

POINTS OF VIEW

Voters want candor, not sound bites

Politics is not a cerebral exercise. Its language is emotion. Its closest relative is theater. Its rare but electric defining moment is when a candidate connects with voter gut.

Over the years, I've seen a lot of elections in Michigan and only a few electric moments.

One was in October 1960, when I was part of the enraptured crowd on the University of Michigan campus that heard Sen. John F. Kennedy talk about a visionary idea that eventually would become the Peace Corps. Another involved Alabama Gov. George Wallace, who made passionate converts by attacking school busing and went on to astonish observers by winning the Michigan Democratic primary election in 1972.

And now Sen. John McCain might be doing the same thing in the Michigan Republican primary next Tuesday. Polls published over the weekend suggested McCain was running overall nearly 10 points ahead of Texas Gov. George W. Bush, an astonishing surge considering that McCain was 34 points down in Michigan two weeks ago before his upset win in the New Hampshire primary.

What is striking about McCain's appeal is that it spreads across the political spectrum. Running against the entire Michigan GOP establishment, McCain trails Bush among Republicans, 44 percent to 33 percent with 23 percent undecided, and he obliterates Bush by more than two to one among Independents.

And Independents are famously active and influential in Michigan politics. Robert Teeter, the Ann Arbor resident who is one of the country's most respected Republican pollsters, was quoted over the weekend in *The Detroit News*: "If you had asked me any time up to two months ago, I would have said almost none of those people (Independents) would vote... With all the new voters coming into the process and McCain being such a hot commodity, the question becomes will he be able to get enough independent voters to go to vote that he might win the damn thing."

What's going on here? For one thing, the Bush campaign — from the beginning replete with vast sums of money and the endorsements of virtually the entire GOP establishment, led by Gov. John Engler — has looked more like a coronation than the outcome of a hard-fought political contest. My older son, Scott, a 28-year-old medical student at the University of Michigan, put it this way: "I don't see what it is in Bush's personality or record that qualifies him to be president, other than that he is his father's son."

And McCain is certainly an attractive personality, a certified war hero with the guts to challenge his own party's orthodox support for the tobacco industry and equally orthodox opposi-



PHILIP POWER

tion to campaign finance reform.

Moreover, the Arizona senator has found a medium perfectly attuned to his message in the "Straight Talk Express," the campaign bus on which he holds what sounds like nonstop, face-to-face conversations with reporters. McCain's Michigan campaign chair, state Sen. John Schwarz, told me over the weekend that the McCain campaign "is the damndest thing I've ever seen. McCain is absolutely loose as a goose. He is saying exactly what he thinks and doesn't seem to care if he wins or loses."

It's exactly this sense of a genuine person, comfortable in his own skin and therefore able to be straight with the voters, that accounts for McCain's extraordinary emotional appeal.

But there's more to it than just a wildly attractive personality. I sense a historical context that gives substance and power to the McCain campaign as the most recent expression of long-running rebellion of reasonable, moderate voters against a political system that has been hijacked over the last decade by a bunch of self-interested elites. Hijacked by big corporations and unions that exploit the loopholes in campaign finance laws. Hijacked by special interests — from the trial lawyers to lobbyists to the anti-abortion people — and ideologues who impose single-issue litmus tests on everything. Hijacked by political consultants, pollsters, media pundits and professional candidate handlers.

The reason so many ordinary voters are so alienated by our politics is that candidate candor has been replaced by scripted sound bites, genuine views on the issues have been overwhelmed by poll results and personal character has become something to be manufactured and manipulated.

Who knows how well John McCain will do next Tuesday. But his candidacy seems perfectly crafted for our times.

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Filtering: Question is who and how

When I first joined the Farmington office, it took about three weeks to get my company e-mail and Internet access information into my new computer.

The first day wasn't so bad. By the end of the first week, however, I began to experience withdrawal symptoms. Trembling in my mouse finger. Visions of my inbox icon flashing, an indication that I had e-mail.

It wasn't pretty.

I've been an Internet user almost four years. We bought onto America OnLine after my daughter spent a weekend with my sister and her partner, who was deep into the web. A few days of chatrooms and clicking onto the MTV website, and my child was hooked.

It took her a few months to convince me. It took another few months for her to lose interest. I didn't mind.

By that time, I was hooked.

E-mail, electronic bulletin boards, news groups, search engines... I learned it all. When my daughter got sick, the Internet helped me understand what was wrong with her and what therapies might help.

It also introduced me to the information superhighway's back alleys, places you would cross the street to avoid if they were storefronts in your community. Places that would have empty condom wrappers and 40-ounce bottles of beer strewn in their parking lots were they actual businesses instead of virtual ones.

A search of the key words "teenagers and depression" turned up a lot of good medical information about symptoms, psychotherapy and drug treatments. It also recovered hits on websites with names like "Hot and Barely Legal" or "Teen Sluts at your Service."

Talk about depressing.

Last week, Farmington Hills librarian Bev Papai and I had a sort of impromptu discussion about Internet filtering, as we discussed technology improvements in the expanded library. When she told me about the information commons, banks of computers that will allow access to information geared for particular age groups, my Reporter Sense started tingling. "Have you gotten into the discussion about filtering?" I asked.

"We filter," Papai replied without hesitation.

Farmington was one of the first library systems in the state to have public Internet access, starting in May 1994. Computers have been available since the 1980s and having a fair number of them allows a division between those used by adults and those used by kids,



JONI HUBRED

she said.

"The board really wrestled long and hard with what to do about children's access and what were the public's expectations about access and is it a privilege or a right," she said.

Board members felt it wasn't right for people who just wanted to find information to be

"assaulted" by images of sex and violence, simply because they walked into a public building to use public facilities. Even though I've only been in these communities a short while, that strikes me as a decision appropriate to the character and social atmosphere in Farmington and Farmington Hills.

Residents must have felt the same way because though the library has been filtering for some time, Papai hasn't heard any complaints.

Which is as it should be. And which is why the state Legislature has taken a giant step in the wrong direction with a Senate bill designed to force libraries offering Internet access to filter it.

Senate Bill 936, which sailed through the judiciary committee last week, amends a state law that allows local library boards to filter obscene materials, because some folks consider that a violation of First Amendment rights. Now, state officials want to compel libraries to install filtering software.

The reasoning is simple: Restrict access in all public libraries because children shouldn't be exposed to pornography simply because they clicked the wrong web link.

In this case, however, whether information should be filtered is not the central issue. It's who should be filtering it and how.

By requiring libraries to install filters, the state is essentially controlling access to information. This is an issue so complex and so delicate, it requires a far less heavy hand than is gloved in Lansing.

More importantly, filtering public information defines the concept of local control. People from throughout the Farmington/Farmington Hills area have a far greater voice in what goes on at their local libraries than they do in what goes on at the capitol.

Filtering most directly affects the lives of local citizens, and when it comes to restricting free speech, theirs should be the final answer.

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