The Handbook of Election News Coverage Around the World

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Trends in Television Network News Coverage of U.S. Elections

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THE HANDBOOK OF ELECTION NEWS COVERAGE AROUND THE WORLD

Edited by Jesper Strömbäck Lynda Lee Kaid
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Trends in Television Network News Coverage of U.S. Elections

Stephen J. Farnsworth and S. Robert Lichter

Throughout recent decades, three national television networks, ABC, CBS and NBC, have dominated the U.S. media landscape. Although their audiences have fallen since the late 1970s as they have faced increasingly aggressive competitors, including CNN, Fox News, online newspapers, and a tidal wave of online commentators, the networks and their cable and online offshoots remain influential media players. Their flagship 30-minute evening newscasts still draw tens of millions of viewers, and the influence of network news is magnified further by the many cable and online outlets that follow their lead (Pew, 2000d; Seib, 2001).

This chapter examines the trends in U.S. television network news coverage over the past several presidential elections. Before doing so, we set the stage with a brief outline of campaign news coverage trends.

U.S. CAMPAIGN NEWS IN CONTEXT

Presidential elections, held every fourth November, have long been contentious spectacles. For nearly the nation’s entire history, two hostile camps have dueled for power, using whatever means they could to win (Genovese, 2001). The raucous electoral tradition in the U.S. represents a sharp contrast from the more genteel electoral traditions of some other nations (Huntington, 1981). While the subjects of electoral disagreements have changed over time, conflict has been a constant electoral companion in the U.S. Just as recent presidential campaigns have done, early 19th century presidential campaigns featured allegations of sexual misconduct and attacks on the patriotism of rivals (Sabato, 2000; Smith, 1977).

The news media function as the ringmasters of the American political circus. The earliest 19th century newspapers were often financed by political parties, and they offered their readers one-sided fare that fueled a voter’s passion more than a voter’s reason. Circulation numbers for these newspapers were small—the best selling publications of the day printed a few thousand copies per issue—because the papers were expensive to produce and to buy.

By the mid-19th century, widespread literacy, the inventions of steam printing presses, the telegraph and rail engines dramatically expanded public interest in newspapers and also dramatically reduced the costs of printing papers. Commercial imperatives—that is, the desire to sell
their products to as many citizens as possible—pushed news organizations to offer more even-handed coverage and cover controversies thoroughly throughout the 19th and 20th centuries. As the American economy expanded throughout this era, businesses demanded a wide audience for their advertisements, increasing the pressure for a paper (and later for radio and television news) to be both interesting and even-handed.

The media’s future may not look like the past. In recent years, the American news environment has begun a process of rapid change. The traditional dominant news outlets—the three networks and a few elite national newspapers (the New York Times, the Wall Street Journal, and the Washington Post)—now face challenges from a wide range of new news sources. Both the traditional norms of more objective reporting and the huge market share enjoyed by the most popular media are under siege from aggressive online upstarts (Seib, 2001). Even the news agenda is no longer set by the traditional media gatekeepers, who increasingly are following the lead of stories first broken online (Hall, 2001).

One cannot generalize about the cacophony of the online media world. Some of the most prominent news voices are online versions of the news outlets that dominate offline. Other news outlets exist largely or entirely in cyberspace, and some of these voices are more committed to the advancement of an ideological agenda through one-sided commentary than conveying the news fairly (Seib, 2001). In addition, the online world is full of clips from late-night television and cable entertainment programs, like The Tonight Show and The Daily Show, where political satire is routine fare (Pew, 2004).

While U.S. news outlets are in transition, the traditional two-dominant party system in the U.S. seems as stable as ever. The Democratic and Republican parties have dominated politics in the U.S. since before the Civil War. Since the election of 1860, every single elected president has been either a Democratic or Republican nominee (Hetherington & Keefe, 2007). The two parties also control nearly all offices in Congress and at the state level. While voters tell pollsters they would like more parties, the rare third party movements that arise expire after an election or two. The Electoral College used in presidential elections, the first-past-the-post system used in nearly all other elections, and the near-universal failures of third party movements discourage voters from casting a ballot for someone other than a major party candidate (Hetherington & Keefe, 2007).

Given the dominance of national news messages in a nation of more than 300 million, presidential candidates have had to develop sophisticated media management strategies to present themselves to the public (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2007). Regardless of their substantive qualifications, candidates who fail to look and sound good on television become ex-candidates fairly quickly (Patterson, 1994; West, 2005). Character has become an important part of presenting oneself to the country, as the candidates become regular visitors (via the evening news) in America’s living rooms (Barber, 1992; West, 2005). So far the Internet has been most useful for fundraising and for drawing attention to second-tier candidates, but overall the new media outlets remain less important than the old standby of television (Trippi, 2004).

The First Amendment and the largely private news sector are huge barriers to government control over news content on television, radio, and print. Media companies are highly profitable and generate sufficient revenues from advertisers that they have arisen without government subsidies provided to state broadcasters elsewhere. U.S. media policies do provide such things as special media access to policy-makers and government records, as well as discounted postage rates for printed media, but these modest benefits are provided regardless of a publication’s editorial policies (Cook, 2005).

Probably the most powerful gift the government bestows on private media companies is a frequency allocation, determining who gets to be Channel 2 or Channel 3 in a given television
3. TRENDS IN TELEVISION NETWORK NEWS COVERAGE OF U.S. ELECTIONS

Radio and television airwaves are public property in the U.S., and once given, a broadcast frequency is almost never revoked, no matter how negative the news coverage of the government (Graber, 2006). What the government obtains in exchange for this very valuable permit to use a particular frequency is a commitment by the broadcaster to provide news and public affairs programming, something that serves the financial interests of the stations by bringing in advertising revenue (Graber, 2006).

Self-policed goals—like that of journalistic objectivity—are not always met. Politicians of all ideologies have complained of media bias, but in the U.S. there is little they can do about it. A previous governmental attempt to mandate even-handed news coverage on radio and television news was abandoned two decades ago, and the so-called Fairness Doctrine has never been close to being reinstated after being eliminated (Graber, 2006).

In the analysis that follows regarding television's election news reports in the relatively unregulated U.S. media system, we pay particular attention to changes in the amount of news coverage; the subject of those election news reports; the ability of candidates to reach voters through these evening newscasts; and, of course, the tone of news coverage. The data used here were produced by the Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA), a nonprofit, nonpartisan media research firm that has examined network news coverage of every presidential election since 1988 (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2007).

This analysis is conducted through scientific content analysis, the careful dissection of each news story into fragments that can be coded along several different dimensions. With content analysis, media scholars and political scientists have demonstrated that the evening news programs on ABC, CBS, and NBC, for decades the dominant citizen sources for information on U.S. presidential elections, do a poor job of covering presidential elections. Over the past two decades, television news’ portrayal of the past five presidential contests has been marked by a host of shortcomings: the damaging focus on horse-race coverage of who is winning and modest attention paid to matters of substance, the less-than-satisfactory performance with respect to the journalists’ cardinal issues of accuracy and fairness, the declining amount of attention paid to candidates (as opposed to that lavished on the correspondents covering them), as well as the declining volume of coverage of the presidential election overall.

CHANGES IN THE AMOUNT OF COVERAGE

Even before the general election stage of the presidential selection process begins, the networks routinely face criticism for cutting back on their live coverage of the party conventions. Critics saw this reduction in coverage as the most recent instance in which the network news departments paid less attention to “hard” political news and more to “soft” news of lifestyle trends and human interest stories (Patterson, 2000). Broadcast executives themselves claimed that the conventions had grown too dull and too stage-managed to justify covering extensively and argued that interested viewers could find more coverage on cable television.

Even so, network television executives may be listening to their critics. During the 2004 presidential election—the second nail-biter in a row—the three evening newscasts aired 504 stories on the presidential election, the largest number since 1992 and a nearly 10 percent increase over the 2000 totals. When measured by number of minutes devoted to the election the results are even more striking: the 1,070 minutes (17 hours and 50 minutes) of campaign news in 2004 was 33 percent more airtime than in Election 2000 and 37 percent more than in the 1996 presidential election. Still the 2004 coverage remained well below the totals for 1992 and 1988.

As shown in Table 3.1, the three networks carried a combined average of 9 stories a night on
the 2004 election between Labor Day and Election Day, well above that of 2000 (7.3 a day for the three networks) and 1996 (7.7), although below both 1992 (11.5) and 1988 (10.5).

All three networks increased their campaign news coverage in 2004. The amounts of network coverage for the last three general elections, however, pale before the massive coverage CMPA recorded for Campaign ’92—23 hours 22 minutes (Campaign ’88 had 18 hours 36 minutes of news coverage). Presidential elections do not get much more interesting than they were in 2000 and in 2004, but the amount of coverage in those elections was far, far less than the general election phase of the 1992 presidential election. However, the trend, at least as of 2004, is improving.

### HORSE RACE COVERAGE

Every four years in November, roughly 100 million Americans cast a vote for a presidential candidate. The campaigns for president, and before that the preliminary battles for the Democratic and Republican presidential nominations, are extended seminars on the state of the nation: primarily how well the incumbent has handled issues concerning the country’s security and economic well-being. Candidates debate other issues that could affect presidential performance as well, which—depending on the year—could include energy, the environment, health care, taxes, and even the country’s moral climate.

More than just a look back, presidential campaigns are also about looking forward. Candidates discuss where the country should go in the years ahead and how the nation can deal with some of its most vexing problems: crime, poverty, the massive federal debt, the tens of millions of Americans who lack health insurance, and the potential insolvency of Social Security and Medicare in the coming decades.

On network television’s evening news programs, though, a different picture emerges. The debate is not primarily over whether Social Security needs fixing, and if so, how to fix it. The televised discussion is not over whether the American economy needs a boost, and if so, how to provide a little macroeconomic help. Instead, in most national elections over the past three decades, network television reporters have talked largely about who is ahead and who is behind in the presidential polls and the reasons for the disparity.

The discussion of public policy matters that does occur on network television is often framed in the context of this horse race. Proposals to fix Social Security or cut taxes or revamp welfare are seen as ways to woo farmers, senior citizens, or some other special interest group. Reporters often spend at least as much time talking about the “sport” of politics as presenting the policy proposal and evaluating its substantive merits, focusing on how effective the appeal, not the policy, seems to be.
A quarter century ago, political scientist Thomas Patterson (1980) observed that television focused greatly on the question of which candidate was ahead and who was behind, a far cry from the much more issue-oriented coverage of the 1940s. Although Patterson focused on the 1976 presidential election, the same trends were found in subsequent contests (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2007; Lichter & Noyes, 1995, 1998; Patterson, 1994; Robinson & Sheehan, 1983).

However, voters did more than learn regularly of each candidate’s standing; they actually began to support in greater numbers the candidate who reporters said was winning. Patterson (1980) called this a “bandwagon” effect. Bandwagon effects make it harder for a candidate who is believed by reporters to be behind—or who really is lagging in the media-reported polls—to catch up with the front-runner. If news consumers are told over and over again that poll numbers are so important, it should come as no surprise that the voters think about polls when evaluating candidates.

The thoroughness of campaign news, along with its usefulness to voters, depends on the focus of the coverage as well as its sheer volume. This issue has long been raised by critics of the media’s concentration on the horse race and, more broadly, the strategies and tactics adopted by the campaigns (Ranney, 1983; Sigelman & Bullock, 1991). It also involves the more specific topical agenda that the news features: the major foci of discussion. This has become more central to the debate over campaign news since the 1992 election.

Many journalists regarded the 1988 general election battle between Bush and Dukakis as a campaign marred by negativity, superficiality, and factual distortions. The network news divisions responded by vowing to pay greater attention to the topics that journalists considered most relevant to the public interest, regardless of the candidates’ spin on issues and events.

In other words, after the 1988 election, broadcast journalism adopted a more active role in setting the campaign agenda, in order to serve better the voting public (Alter, 1988, 1992; Bode, 1992). This commitment towards a more heavily mediated approach has been a goal of network television since 1988, though the effects of this approach have been mixed at best (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2007; Kerbel, 1998; Lichter & Noyes, 1995, 1998; Owen, 2002).

With a more active role comes increased responsibility for the tone and substance of campaign news. How did the networks respond to this challenge in the past five presidential elections? As Table 3.2 illustrates, 48 percent of all stories during the 2004 general election contained a discussion of the candidates’ standings and prospects (We defined “discussions” as lasting a minimum of 30 seconds of air time or one-third of very brief stories). This figure matched the 48 percent figure produced by Clinton’s runaway victory eight years earlier, far less than the 71 percent of the discussions devoted to horse-race matters in the razor-thin 2000 election, or the 58 percent of stories that dealt with the horse race in both 1992 and 1988.

Of course the question of who is likely to win the election is a perfectly legitimate one for the voters to hear about. This question is particularly likely to be a focus of media coverage when

### Table 3.2

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<td>58</td>
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<tr>
<td>Policy Issues</td>
<td>49</td>
<td>40</td>
<td>37</td>
<td>32</td>
<td>39</td>
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</tbody>
</table>

*Stories can include a horse race and a policy focus (or neither focus); numbers therefore do not sum to 100 percent.
the answer is highly uncertain, as it was leading up to, and even for several weeks after, Election Day 2000. (The 2004 contest was also close, though an undisputed Bush victory in Florida that year prevented the weeks of uncertainty that followed Election Day four years earlier.) Even though the 2004 election turned out to be the second closest (behind 2000) of the five presidential contests considered here, it tied for the lowest focus on the sport of politics, and placed first in amount of coverage spent on policy matters (49 percent, up from 40 percent in 2000).

As television news has become more and more focused upon campaign standings and campaign strategy, evaluations of the news media remained consistently negative. Citizens surveyed by the Pew Research Center gave reporters a “C” average grade for their Election 2004 coverage, with the mean score of 1.9 (where a 4.0 is an “A” and a 2.0 is a “C”). The 2004 media GPA is higher than the 1.7 mean grade for 2000, the 1.8 mean grade for 1996, but below the 2.0 average for 1992 and tied with the 1.9 average for 1988 (Pew, 2004).

Polling data are not the only evidence that people are frustrated with the media’s approach to campaign coverage. They also seem to be voting through their news consumption choices. Surveys of media use show that citizens clearly are not endorsing the heavy horse race coverage that network television provides. Pew Research Center surveys found that the percentage of people who listed network television as one of their two leading sources of campaign news has fallen 26 percentage points between 1992 and 2004, down from 55 percent to 29 percent (Pew, 2000c, 2004).

The decline registered by network television, once the jewel in the crown of America’s corporate media empires, was the sharpest of the seven media sources included in the survey. While network television and newspapers were virtually tied in the 1992 survey (55 percent versus 57 percent respectively), by 2004 more people listed newspapers (46 percent) and cable television (40 percent) than the networks as leading sources of campaign news. (Since people were allowed to give up to two responses, the percentages for media use exceed 100 percent). While newspapers also provide considerable horse-race coverage, CMPA content analyses demonstrate they provide less of it than network television (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2007). Further evidence that the networks are on the wrong track in paying so much attention to the horse race comes from the questions voters ask when they are given the chance to question candidates (Just et al., 1996; Patterson, 1994). The town meeting-style debate between Bush and Gore several weeks before the election—the third of three presidential debates in 2000—focused on middle-class needs and the merits of Bush’s proposed tax cuts. In 2004, the candidates also devoted one of their three debates to questions from the audience, and the questions in that debate also directed candidates towards health care, Social Security, and other policy matters, and away from the horse race.

MEDIANED COVERAGE AND THE SILENCING OF CANDIDATES’ VOICES

To be sure, the horse race frame offered up by network television has the potential to degrade our democratic debates. A less visible, but perhaps equally dangerous frame is one that is the result of news media narcissism. Television correspondents increasingly seem to believe that elections are largely about themselves as reporters and as interpreters of political events.

U.S. election news increasingly has become a zero-sum game in which candidates lose out as journalists increasingly set the tone of reportage. In a study of front-page presidential election news stories from the New York Times, Patterson (1994, p. 114) found that candidates and other partisan sources set the tone of an article nearly two times out of three in 1960 and more than 70 percent of the time in 1964 and 1968. Since 1972, candidates and other partisan sources never again set the tone even 40 percent of the time, and by 1992 reporters were setting the tone of a
story about 80 percent of the time. Patterson attributes the reversal to the weakening of norms that once worked against such advocacy by reporters.

This proved true for television as well. In his analysis of the differences between news programs on ABC and CNN during the 1992 presidential election, Matthew Kerbel found few differences worth noting between the broadcast and cable networks with respect to who tells the story. On both networks, Kerbel (1998, p. 22) found “better than three quarters of all statements were attributed to news personnel—correspondents, anchors or analysts solicited by the networks to make observations about the election.”

In her analysis of the 2000 presidential election, political scientist Diana Owen (2002) observed that broadcast network reporters sometimes tried to focus attention on average voters and their views, one of the key differences from their cable news counterpart. Even they abandoned the practice as the campaign progressed, returning to the reporter-centered perspectives relatively quickly.

These media-centered trends in coverage are not trivial. Citing the Vanishing Voter Project at Harvard University, Kerbel (2001) reported that large numbers of citizens exposed to such self-referential media fodder predictably described the fall campaign as “boring.” This was an astonishing assessment, given the photo finish nature of the November 2000 general election. However, when reporters talk a lot about their troubles on the campaign trail rather than the candidates’ future plans for the country, it should not be surprising that many citizens do not find these campaigns interesting.

Of all the declines in the quality of network television election news in recent decades, perhaps none have been as dramatic as the reduction in a presidential candidate’s ability to address the issues in his or her own voice. Candidate sound bites have been shrinking for several decades (Hallin, 1992). A study by Kiku Adatto (1990) found that the average length of time a candidate spoke in his own words on network television news during the 1968 campaign was 42 seconds. The average sound bite length in 1988 fell to 10 seconds, a decline of more than three-quarters over that twenty-year period (Adatto, 1990). The results triggered a good deal of soul-searching among reporters when they were first released, and the networks promised longer candidate sound bites in 1992 (Kurtz, 1992; Patterson, 1994). Despite that controversy, CMPA content analyses have since revealed a steady decline in the average length of on-air candidate statements from 9.8 seconds in 1988 to 8.4 in 1992, 8.2 in 1996, and 7.8 in 2000 and again in 2004. Lichter, Noyes, and Kaid (1999) reported that in 1996, for instance, journalists took up 73 percent of the campaign coverage time on the networks, and voters heard journalists speaking six times as often as they heard candidates. Thus, the average amount of time that a candidate speaks on-air without interruption seems to have stabilized. But the shrunken sound bite we now take for granted is about 20 percent below the figure that caused a furor when it was reported by Adatto five presidential elections ago. Details are found in Table 3.3.

### Table 3.3
Labor Day through the Day before Election Day

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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Amount of Coverage</strong></td>
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<td></td>
<td></td>
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<td></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Average Sound Bite (seconds)</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>7.8</td>
<td>8.2</td>
<td>8.4</td>
<td>9.8</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Percentage of candidate airtime</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>n/a</td>
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*2004 data is based on a random 10 percent sample of election news stories.
Expressing an idea, even a relatively simple one, in eight seconds or less is a considerable challenge. The standard television commercial, which usually has a single, simple message to “buy this product,” uses twenty to thirty seconds to make its case, about three to four times as much time as a presidential candidate has to say “Here is why you should vote for me” or “Here is why you should support this policy.” (These sentences can be said in about three seconds each, so together they come close to an average sound bite.) Making the case as to why one should be president by speaking for eight seconds or less at a time is a daunting, perhaps an impossible challenge. After all, Coca-Cola would not try to sell a can of soda that fast.

When you add up all the sound bites on the three networks across the two month campaign, they still do not represent all that large a part of campaign discourse. Cumulative speaking time for the entire 2000 general election campaign was 53 minutes for Gore, 42 for Bush, and three for Ralph Nader. By contrast, cumulative speaking time for journalists was 9 hours 56 minutes during the roughly two-month general election campaign season. The total speaking time for presidential candidates dropped from 168 minutes in 1992 to 98 minutes in 2000, a 40 percent decline that represents a loss of more than an hour of direct communication with viewing audiences on the three networks.

The declining amount of news coverage and the shrinking sound bites encourage politicians to focus on raising money to pay for vast amounts of campaign advertising. Advertisements by the candidates, and by independent organizations that may or may not be linked to a specific candidates, is an important source of learning about the campaign, even though the often-nasty advertisements may be quite misleading in content (West, 2005).

Third party candidates without the vast personal fortune of Ross Perot face an impossible challenge when it comes to getting his or her message out on network television (Nader, 2002). Ralph Nader’s three minutes of sound bites during the 2000 campaign averages out to just sixty seconds per network—the length of two commercials over the course of a two-month general election campaign. The nearly total absence of Nader on these news programs was particularly ironic, given his crucial influence on the final outcome of the 2000 presidential election.

These brief snippets from Gore, Bush, and Nader in the 2000 election and from other candidates in previous elections are hardly sufficient for a viewer to get a well-developed sense of a nominee and his or her policies. Of course, interested viewers can go beyond the nightly newscasts for other information, including the more extensive coverage found in most newspapers or on cable news networks. In fact, the declining overall coverage of the campaign, coupled with the tiny share of that coverage that allows the candidates to speak in their own words, practically invites voters to look elsewhere. More and more citizens are accepting the invitation, as the downsizing of network news campaign coverage has been accompanied by a decline in the viewing audience (Norris, 2001; Pew, 2000a, 2000b).

**TONE OF COVERAGE: QUESTIONS OF NEGATIVITY AND BIAS**

The news media’s power to set the agenda is particularly troubling if reporters fail to meet standards of objectivity and fairness. Conservatives have long charged that reporters are biased. In the 1992 campaign, when allegations of media bias were particularly high, many Republicans put bumper stickers on their cars that said, “Annoy the Media: Re-Elect Bush.” In the 2000 election, however, many liberals alleged the reporters were being too easy on Texas Gov. George W. Bush and were unfairly keeping Green Party candidate Ralph Nader off the air.

Scholars have a range of opinions on the question of whether reporters are biased. A recent
meta-analysis of studies that examined possible partisan bias in news content have found barely measurable differences (D’Alessio & Allen, 2000) or no significant coverage differences at all (Niven, 2003). Some researchers have concluded that whatever bias that exists makes it way into the news because of deadline pressures and the need to make stories interesting for the public (Robinson, 1976). Others say that reporters try to be fair, but whatever bias that does find its way into stories—consciously or unconsciously—is predominantly biased towards the liberal perspective (Lichter et al., 1990).

Still other media researchers, generally found on the ideological left, focus on the corporate structures of the news business and argue that the generally conservative orientations of publishers, owners and other corporate executives are the true sources of bias (Ginsberg, 1986; Herman & Chomsky, 1988). As the diversity of opinion suggests, media researchers have not yet reached a consensus on the nature of an alleged media bias. In this project, we use the CMPA content analysis to search for evidence of bias on the network news across the past five presidential elections.

While scholars and politicians argue over the existence of ideological bias, there is much stronger evidence that television coverage has become increasingly negative in tone over the past several elections (Lichter & Noyes, 1995, 1998). This negativity, directed against nearly all viable candidates, can have a powerful impact on the public’s orientation toward government. Above all, citizens exposed to the cynicism found in media portrayals of political candidates and public officials may become increasingly negatively disposed towards politics and government (Cappella & Jamieson, 1997; Hetherington, 2001).

More than a quarter century ago, Americans generally and journalists in particular were rocked by twin scandals of governmental deceit: Vietnam and Watergate (Gergen, 2000; Neustadt, 1990). In a televised moment eerily similar to President Bill Clinton’s finger-wagging denial of any sexual relationship with Monica Lewinsky more than twenty years later, President Richard Nixon declared that he was “not a crook,” while the Watergate scandal swirled around him (Gergen, 2000).

President Nixon, and President Lyndon Johnson before him, repeatedly misled the country about the ultimately failed U.S. military intervention in Vietnam. When the magnitude of their deceit became apparent, investigative reporters who exposed government malfeasance, such as Bob Woodward and Carl Bernstein of the Washington Post, became folk heroes and celebrities. The brightest of Hollywood’s stars—Robert Redford and Dustin Hoffman—portrayed these enterprising reporters in a hit film on Watergate, All the President’s Men. Reporters ever since have viewed government pronouncements with suspicion and governmental figures with contempt. For two generations now, reporters have resolved that they won’t be fooled again (Kurtz, 1998; Sabato, 2000).

Campaign news coverage was not exempt from the growing media negativity of the post-Watergate years. A content analysis of news coverage of the 1980 presidential campaign found that all four major candidates that year—President Carter, Senator Edward Kennedy (D-MA), Ronald Reagan, and Republican turned Independent candidate John Anderson—received more negative than positive press on CBS (Robinson & Sheehan, 1983). Despite allegations of a liberal media bias, in 1980 there was no evidence to indicate that the most conservative candidate of the four—Ronald Reagan—received more negative press than the other leading candidates.

In a study of favorable and unfavorable references to major party nominees in Time and Newsweek, Patterson (1994) found a dramatic trend towards negativity in recent decades. The study, which excluded horse-race evaluations, found that in 1960, 75 percent of the references in America’s two leading weekly news magazines were positive and that as late as 1976 over 60
percent of the coverage was positive. A majority of references were negative in 1980, and the figure rose to 60 percent negative in 1992 (Patterson, 1994).

If academic criticism has concentrated mainly on the superficiality and negativism of campaign news, the candidates and their supporters are most attuned to the fairness issue. Historically this complaint has been raised most often by Republicans, who see the national media as presenting the perspectives of liberals and Democrats (Bozell & Baker, 1990; Rusher, 1988). The Democratic voting patterns and relatively liberal personal perspectives of national media journalists are well documented, particularly on social and cultural rather than economic issues (Lichter, 1996; Lichter et al., 1990; Schneider & Lewis, 1985).

In recent years, however, Democrats have increasingly joined the chorus of media criticism. President Clinton’s resentment of the media for its treatment of his personal life, beginning in the 1992 campaign, is well known. In the waning weeks of the 2000 campaign, several prominent liberal commentators charged that the media coverage was favoring George W. Bush, stemming either from journalists’ personal antipathy toward Al Gore or their efforts to lean over backwards to avoid charges of partisanship.

In response to such criticism, journalists typically argue that their professionalism prevents their personal politics from influencing their coverage in any overt or systematic fashion (Deakin, 1983; Hunt, 1985). Some scholars have reached the same conclusion by pointing to economic and social constraints as counterweights to personal opinion in the news product (Epstein, 1975; Gans, 1979). However, this position should be treated as an empirical question rather than an article of faith.

CMPA’s content analysis system was designed to examine this question with greater depth and precision than it usually receives. The system identified the tone as well as the source and topic of each statement about a candidate or issue; i.e., who said what about whom. This procedure allows for a more detailed and nuanced analysis than is possible when the entire story is treated as the unit of analysis. Our 2004 study was conducted in cooperation with Media Tenor, which coded election news according to CMPA’s categories as well as their own. We are grateful for their generous assistance with this project.

Our coding procedure differentiated between the source and the object of each evaluative statement. We separated evaluations of candidate viability (horse race assessments) from those of candidate desirability (assessments of a candidate’s qualifications, policies, personal character, or conduct). Only the latter were included in our definition of tone or valence, which is concerned with the merit of each candidacy rather than its likelihood of success. Second, we differentiated between evaluations made by (or attributed to) partisan and nonpartisan sources, respectively. In this case, “partisan” refers to sources identified as being affiliated with a particular candidacy; “nonpartisan” refers to all other sources. In practice, the vast majority of partisan evaluations in election stories come from the candidates and their campaign staffs. Nonpartisan sources of evaluative statements are most frequently journalists themselves, voters, experts (such as an economist who comments on a candidate’s economic policies) and various pundits.

We followed the lead of Robinson and Sheehan’s pioneering work (1983) in restricting our measure of tone to statements by nonpartisan sources. This was done for two reasons. First, they are more influential in the sense of predicting opinion change (Page, Shapiro, & Dempsey, 1987), presumably because voters give less credence to identifiably partisan opinion. Second, they represent the more discretionary portion of election news, the value-added element of a journalist’s (and a media organization’s) particular news judgment. So news accounts of partisan evaluations are more closely linked to the campaign trail give-and-take, whereas nonpartisan evaluations give more latitude to journalists’ own judgments in selecting sources and topics.2
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NETWORK NEWS TONE IN PRESIDENTIAL ELECTIONS

Throughout the final weeks of Campaign 2004 it was good to be John Kerry on network news. The Democratic nominee received highly positive coverage between Labor Day and Election Day—59 percent positive in tone. George W. Bush, in contrast, received coverage that was only 37 percent positive (i.e., 63 percent negative) in tone. In other words, Kerry easily won the battle for good press, which was calculated by tallying every positive or negative on-air evaluation of a candidate’s record, policies, personal character, and behavior on the campaign trail by nonpartisan sources. This overall pattern differed little among the networks, as Kerry bested Bush by at least 19 percentage points for all three. Kerry received better press than Bush on policy matters (42 percent positive to 25 percent positive) and on personal evaluations (64 percent to 46 percent).

Kerry’s advantages in media coverage were even more apparent when compared to major party candidates in previous presidential elections, as shown in Table 3.4. The tone of Bush’s coverage was identical to that of 2000—and better than the coverage received by GOP nominee Bob Dole in 1996 or the elder George Bush in 1992. However, the tone of Kerry’s coverage was the best of any major party nominee since CMPA began tracking election news in 1988.

Of course, the broadcast networks had competition this year from a cable channel that attracts a more conservative audience. Fox News Channel, an upstart cable news outlet that has seen a substantial rise in its audience in the past several years, was even more one-sided than the broadcast networks, but in the opposite direction. On Fox, Bush received coverage that was 53 percent positive versus only 21 percent positive coverage for Kerry. That 32 percentage point margin favoring Bush was greater than the overall 22 percentage point gap on the three broadcast networks.

Kerry’s fortunes on all four networks improved considerably following a strong performance in the first presidential debate. On the broadcast networks, Bush received coverage that was 36 percent positive in tone during September—that is, before the first debate—compared to coverage that was 27 percent positive in tone for Kerry. Bush beat Kerry on Fox by a 58 percent to 9 percent margin during that month. (Kerry was also struggling to deal with questions raised by the Swift Boat Veterans for Truth during September). During October, the tone of Kerry’s coverage rebounded to an unprecedented 73 percent positive on the Big Three networks, versus 38 percent positive for Bush. Even on the Fox News Channel, Kerry’s coverage rose to 30 percent positive in tone during October, though still far below the 50 percent positive tone that Bush received.

Overall, in the last five presidential elections going back to 1988, CMPA studies three times found a significant imbalance in the tone of broadcast network news toward the major party candidates. In 1996 Democratic Bill Clinton enjoyed 50 percent positive evaluations versus only

| TABLE 3.4 General Election News: Tone of Coverage, 1988–2004 Labor Day through the Day before Election Day |
|--------------------------------------------------|-------|-------|-------|-------|-------|
| Dem Nominee                                     | 59%   | 40%   | 50%   | 52%   | 31%   |
| Rep Nominee                                     | 37%   | 37%   | 33%   | 29%   | 38%   |

Data based on campaign news stories from the ABC, CBS and NBC evening newscasts between Labor Day and Election Day for all years.
33 percent positive commentary for Republican Bob Dole. In 1992 Bill Clinton bested then-President George H.W. Bush by an even wider margin of 52 percent to 29 percent positive evaluations (Perot’s coverage that year was 45 percent positive). Thus, during his two campaigns for the presidency, a slight majority of Clinton’s on-air evaluations were positive, while over two out of three evaluations of his Republican opponents were negative. Clinton’s advantage in election news coverage has also been independently replicated by other media scholars (Just et al., 1996; Kerbel, 1998).

Network news was not alone in pumping up Clinton at the expense of the elder President Bush in 1992. That year, CMPA expanded its content analysis to include other media outlets, including the Wall Street Journal, the New York Times, the Washington Post and CNN and PBS. In all these media, Clinton received coverage that was better than Bush’s by a margin of at least fifteen percentage points (Farnsworth & Lichter, 2007). These imbalances on network television and elsewhere cannot be dismissed as an accurate reflection of the loser’s inferior political skills, i.e., the reality of the campaign trail. Even after controlling for this subset of evaluations, Clinton enjoyed significantly better notices for his policy stands than his opponents did. (For all five elections we examined, the tonal directionality of policy judgments mirrored the overall pattern of candidate evaluations.)

The only time the Republican candidate fared better on network television than his Democratic opponent was in 1988, when coverage of then-Vice President George H.W. Bush was slightly more positive than that of Michael Dukakis, by the margin of 38 percent to 31 percent favorable assessments. Bush’s slight advantage in 1988 and Gore’s in 2000 can be treated as effectively balanced (or as canceling each other out). If we accept a 10 percentage point difference as the threshold for a clear advantage, then the Democrats’ scorecard in this battle for better network news coverage reads three wins, no losses, and two ties in the five presidential elections between 1988 and 2004.

Of course, in two of the three instances of unbalanced coverage over the past four presidential campaigns, the advantage went to Bill Clinton. (Two of the three distinctly negative treatments were directed at an incumbent president who is a member of the Bush family.) Although it is difficult to imagine that this finding reflects a generalized pro-Clinton tilt (or anti-Bush family trend) in the news, we controlled for this factor by examining all evaluations of Democratic and Republican candidates during the two off-year elections of 1994 and 1998, from Labor Day through Election Day. The results were consistent with the pattern that we observed for general elections: In 1994 Democratic candidates fared better, collectively receiving 43 percent positive evaluations, compared to 31 percent for their GOP counterparts. In 1998 the tone was more balanced, with 43 percent positive judgments of Democrats and 40 percent positive for Republicans.

Our findings demonstrating tonal advantages that favor neither party in some years and favor the Democrats in others are consistent with the results of content analyses of the two presidential elections prior to those studied by CMPA. An examination of news coverage of the 1980 campaign concluded that Ronald Reagan and Jimmy Carter “both did about equally badly on television” (Robinson & Sheehan, 1983, p. 138). Studies of the 1984 campaign found that Walter Mondale received balanced news coverage, while Reagan’s was predominantly negative (Clancey & Robinson, 1985; Graber, 1987).

Clancey and Robinson (1985) accounted for the good press gap between Mondale and Reagan by positing a general anti-frontrunner bias they termed “compensatory journalism.” They argued that reporters are toughest on the candidates who are most likely to become president, in effect compensating those who are trailing with better press than the leaders. However, this hypothesis has since been contradicted by data from subsequent general elections. Clinton got far better press than both Bush in 1992 and Dole in 1996, despite his wire-to-wire leads in the polls.
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And Bush led Dukakis in good press in 1988, albeit by a slight margin, despite his frontrunner status in preference polls throughout the fall.

In sum, a general pattern of negativism on network news has coincided with an intermittent tendency toward more favorable press for Democrats than Republicans. In four of the past nine elections for which exhaustive systematic content analysis data are available (1980, 1988, 1998, and 2000), both sides received mainly negative notices. In the other five (1984, 1992, 1994, 1996, and 2004), Democrats fared substantially better on the evening news programs than did Republicans.4

It appears that negativity and political ideology represent separate dimensions that contribute independently to the tone of election news. To paraphrase George Orwell, journalists may see all candidates as evil, but some as more evil than others. Democratic candidates did not always get better press than Republicans, but Republican candidates never got much better press than Democrats. To be sure, any difference in tone seems less pro-Democratic than anti-Republican. Nonetheless, these data suggest that allegations of ideological tilt in election coverage cannot be dismissed entirely as the special pleading of partisans. At the same time, neither negativity nor partisanship alone can fully account for the tilt in the tone of campaign news.

It is important to note that positive media coverage during the general election does not always help the candidate who received it. For the five elections in which the Democrats received significantly better coverage (the presidential election years of 1984, 1992, 1996, and 2004 and the mid-term congressional elections of 1994), the party was only two-for-five at the polls. Bill Clinton won his two presidential campaigns, but John Kerry lost narrowly in 2004 and Walter Mondale was trounced in 1984, winning only his home state of Minnesota and the overwhelmingly Democratic District of Columbia. In 1994, the off-year election in this group, the Republican candidates for the U.S. House and the U.S. Senate scored extraordinary victories on their way to taking majority party status away from the Democrats in both chambers (Jacobson, 2001a).

The four elections in which coverage was about equally negative for the two parties and their candidates (1980, 1988, 1998, and 2000) also offer mixed results. Reagan won easily in 1980, and the Republican Party took control of the U.S. Senate that year. George H.W. Bush won the presidency in an easy victory in 1988, securing nearly 54 percent of the popular vote and winning 40 states. In the mid-term election of 1998, when the air was thick with the presidential impeachment controversy, the Republicans broke even in the Senate and suffered a net loss of five seats in the House (Jacobson, 2001a). In 2000, of course, the presidential election ended in a virtual deadlock that was settled by the U.S. Supreme Court after a five-week struggle involving partisan activists, lawyers, and Florida ballot counters. Although the Republicans regained the White House that year, the party lost four Senate seats and two House seats (Jacobson, 2001b).

The mixed results demonstrate that the fears of an all-powerful or “imperial” media in the U.S. are overblown. In cases of both equally negative media and of more one-sided coverage, the results offer no evidence in support of the hypodermic effects model of media influence. The media don’t tell us in a consistently decisive and effective way how to vote. But this doesn’t mean television news coverage is unimportant. The mere fact that a “media candidate” did not win does not prove that the media did not influence voters. Further, the media have powerful agenda-setting effects, particularly relating to the framing of news stories, a process of telling viewers what issues to think about and in what ways.

Our content analysis of five presidential elections reveals that what we are told to think about by television—the horse race, candidates who seem to be scheming at every opportunity, and the human failings of those candidates—are not matters likely to make us informed citizens or congenial voters. Nor does the generally declining amount of coverage we have found on all networks remind citizens about the importance of political participation in presidential elections.
CONCLUSION

Media theorist Marshall McLuhan (1964) famously argued that “the medium is the message.” But the evidence shows that in presidential campaigns the message matters a great deal to candidates and voters. So what messages do network television news programs offer us? The short sound bites and shrinking amount of news coverage of elections tell us that presidential candidates aren’t worth listening to for long, and that presidential campaigns don’t deserve much of our attention. The horse race-dominated coverage tells us that issues don’t really matter much either. The embarrassing way the networks made mistake after mistake on Election Night 2000 raises questions about how seriously they take their central mission of being responsible, fair, and accurate transmitters of critically important information.

The heavily mediated and negative coverage that year told us that neither the Democratic liar nor the Republican lightweight deserved to be president. And the lack of coverage of third-party candidates like Ralph Nader and Pat Buchanan told us they hardly existed. (Ironically, the votes for both these candidates turned out to be decisive in Florida, and hence the entire election, in 2000. Gore would have won Florida with a fraction of either Nader’s 97,000 votes in the state or less than one-quarter of the 3,400 apparently mistaken votes recorded for Buchanan in Palm Beach County.)

This multi-count indictment of network news is particularly troubling in light of the central role that the news media play in linking citizens to candidates. Since few of us ever meet presidential candidates in person, our views of Kerry, Bush, Gore, Clinton, and the rest develop largely from what we learn about them from the mass media. And if we rely on network television’s evening newscasts, the flagship public representation of some of the world’s largest companies—including General Electric (NBC) and Disney (ABC)—do not learn much beyond the basic fact that candidates are not nearly as important as reporters, that their positions and records don’t matter much, and perhaps that neither major party candidate really deserves our vote, and other candidates barely exist. Of course, the networks’ Election Night 2000 inaccuracies—together with the retracted CBS 60 Minutes II September 2004 story on George W. Bush’s alleged National Guard records—send an unintended message that the networks don’t deserve our confidence any more than the candidates do.

Simply put, coverage that focuses on the horse race shortchanges candidates trying to talk about issues, and voters who are trying to think about issues. The questions voters ask of candidates are about a lot more than who is gaining or losing ground in the latest poll. The movement in recent years towards talk shows, cable television, and even the Internet suggests that increasing numbers of voters are hungry for the kinds of coverage that broadcast television news is increasingly unable and/or unwilling to provide. Of course, not all people have equal access to, or equal ability to use, these alternative sources of information.

News coverage of 2004 suggests that the considerable ferment and reform efforts by mainstream journalists in recent years, together with extensive criticisms of media content by scholars, may be pushing the news back towards levels of campaign coverage not seen since 1992. But one cannot be as optimistic about the shrinking sound-bites, which in 2004 remained at an abysmally low average of 7.8 seconds. Nor can one be sanguine about the strong differences in the tone of coverage of Kerry and Bush during the 2004 election. That year, Fox tilted towards Bush while the three broadcast networks’ tilted toward Kerry.

In the early years of the 21st century, network news departments continue to struggle to redefine their role in a rapidly expanding media landscape that already includes such new venues for election news as talk radio, cable news networks, Internet sites, and entertainment formats that range from Oprah to late night comedy monologues (Farnsworth & Owen, 2004; Pew, 2000c,
2000d, 2004). Twenty years ago the broadcast network news departments had the field virtually to themselves among electronic media in setting the campaign news agenda. Today they struggle to remain *primus inter pares*.

Of course the broadcast networks are staking their own claims in the new media landscape. For example, NBC reaches voters through the cable networks CNBC and MSNBC, along with their associated web sites, not to mention other news programs like “Dateline” and Jay Leno’s nightly thrusts at politicians during the *Tonight Show* monologues. The information at each network outlet is increasingly integrated with the others by cross-promotions that encourage viewers to learn more by watching another channel or visiting a website. But showing a web page address at the bottom of the screen is no substitute for doing a better job of covering the campaign, an area where there is considerable room for improvement on several dimensions we have examined here.

NOTES

1. Thanks to the staffs of the Center for Media and Public Affairs, especially Mary Carroll Willi, and of Media Tenor for their assistance with this project. Thanks also to the University of Mary Washington and McGill University for financial support and to Rowman & Littlefield for permission to use material drawn from the second edition of *The Nightly News Nightmare*. An earlier version of this chapter was presented at the Seventh Annual International Agenda Setting Conference, Bonn, Germany (2006). All errors remain the authors’ responsibility.

2. Additional data analysis showed that the inclusion of partisan evaluations did not significantly alter the tonal balance between Bush and Gore. We could not make longitudinal comparisons, because only non-partisan source evaluations were coded for all five elections.

3. Just et al. (1996) found no clear tilt in terms of visual images in 1992. CMPA coded shot-by-shot visuals during the same contest and similarly found no clear pattern. We also concluded that few images could be reliably categorized for tone in a fashion that met the criteria of reliability and validity, i.e., replicable judgments that were substantively meaningful.

4. Hofstetter (1976) found negative but balanced network news coverage in the 1972 race between Nixon and McGovern. Unfortunately his coding system conflated what we have termed the viability and desirability dimensions of evaluative content. Robinson and Sheehan (1983, p. 311) cite this problem as a major drawback of this study. This convinced them to separate the two dimensions in their analysis of the 1980 campaign.

REFERENCES


3. TRENDS IN TELEVISION NETWORK NEWS COVERAGE OF U.S. ELECTIONS