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Election Study Finds TV Sound Bites Shorter, Meaner Than In '88

The 1992 presidential candidates are given shorter sound bites and portrayed more negatively on the evening news than in 1988, according to a new study by the Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA). The findings help explain why the candidates are attempting more direct appeals to voters, in formats such as "talk show" interviews and paid programming.

In a study of ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts during the primary elections, CMPA researchers found that the average "sound bite" of all presidential candidates lasted only 7.3 seconds. During the 1988 campaign, the average was 9.8 seconds, or 25 percent longer than this year. The average sound bite has declined 83 percent since 1968, when it averaged 42.3 seconds.

The CPMA study also found that George Bush and Bill Clinton each received more bad press during the primaries than did the 1988 major party nominees. Bush and Clinton both received mainly negative coverage during the primaries. But Ross Perot bucked the trend with mainly positive coverage.

The good and bad press scores are based on a scientific content analysis of all 828 news stories on the presidential campaign that appeared on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts from January 1 through June 2. A random sample of 10 percent of all newscasts was analyzed to measure the length of candidate sound bites. CPMA will continue monitoring network campaign news through Election Day.

Major Findings:

***Coming Up Short** No candidates reached the 1988 average of 9.8 seconds per quote. Tom Harkin had the shortest sound bite of any candidate (4.9 seconds) and George Bush the longest (8.4 seconds). Bill Clinton averaged 8.1 seconds, and was given the longest uninterrupted quote: 27 seconds (CBS, May 20).

***Stealing the Show** Comments from presidential candidates made up only 13 percent of the airtime in the network's campaign stories. Quotes from other sources (such as voters, political experts, etc.) made up 15 percent of airtime. Reporters' comments took up the remaining 72 percent of all election news airtime.

***Thumbs Down on Bush and Clinton** On-air evaluations of George Bush are running 78 percent negative this year. In 1988, Bush received 50 percent negative coverage during the primaries. Evaluations of Bill Clinton were 59 percent negative this year. In 1988, coverage of Michael Dukakis was 54 percent positive during the primaries.

Example: It's tough to lead when you don't know where you want to go. Call it a vision; George Bush doesn't seem to have one.

- Lisa Myers, NBC, 1/28/92

If [Clinton]'s going to cheat on his wife, he's going to cheat on America.

- Voter, NBC, 2/11/92

Ross on a Roll Evaluations of independent candidate Ross Perot were 64 percent positive during the 1992 primary season, better than any other candidate.

Example: We need a man in there who knows business, a man who can take care of his people.

- Voter, ABC, 6/2/92

Perot hasn't been in politics; he's not tainted, yet.

- Voter, CBS, 6/1/92

According to CMPA Co-Director Robert Lichter, "The networks are bashing the candidates and stealing the show for themselves. It is no wonder that the candidates are looking to take their business elsewhere." (This quote takes 7.3 seconds to read aloud, the length of the average candidate sound bite in 1992.)

The Center for Media and Public Affairs is a non-partisan, non-profit organization that conducts scientific analysis of news and entertainment media. This study appears in the June/July Media Monitor, the Center's monthly newsletter. Copies are available upon request.

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