New Jersey Council for the Humanities has funded From ”I Like Ike” to Will.I.Am: Electing a President in the Media Age event. Dr. Abigail Perkiss, History, will serve as the PI. The event will take place on Tuesday, October 16, 2012, from 6:00 to 7:30 PM. Presenters will include Jan Schaffer, executive director of J-Lab, and Dr. David Greenberg, associate professor of history and journalism and media studies at Rutgers University. The program will take the form of a panel discussion addressing the evolution of televised presidential campaign ads and the recent growth of social media in deciding the outcome of the 2012 election.

In the months before the 2012 presidential election, Americans will experience a deluge of political campaign ads. According the Museum of the Moving Image, which chronicles the TV advertisements of every presidential election since 1952, in a media-saturated environment the television commercial remains the one area where presidential candidates have complete control over their images. These ads seek to inspire hope and confidence, fear and doubt; they transform political platforms into the emotional responses that bring voters to the polls.

In 1964, Lyndon Johnson’s reelection campaign produced the “Daisy” ad. The spot featured a girl sitting in a meadow, counting daisy petals as she picks them from the flower. When she reaches nine, an ominous countdown commences to nuclear explosion. As a mushroom cloud fills the screen, a voice warns, “The stakes are too high. To make a world in which all God’s children can live, or to go into the dark. We must either love each other or we must die.” The ad aired only once, and though the backlash was intense, it is credited as a key factor in Johnson’s win over Barry Goldwater.

Twenty years later, Ronald Reagan’s team aired the “Prouder, Stronger, Better” spot. The ad presented a montage of wholesome images of Americans in their day-to-day lives Ð working, buying, playing, learning, marrying Ð as a gentle voice spoke of the growth and improvement over the previous four years: “It’s morning again in America, and under the leadership of President Reagan, our country is prouder and stronger and better. Why would we ever want to return to where we were less than four short years ago?” The ad invoked a sense of patriotism and traditionalism; under the direction of Ronald Reagan, it said, the nation was moving forward by returning to its former glory. From the fear in the Daisy Ad to the optimism in Morning in America, presidential campaign ads have become powerful tools through which candidates evoke the most visceral elements of the human experience. They have transcended substantive politics, and in doing so have worked to give Americans an emotional stake in the outcome of each election.

By tracing the evolution of these ads from 1952’s “I Like Ike” to the present day, our speakers will dissect both the mode and message of political TV ads. In doing so, they will challenge the audience to critically assess the role of these ads in presidential elections and the influence of contemporary social media in creating new outlets for politics and persuasion.