



SEARCHLIGHTS AND SUNGLASSES

LEARNING LAYER

Attack of the ‘attack ads’

Imagine you are watching television. You see an American flag melting away. A frightening voice says “A **cancer** eats at American politics... there are more of them than ever ... they’re in your home ... they’re trying to get into your head ... they want to **destroy democracy**”

What are they? Attack ads! Short television spots with scary images and allegations flooded television in the 2012 presidential election. An unprecedented wave of money entered the campaign because the U.S. Supreme Court lifted restrictions on who can donate in [the Citizens United case](#).

Attack ads made up 70 percent of total television advertising in the 2012 presidential race, [soaring up from 9 percent in 2008](#). Rather than say good things about their candidate, attack ads aim to damage the reputation of the other candidate. Some of the allegations in attack ads have been famously false, such as the 2004 [“Swift Boat” ads challenging the combat record of Sen. John Kerry](#).

Pick from these five student activities:

Flashlight: What is an attack ad? Watch this well-known attack ad, [“Daisy Girl.”](#) Look at this description of [how to make an attack ad](#) as well as this imagined [attack ad on Abraham Lincoln](#). Make a class list of the elements of the typical attack ad. Questions for discussion: Do you think attack ads are more likely to be inaccurate than positive ads? Why or why not? Have political campaigns always been this way, or is something new happening?

Spotlight: This [PBS MediaShift article predicts the rise in attack ads](#). What’s more, in many states candidates routinely avoid answering questions about their positions [from reporters or the public](#). Why do politicians prefer to use advertising, marketing or partisan media instead of talking to mainstream journalists? Why is this routine in some states but not others? Find a news story on the issue and post a comment in response, bringing the comment to class.

Searchlight: After looking at all the links on this page, ask students to turn the tables by creating short ad-style videos opposing the spread of attack ads. [Like other parodies](#), use the same techniques attack ads use, but substitute real facts about the rise in negative ads. These attack-ads-attacking-attack-ads could be 30-

second or one-minute spots. What is the “call to action”? Should you urge viewers to turn off the ads? Run from the room? Call and complain? Sign a petition? Post the best attack ads on line.

Extra Credit: Political advisers believe attack ads always work. Some scholars have argued they play an important role. Other researchers say ads from unknown sponsors (which one presumes are even more negative) are even more effective. Is there any research on Google Scholar or elsewhere showing whether political ads on television are becoming more or less effective in the era of social and mobile media? Present your findings to the class and distribute through your social media network.

Bonus questions for class discussion: Such organizations as FactCheck.org and PolitiFact.com expose false statements. If a candidate’s ad is proven false, he or she might pull it; in a few cases, broadcasters have refused to air false ads. But in recent years, false ads have stayed on the air. Critics say broadcast news looks the other way. The Radio and Television Digital News Association’s chair said false ads don’t bother him, only the ones that deceive by pretending to be news stories. Do you agree with that position? What elements of the RTDNA code of ethics apply? Do consumers have any recourse if stations refuse to pull false ads? What can the class do about it?