

The Diversity Debate

Media Coverage of Affirmative Action in College Education

Major findings:

- **Fair and Balanced** Mainstream media coverage of diversity programs was balanced. *Page 4*
- **Fairly Unbalanced** But conservative outlets were highly negative. *Page 4*
- **TV Tilt** Fox and NBC were most negative, CBS was most positive. *Page 4*
- **Bashing Bush** Coverage of the Bush administration's position was 90% negative. *Page 6*
- **Affirmative Arguments** The *New York Times* opinion pages were 95% pro-affirmative action. *Page 7*
- **Down on Diversity** The *Washington Times* opinion pages were 93% anti-affirmative

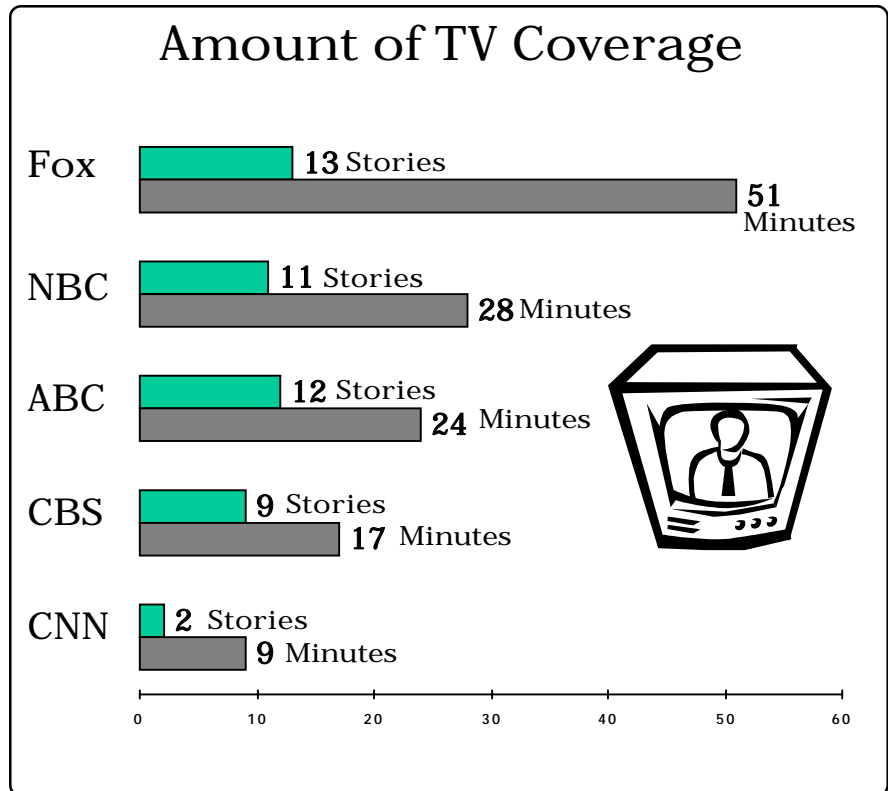
This issue of *Media Monitor* looks at coverage of affirmative action in college enrollment diversity programs during the six months prior to the Supreme Court's decision on two lawsuits brought against the University of Michigan, which claimed discriminatory admission policies at the undergraduate and graduate level. We examined the way this contentious issue was portrayed on the network evening news and news magazine shows, a range of leading national newspapers and the three weekly news magazines.

The Supreme Court's decision to review *Gratz v. Bollinger* and *Grutter v. Bollinger* — which charged the University of Michigan with unfairly favoring minority applicants over equally or better-qualified white applicants — raised the possibility of a complete ban on programs designed to produce racial diversity by giving minority students an advantage over others in admission decisions. We began our analysis of the media's coverage of this contentious debate on January 1, 2003 and concluded on June 30, a week after the Supreme Court handed down its decision. We examined the major network evening news shows — ABC's "World News Tonight," CBS' "Evening News," NBC's "Nightly News," CNN's "Wolf Blitzer Reports" and Fox News' "Special Report with Brit Hume." We also looked at the broadcast networks' news prime time magazine shows, ABC's "Primetime Live" and "20/20," CBS's "48 Hours," "60 Minutes" and "60 Minutes II" and NBC's "Dateline."

In print, we examined both news and opinion coverage in the *New York Times*, *USA Today*, *Wall Street Journal*, *Washington Post* and *Washington Times*, and in the three major news weekly magazines — *Newsweek*, *Time* and *U.S. News and World Report*.

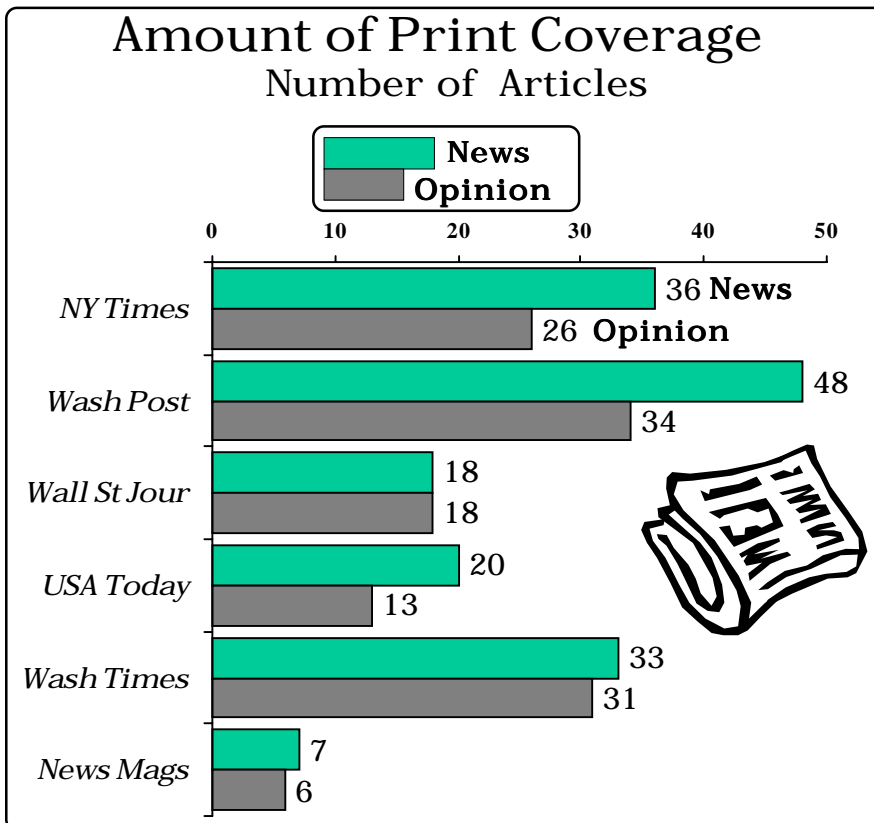
Amount of Coverage

Overall, television devoted two hours and nine minutes to covering the affirmative action debate. The broadcast networks accounted for one hour and eight minutes of coverage, led by NBC with 28 minutes (11 stories) followed by ABC with 24 minutes (12 stories). Despite running three news magazine shows, CBS provided the least amount of coverage with just 17 minutes (9 stories). Cable news accounted for the remaining hour,



with most of that time claimed by Fox (51 minutes and 13 stories).

Overall, the newspapers and news magazines in our sample devoted 209 news stories and 128 opinion pieces (i.e. editorials and op-ed columns) to covering affirmative action. Not surprisingly, given its position as the hometown newspaper of the Supreme Court, The Washington Post led newspaper coverage with 48 news stories and 34 opinion pieces. The *New York Times* ran 36 news stories and 26 opinion pieces, followed by *USA Today* with 20 news stories and 13 opinion pieces. The *Wall Street Journal's* conservative editorial page matched the paper's non-partisan news section with 18 articles each. The sole local paper in our sample, the conservative *Washington Times*, also produced a balance between news (33 stories) and opinion (31 pieces).



Given the potential magnitude of the Supreme Court’s decision, coverage in the weekly news magazines was modest. All three combined produced only seven news stories and six opinion columns.

Topics

Overall, substantive coverage of affirmative action took a back seat to the politics surrounding the debate. Among the five most discussed topics, political aspects outweighed substantive aspects by almost a two-to-one margin (116 discussions vs. 63 discussions). The Bush administration’s position on affirmative action, which combined criticism of the University of Michigan’s alleged quota system with a broader affirmation of the importance of diversity, was the most discussed topic by far (73 discussions). The administration’s position, presented in an amicus

brief to the court, elicited criticism from both opponents and supporters of affirmative action. The fourth through sixth most discussed aspects were the groups that were aligned on each side of the debate (22 discussions) and their strategies and tactics (21 discussions). The most frequently discussed substantive topic concerned alternative plans to affirmative action, such as “top percentage plans” that rank students according to their high school grade-point average (38 discussions), followed by the historical background to the Supreme Court review of Gratz v. Bollinger and Grutter v. Bollinger (25 discussions).

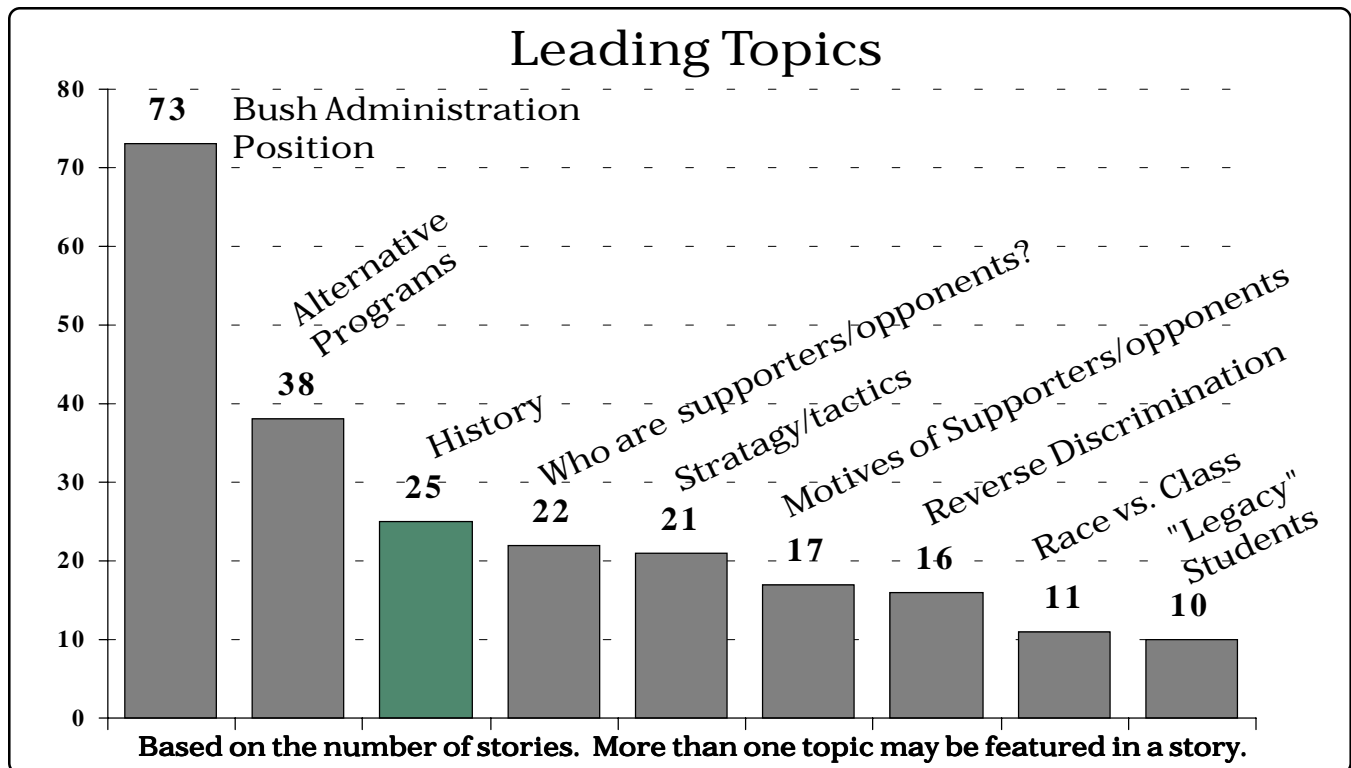
Sources

University sources were the single largest group represented in news coverage of the debate, accounting for 325 sources, in addition to 95

sources from the University of Michigan. Officials from the Bush administration were quoted 232 times, followed by the justices of the Supreme Court, who were quoted 144 times. Pro-affirmative action groups were quoted 89 times and their anti-affirmative action counterparts were quoted 92 times.

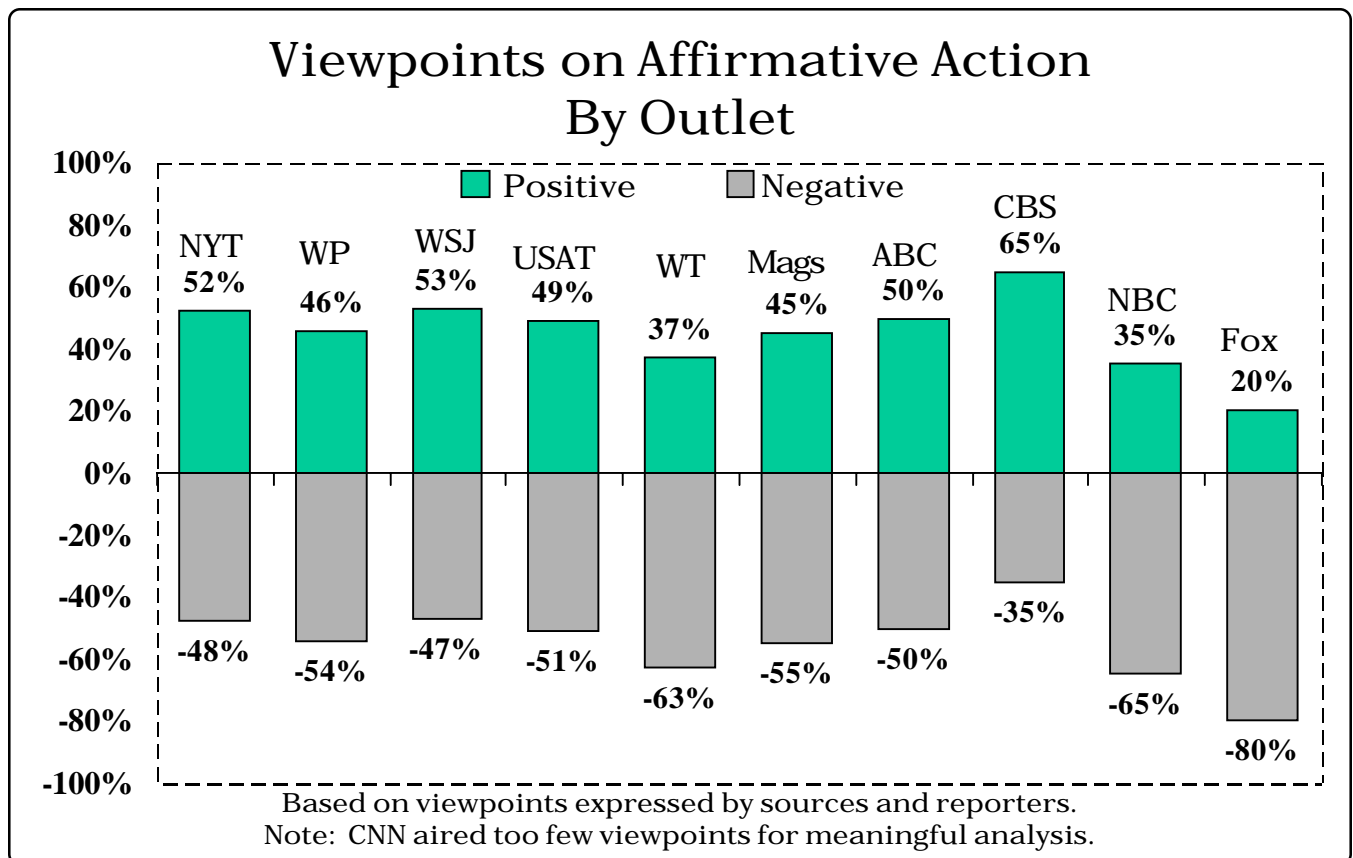
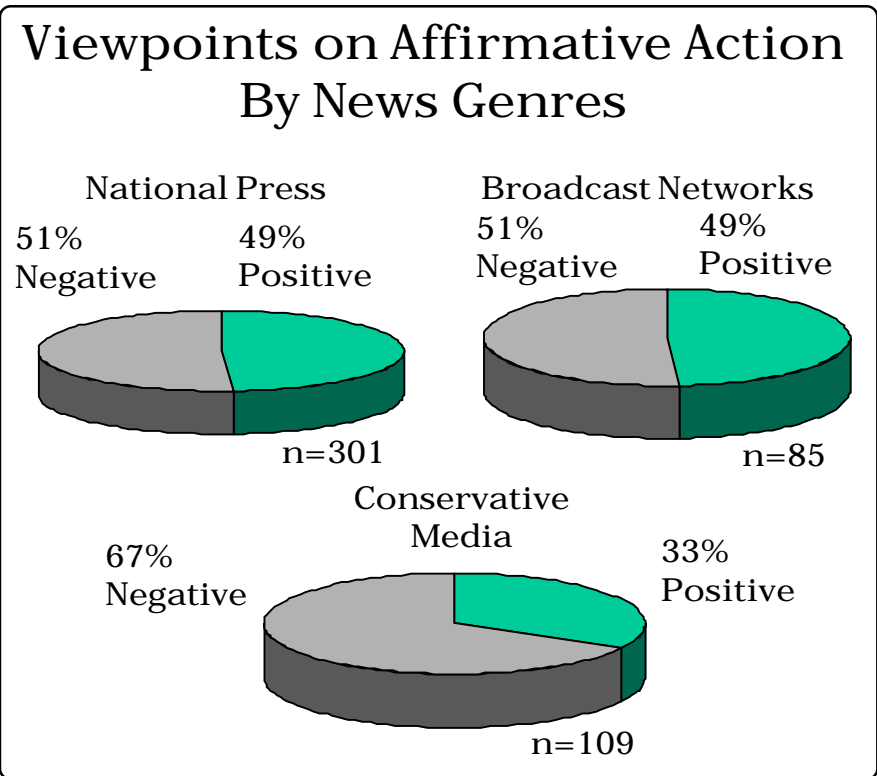
Viewpoints on Affirmative Action

Both broadcast television and the national press covered the debate over minority enrollment and diversity programs in an evenhanded manner. When all viewpoints expressed on the broadcast networks were aggregated, 49 percent supported affirmative action and 51 percent opposed it. There were, however, significant differences among the three networks. Opinion on ABC was perfectly balanced



between positive and negative comments (50 percent positive vs. 50 percent negative). On CBS, almost two out of every three comments supported affirmative action (65 percent positive), and on NBC the pattern was reversed, with two out of every three comments opposing affirmative action (65 percent negative). NBC also aired almost twice as many viewpoints (40) as CBS (23) and ABC (22).

News coverage in print was also balanced between pro and con positions on affirmative action (49 percent vs. 51 percent negative). There were no significant differences among mainstream, nationally-influential print outlets such as the New York Times, Washington Post, Wall Street Journal, USA Today and the weekly news magazines.



By contrast, among the outlets regarded as politically conservative, affirmative action in college enrollment was criticized in two out of every three comments (67 percent negative). Almost two out of three sources quoted in the explicitly conservative *Washington Times* were negative (63 percent), while on the Fox News Channel, which is widely perceived as conservative-leaning, four out of every five comments on affirmative action were critical (80 percent negative).

Arguments

We noted the specific arguments advanced for or against affirmative action in college enrollment. The most frequently cited charge came from opponents, who argued that the policy was illegal or unconstitutional (60 times). For example, the *Washington Times* (1/06/03) quoted President Bush's objections to the University of Michigan's admissions policy on the grounds that it represented a quota system, and quota systems were unconstitutional:

“Our constitution makes it clear that people of all races must be treated equally under the law. Quota systems that use race to include or exclude people from higher education and the opportunities it offers are divisive, unfair and impossible to square with the constitution.”

Similarly, Jennifer Gratz, the plaintiff in one of the suits against Michigan, criticized the university's admissions process to the *Washington Post* (2/23/03) by asserting its illegality. “That would be like me deciding, ‘Hey, I want to feed the hungry, but I don't have

the means to do that, so I'm going to rob the grocery store.’ It's still illegal, even though my intentions are good.”

Critics also labeled affirmative action as being unfair (21 times), an example of reverse discrimination (11 times) and damaging to minorities in the long run (eight times).

The most popular arguments in favor of affirmative action were that it would increase the number of minorities in college (36 times), help build a multicultural society (28 times), combat racism (eight times) and improve the educational milieu (seven times).

Our analysis of the kinds of arguments used by opponents and supporters of affirmative action

revealed an important rhetorical difference between the two camps. Many of the arguments against affirmative action relied on “self-evidence:” affirmative action was, simply, “unfair,” or “illegal.” By contrast, many of the arguments in favor of affirmative action relied on appeals to substantive evidence, such as linking diversity to concrete educational and social benefits.

For example, *U.S. News and World Report* (3/31/03) quoted the University of Michigan defending affirmative action on the grounds that “it encourages students to think critically and to participate in an increasingly multicultural workplace,” while University of Michigan Law School student Brandy Johnson told CBS News (6/23/03) that affirmative action “has improved our experiences in

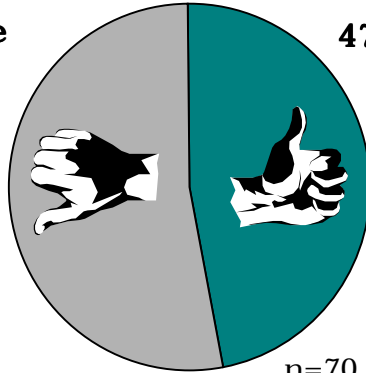
Leading Arguments

1. Illegal/Unconstitutional (anti)	60
2. More Minorities in College (pro)	36
3. Builds Multicultural Society (pro)	28
4. Unfair (anti)	21
5. Reverse Discrimination (anti)	11
6. Hurts Minorities (anti)	8
7. Combats Racism (pro)	8
8. Improves Educational Milieu (pro)	7

Number of instances.

Viewpoints on Alternatives

53% Negative



47% Positive

n=70

the classroom by creating integrated diverse environments.”

Similarly, a *Wall Street Journal* news story (6/24/03) observed that, according to the Supreme Court,

businesses “have made clear that the skills needed in today’s increasingly global marketplace can only be developed through exposure to widely diverse people, culture, ideas and viewpoints.”

Viewpoints on Alternatives

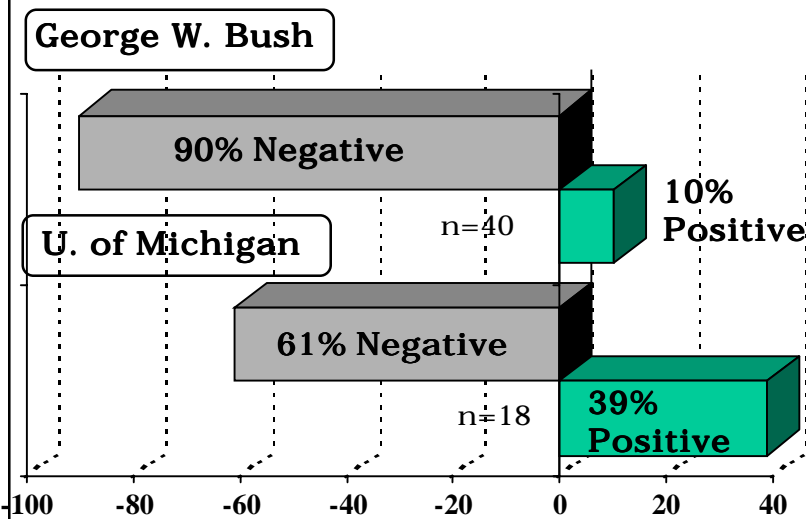
“Top percentage” plans were the most frequently discussed alternatives to affirmative action. Such plans, which are employed in California, Florida and Texas, offer automatic admission to any senior who places within a designated top percentile of his or her graduating high school class. When print and television viewpoints were combined, a slight majority of comments on these plans were negative (47 percent positive vs. 53 percent negative). For example, *USA Today* (3/26/03) cited a bipartisan congressional statement criticizing percentage plans because they “impermissibly rely on segregated schools to produce racial diversity.”

Evaluations of Actors

Although news coverage treated the affirmative action debate in an even-handed fashion, evaluations of the Bush administration’s handling of the issue were overwhelmingly critical (90 percent negative). This, again, reflects criticism of the president’s middle-of-the road position from both opponents and supporters of affirmative action.

For example, Senate minority leader Tom Daschle told ABC News (1/15/03) that the Bush administration “had a choice between siding with those who support civil rights and diversity and those who do not. They chose not to side with those who want to advance equal opportunity on this country. That is disappointing.”

Evaluations of Actors



The University of Michigan was not subjected to much critical evaluation, but when it was, three out of five comments were negative (61 percent negative). The nine evaluations of the Supreme Court produced a split decision, five in favor and four against (54 percent positive).

Opinion Coverage

We analyzed separately news coverage and editorial and op-ed coverage. With news, we analyzed the coverage on a statement by statement basis, so as to reflect the diversity of the sources and opinions quoted within each story. When it came to the opinion pages — newspaper editorials and regular and guest opinion columnists on the op-ed page — we analyzed each article as a whole unit that advanced an argument either for or against affirmative action in college

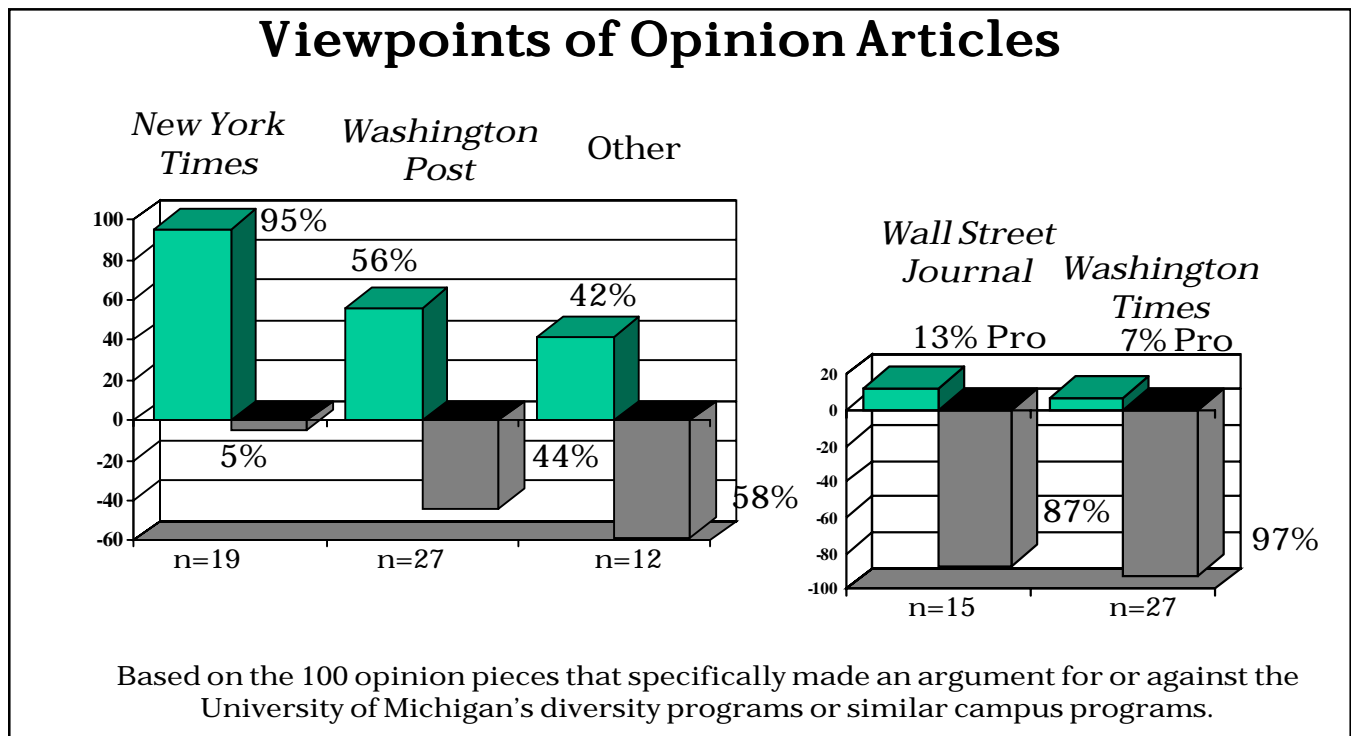
enrollment. Thus differences in the percentages are more significant for opinion pieces than for news stories.

Out of 128 opinion pieces that mentioned the affirmative action debate, we included 100 that specifically made an argument for or against the University of Michigan’s diversity programs or similar campus programs. Overall, opinion pieces in the mainstream press came out in favor of affirmative action in college enrollment by a significant margin — 69 percent positive vs. 31 percent negative. Within this sample, however, one newspaper was largely responsible for creating this imbalance.

The *New York Times*, whose news coverage of the issue was largely balanced (52 percent positive vs. 48 percent negative), brooked almost no dissent in the opinion pages: columns and editorials on affirmative action were 95 percent

positive. By contrast, the *Washington Post*, which was also roughly balanced in its news coverage (46 percent positive vs. 54 percent negative) was similarly balanced on its editorial and op-ed pages: Opinion pieces on affirmative action ran 56 percent positive to 44 percent negative. The other print media (*USA Today* and the news magazines) combined for only 12 opinion articles, which were slightly more critical than supportive (42 percent positive vs. 58 percent negative).

Opinion pieces in the conservative outlets weighed in against diversity programming by a nine to one margin (9 percent positive vs. 91 percent negative). Individually, opinion in the *Wall Street Journal* ran 87 percent negative. Even more negative was the *Washington Times*, whose opinion coverage ran 93 percent negative.



The Nightly News Nightmare

Network Television's Coverage of U.S. Presidential Elections, 1988-2000

Stephen J. Farnsworth & S. Robert Lichter

\$22.95

Farnsworth and Lichter use extensive data from the nonprofit, nonpartisan Center for Media and Public Affairs content analyses to document the decline of network news. The unprecedented breadth and depth of the evidence shatter old myths and shift the terms of the debate about the relationship between news and newsmakers. Proposing sweeping reforms affecting the news organizations, the political process, and the candidates themselves, the authors demonstrate that the old order is gone, but what replaces it may make it tough to sleep at night for those who care about the news.



"If you are looking for a concise description of news trends in recent presidential elections, this book is an easy choice."

-Harvard International Journal of Press/Politics Fall 2003

"A gold mine of data... lively yet serious."

-Diana Owen,
Georgetown University

"Be Afraid! Be very Afraid!"

-Larry Sabato,
University of Virginia

"Illuminating, compellingly presented, and scary -- but frightening only if changes in the way media cover campaigns are not made."

-Journalism History,
Summer 2003

To purchase a copy of this book – with free shipping and handling – please fill out this form and send it with a check or money order for \$22.95 (payable to CMPA) to:

Name _____
Address _____
City _____ State _____ Zip _____

Center for Media and
Public Affairs
2100 L Street, NW
Suite 300
Washington, DC 20037

Thank you for your order.



Center for Media and Public Affairs

2100 L Street, N.W. Suite 300 * Washington, D.C. 20037 * Phone (202) 223-2942 * Fax (202) 872-4014

Media Monitor (Copyright © 2003) is published bimonthly by the Center for Media and Public Affairs, a nonpartisan and nonprofit research organization. The Center conducts scientific studies of how the media treat social and political issues. Yearly individual and organizational subscriptions are available. Visit our home page at www.cmpa.com.

Editors: *Dr. S. Robert Lichter, Dr. Linda S. Lichter*
Research Director: *Daniel Amundson*
Political Studies Director: *Mary Carroll Willi*
Assistant Project Directors: *Matt Curry*
Research Assistants: *Sunlen Miller, Julia Sumner*
Senior Research Fellow: *Trevor Butterworth*
Production and Graphic: *Mary Carroll Willi, Keith Bundy*
Director of Circulation: *Keith Bundy*
