an alternative to the traditional broadcast networks of ABC, CBS, and NBC. CNN "gained its market niche primarily because other U.S. networks did not conceive news as a lucrative business" ("The Rise of 24-Hour News..."). Turner offered news coverage 24 hours a day, seven days a week. But, it was only available to cable television subscribers. So, most Americans still relied on the major networks for their national televised news information. CNN was not around when Nixon resigned or when Ford pardoned his former boss. It was still less than 10 years old when Hart and Biden dropped out of their respective races.

Since then, CNN has become a leader in news coverage and because of its success, other around-the-clock channels have made their way onto television screens; Fox and MSNBC, to name a few. With their presence, American

broadcast audiences have been able to catch political rhetoric almost anytime at their disposal. In other words, if they missed it the first time, they can stick around shortly because it will be aired many times later.

Social networking outlets such as Facebook and Twitter and other avenues on the blogosphere have been household staples for many media consumers over the last few years. In addition to the broadcast arena, politicians have been able to stay close with their constituents via social media in helping shape public opinion. Johnson (2012) writes, "The candidates who use Twitter, Facebook, and blog can expand sound bites and ensure that the sound bites are accurate presentations of what the candidates want to present" (p. 56). Elmer et al. (2012) echo that by writing that social media are seen "not only as [tools] for managing political discussion online, but perhaps more importantly, as the means through which political communication can be transformed into political action" (p. 47). In addition, Bond et al. (2012) found that social media play a crucial role among voters. Results of a controlled trial of political mobilization messages delivered to 61 million Facebook users during the 2010 U.S. Congressional elections showed that "the messages directly influenced political self-expression, information seeking and real-world voting behavior of millions of people. Furthermore, the messages not only influenced the users who received them but also the users' friends" (p. 295).

Conclusion

WebProNews reports that almost 60% of Americans receive some of their news and information from television; almost 28% use social media as one of their information sources; and, 19% rely on radio for some of their news (Wolford, 2012). What this means is that most of this country's residents are exposed to news and information that includes audio and/or video sound bites. In other words, they hear actual vocal transmissions of people's remarks through viral or "over the air" contexts. And when 24-hour television news channels, YouTube, and satellite radio continually run these transmissions, it is difficult to avoid them. Audiences may ask, "What did he just say?" Not to worry, they will hear it again, again and again. Voters in Missouri and Indiana got to know Todd Akin and Richard Mourdock more during their campaigns than perhaps the candidates themselves wanted. After their controversial remarks were broadcast and made viral, their attempts to make amends through apologies did not seem to help. They both lost their races, thanks in part to the media's overexposure. Had they won, the Republican Party would still have been a few seats shy of re-gaining control.

World War II was the setting for the phrase, "Loose lips might sink ships." Indiana and Missouri were the stopping points in 2012 for the phrase, "Loose lips might sink elections."

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