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[ARTICLE+ILLUSTRATION]

Abe Handler

**LOOKING
UP**

Broadcast From Broadway

Then-presidential candidate John Edwards was rolling comfortably through a nationally-televised speech in Roone Arledge Auditorium last month, when fifteen students in red T-shirts stood up suddenly from the audience and began chanting “Campaign on AIDS.”

The room paused with an uneasy confusion. Everything up to that point had been carefully scripted. Zac Frank, president of the College Democrats, had invited the audience to cheer, but asked students not to wave signs during the event. Half an hour before Senator Edwards arrived, campaign aides had offered unfilled seats in the auditorium’s visible first tier to students sitting in the balcony.

Roone Arledge looked like a TV studio. The room swarmed with camera crews and a giant American flag hung behind the stage. Students that had been placed on risers sat behind the podium. The only thing missing was a flashing applause sign above the stage.

Just before the Senator entered, a baggy-eyed campaign worker offered a section of students the opportunity to “meet” Edwards. I joined thirty other students in forming a carefully-crafted pack of youth around the door. Campaign staff and television cameramen haggled over how to place students for the Senator’s entrance.

Carefully, late John Edwards headed in

Carefully later, John Edwards bounded in amid an apparent horde of young supporters. The then-candidate shook a few hands and quickly took the stage to begin his stump speech—two Americas, the transgressions of President George W. Bush, beating the pants off of the corporate lawyers. One reporter in the ample press section turned to another, and with a mock, exaggerated sincerity, mouthed the Senator's predictable words just ahead of the candidate.

I'd seen thousands of media events on TV before—countless debates, press conferences, speeches—yet I'd always seen American politics on a screen, one degree removed from the actual event. There was something eerie about actually being in attendance at such a staged political spectacle—I felt like I was in CNN-land. Although John Edwards was speaking directly to the college students in Roone Arledge, the entire event itself was very much a contrived backdrop, a necessary foundation, designed to serve up the sound bites, images, and news reports culled for broadcast from the event itself. Edwards had spent months orchestrating media spectacles like the one in Roone Arledge, the broadcast and transmission of the events far eclipsing the events themselves.

Louis Menand, professor of comparative literature at the City University of New York, considered such media spectacles in a recent article for *The New Yorker*. Menand summarizes the work of University of Chicago histori-

an Daniel Boorstin, who argued in 1961, Menand writes, “that the rise of mechanical means of communication and reproduction ... and the subsequent emergence of ‘sciences’ such as advertising and public relations, had produced a culture of what he called ‘pseudo-events,’ events that are neither real nor illusory, neither genuine nor fake ... manufactured spectacles designed to generate material for further manufactured spectacles, such as post-mortem commentary supplied by the employees of the news organizations that had produced the things in the first place.”

Menand later adds, “A manufactured event is somehow true and not true. John Kerry on the motorcycle, George Bush on the flight deck: the knowledge that these perfectly real things are also ‘images’ whose ‘quality’ should

things are also images whose reality should be regarded with skepticism is part of their content.”

Watching Senator Edwards smile, point and wave to the nation behind a mammoth flag, I was acutely aware of how much of American politics takes place in a derivative media reality—on TV screens, web sites and front pages.

This winter, Senator Kerry’s surprising primary victories over Howard Dean in Iowa and New Hampshire were credited to the candidate’s strong support, “on the ground”—as if the actual campaign itself, that whole bit about actually talking to voters, dropping campaign literature or (gasp) representing an electorate is an afterthought to the real politics taking place in media.

Under such a system (or at least partially due to such a system), political events themselves (as opposed to their derivative media reflections), are flat and artificial. As Boorstin put it, “national politics has become a competition for images or between images, rather than between ideas.” John Edwards didn’t delve into policy, didn’t try to convince the voters before him of the merit of his vision for the country. Instead, the candidate offered a slightly new version of what he had repeated countless times before on television—a man, as they say, “on message.”

Then, as if defying the script, fifteen students rose and began chanting. The cameras swiveled toward the unexpected outburst. Senator Edwards, at first flustered and frightened, quickly regained composure and asked the audience to give the demonstrators a round of applause. The Senator said a few words about the importance of addressing HIV and AIDS issues, and then returned to his speech.

After a brief incursion into the real event, the media event continued undeterred; John Edwards returned to message, back inside the TV set.

Abe Handler is a Columbia College first-year. Looking Up runs alternate Mondays.

