

2002 Year in Review

TV's Leading News Topics, Reporters, and Political Jokes

Major findings:

- **Terror TV** One out of six stories featured terrorism.
Page 1
- **Killer Strikes** News of murders jumped over 50%.
Page 2
- **Managers in Manacles** Enron and other corporate scandals racked up almost 600 stories.
Page 2
- **Late Returns** The last week of Election 2002 got more coverage than all of Election 1998.
Page 5
- **Diversity Programs** Female and minority reporters had their most visible year.
Page 5
- **Bush Wins Rematch** George W. Bush beat out Bill Clinton as the top joke target, reversing their 2001 order.
Page 6

During 2002 we monitored all 12,179 news stories broadcast on the ABC, CBS and NBC evening news programs. We also logged 3,119 jokes about public affairs and public figures from the monologues of late night television comics Jay Leno, David Letterman and Conan O'Brien. This edition of our annual roundup of the hottest topics, most visible reporters and most frequent joke targets of the year focuses on the first full year after September 11th transformed the news agenda.

The events of September 11th initially had a marked effect on network evening news. Despite the hopeful predictions of some commentators, however, many of these effects were short-lived. Although television news did cause a brief upsurge in foreign news, in 2002 the amount of foreign news increased only five percent over 2000 levels. That is still lower than levels of foreign coverage we found in 1992. Also this slight rise in foreign news coverage was prompted not by greater geographic diversity, but a more intense focus on a few countries that were central to the war on terrorism (*Media Monitor* November/December 2002).

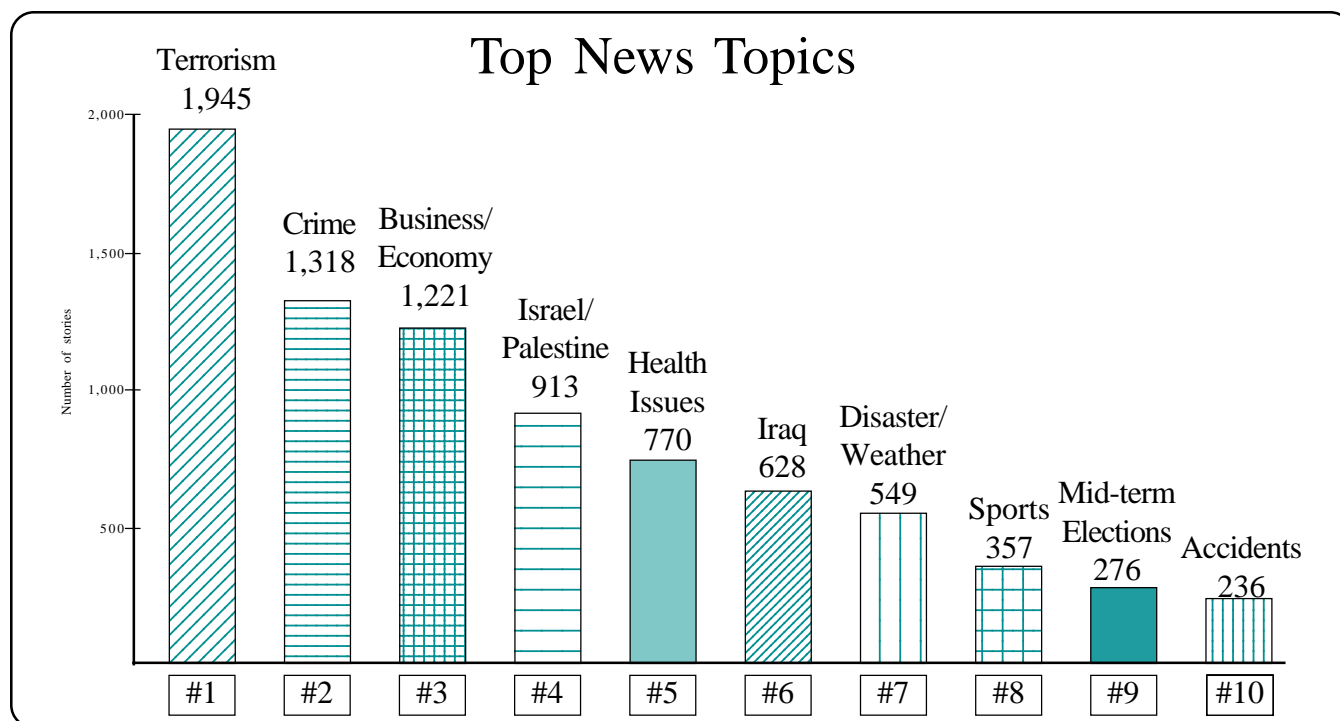
Top Ten TV News Topics for 2002

#1) *Terrorism*

Not surprisingly, the number one topic of the year was terrorism. From Operation Enduring Freedom through the worldwide hunt for Al Qaeda to the one year anniversary of the September 11th attacks and the formation of a new government agency, terrorism dominated the news with 1,945 stories - one out of every six on TV news in 2002. There were four major components of terrorism coverage. Operation Enduring Freedom in Afghanistan accounted for 29 percent (564 stories). This coverage included the progress of operations in Afghanistan, the civilian casualties and military life in the field. The year-long search for Al Qaeda operations around the world accounted for another 25 percent (489 stories). Many of these focused on arrests of possible Al Qaeda members in Germany, England and Buffalo, New York.. Events marking the one year anniversary of 9/11 and other memorial activities during the year combined to account for 23 percent (446 stories).

Finally, the much-debated topic of a cabinet level department to combat terrorism was the subject of 15 percent (289 stories). The heaviest coverage occurred from May through July, as debate surged over new immigration restrictions, a restructuring of the FBI, as well as renewed threats to American safety. The coverage

(continued on page 2)



peaked with the November 19th creation of the Department of Homeland Security. A second tier of stories dealt with questions about intelligence and law enforcement failures prior to 9/11 (97 stories), which were spurred by Congressional hearings in June, and the threat of biological or chemical weapons (95), including the continuing investigation of the 2001 anthrax cases and the possible threat of small-pox.

#2) *Crime*

Crime moved up one spot from 2001 to take second place with 1,318 stories, a 6 percent increase over 2001 (1244 stories). In fact, levels of television news crime coverage are approaching their peak period of the late '90s. As in previous years, murder was the most commonly covered crime with 450 stories. Murder coverage has risen steadily over the past three years, and 2002 offered 53 percent more murder coverage than did 2001. The biggest murder story concerned the October sniper shootings, which left 10 dead. Occurring in the very backyards of much of the Washington press corps, the shootings generated 209 stories, nearly half the overall total. Other newsworthy murders included the trial

of Andrea Yates in Houston for the murder of her five children (34 stories), the shootings at the El Al ticket counter in L.A. airport (21) and the manslaughter trial of Thomas Junta, the so-called "hockey dad" (17).

A second high profile crime story was corporate fraud. The scandals that wracked Enron, WorldCom, Adelphia Communications and other major firms accounted for 164 stories. The Enron collapse generated 41 stories, Martha Stewart and IMClone 34 stories, and WorldCom 11. The sex scandal in the Catholic church led to 142 stories about criminal sexual abuse. (There were 235 stories about the sex scandals in the Church, but the other 97 dealt with reform efforts and other non-crime topics).

The summer of 2002 brought a flurry of reports on child kidnappings, much as shark attacks did in summer 2001. The 72 stories included the kidnapping of Elizabeth Smart (33 stories), the kidnapping and murder of Samantha Runion (19) and, the trial of David Westerfield for the kidnapping and murder of Danielle van Dam (11). Other leading crime stories included rape (48 stories) and illegal drug use (40). The latter remained at levels virtually iden-

tical to 2001 and 2000, a small fraction of the 518 stories we recorded during the peak year of drug coverage in 1989.

#3) *Business/Economy*

Business and economic news received an almost identical number of coverage (1221 stories) as crime news. Driven by high profile business scandals and bankruptcies, business news accounted for 857 stories while the faltering economy accounted for the other 364.

The biggest business story of the year was the string of corporate scandals tied to questionable accounting practices and possible fraud at businesses as diverse as Enron, WorldCom and Adelphia Communications. Scandals accounted for 428 business stories, not counting an additional stories on business crimes. During the first half of the year business scandals accounted for 77 percent of all business coverage (Media Monitor Sept/Oct 2002). For the entire year, scandals accounted for 54 percent of all business news. Enron's bankruptcy (which began in late 2001) and the ensuing investigation dominated coverage of corporate scandals

with 238 stories. The general topic of corporate greed and dishonesty accounted for another 122 stories. IMClone and insider trading allegations against Martha Stewart were covered in 71 stories. The WorldCom accounting scandal racked up 38 stories.

During the first six months of 2002, Media Monitor examined TV news coverage of business scandals in detail. Coverage in the first half of the year focused on the impact the scandals would have on the economy (392 stories) and details of the wrongdoing (371). The penalties and consequences of this behavior were discussed 278 times. The nexus of Congress and big business accounted for 195 discussions, while business connections to the White House showed up 88 times. With criminal penalties (39%) and legislative remedies (25%) dominating discussions of proposed solutions, it is not surprising that four out of five opinions (86%) favored government action to clean up the problem. (Media Monitor Sept/Oct 2002).

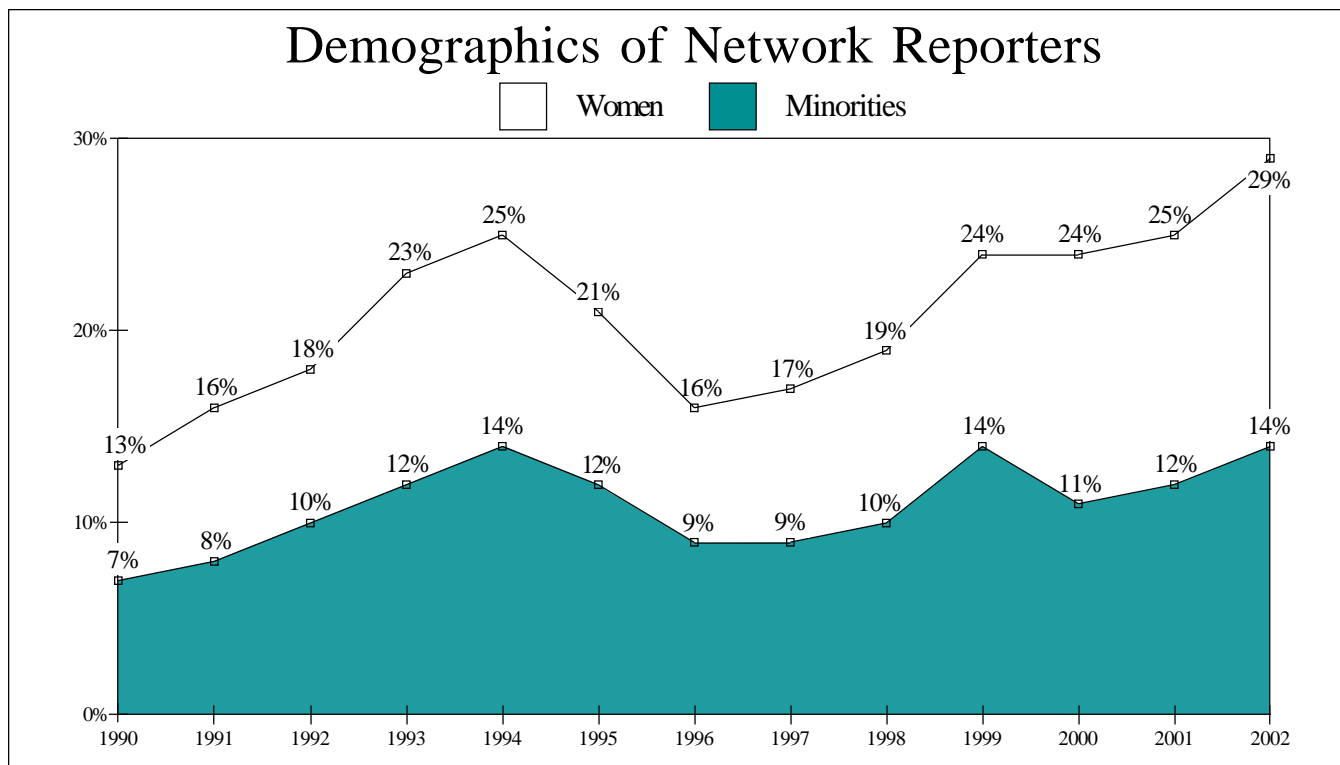
#4) *Israel/Palestinians*

News from Israel was almost synonymous with coverage of Middle East violence in 2002. Of the 913 stories about Israel, 826 were about the continuing terrorist attacks or Israeli reprisals. Only 77 stories discussed the peace process and repeated efforts to negotiate a cessation of violence.

The July/August issue of Media Monitor examined three months of coverage of the Israeli Palestinian conflict, from the April Passover suicide bombings through the end of June. The Israeli military incursions accounted for 239 stories during these three months, while the Palestinian suicide attacks accounted for 118. The U.S. role in the dispute appeared in 82 reports. The tone of the coverage was negative toward all parties, with the Palestinians receiving the most criticism. Opinions on Palestinian actions were 92 percent negative, while views on Israeli actions were 78 percent

Top 50 Network Evening News Reporters

Rank	Reporter	Frequency	Network	Gender	Race
1	Roberts, John	133	CBS	M	W
2	Hager, Robert	128	NBC	M	W
3	Mitchell, Andrea	123	NBC	F	W
4	Brokaw, Tom*	118	NBC	M	W
5	Williams, Pete*	116	NBC	M	W
6	Myers, Lisa	115	NBC	F	W
7	Avila, Jim	113	NBC	M	H
8	Miklaszewski, Jim	110	NBC	M	W
9	Rather, Dan*	106	CBS	M	W
10	Moran, Terry	105	ABC	M	W
11	Bazell, Robert	104	NBC	M	W
12	Martin, David	101	CBS	M	W
13	Raddatz, Martha	100	ABC	F	W
14	Thompson, Anne	95	NBC	F	W
15	Axelrod, Jim	89	CBS	M	W
16	Mason, Anthony	85	CBS	M	W
17	Harris, Dan	84	ABC	M	W
18	Brown, Campbell	83	NBC	F	W
19	McWethy, John	82	ABC	M	W
20	Douglass, Linda	80	ABC	F	W
20	Cowan, Lee	80	CBS	M	W
20	Gregory, David	80	NBC	M	W
23	Reynolds, Dean	78	ABC	M	W
23	Stark, Betsy	78	ABC	F	W
23	Stewart, Jim	78	CBS	M	W
26	Orr, Bob	75	CBS	M	W
27	Judd, Jackie	73	ABC	F	W
28	Thomas, Pierre	70	ABC	M	B
28	Attkisson, Sharyl	70	CBS	F	W
30	Hawkins, David	69	CBS	M	W
31	Schieffer, Bob*	68	CBS	M	W
32	Fletcher, Martin	67	NBC	M	W
33	Wright, David	65	ABC	M	W
34	Bowers, Cynthia	64	CBS	F	W
35	Jennings, Peter*	63	ABC	M	W
36	Pitts, Byron	62	CBS	M	B
36	Chen, Joie	62	CBS	F	A
38	Andrews, Wyatt	61	CBS	M	W
38	Kaledin, Elizabeth	61	CBS	F	W
40	Redeker, Bill	59	ABC	M	W
41	Ross, Brian	58	ABC	M	W
41	Strassman, Mark	58	CBS	M	W
43	Blakemore, Bill	56	ABC	M	W
44	Stark, Lisa	56	ABC	F	W
45	Findlay, Gillian	55	ABC	F	W
45	McKenzie, John	55	ABC	M	W
45	Muller, Judy	55	ABC	F	W
45	Yang, John	55	ABC	M	A
45	O'Donnell, Norah	55	NBC	F	W
50	Hughes, Sandra	53	CBS	F	W
50	Phillips, Mark	53	CBS	M	W
50	Plante, Bill	53	CBS	M	W



negative and ratings of the Bush administration's role 79% negative. Among leaders, Yasser Arafat fared worst with just eight percent positive ratings, Israel leader Ariel Sharon totaled 22% positive opinions, and President Bush had a 28% positive rating.

#5) *Health Issues*

There were 770 stories about health issues in 2002, a 25% drop from 2001. The most frequent health topic consisted of new treatments for disease (183 stories). These covered a wide variety of conventional treatments for illnesses as well as interest in alternative medicine and organ transplants (18 stories apiece).

News about the outbreak or incidence of diseases followed close behind with 176 stories. For the first time in six years cancer was not the most-discussed disease. That distinction went to the summer outbreak of West Nile virus (48 reports), followed by cancer (44), heart disease (19) and AIDS (18). In a second tier of health issues were discussions of food, nutrition, and diets (59 stories) and the costs of health

care and health insurance (57 stories, including 11 about prescription drug prices).

#6) *Iraq*

The debate over Iraqi behavior and the U.S. response placed sixth in 2002 with 628 stories. Almost all of this discussion revolved around U.S. plans to oust Saddam Hussein (592 stories). ABC offered slightly more Iraq coverage (248 stories) than NBC (231) with both far ahead of CBS (149 stories). The vast majority of these occurred after the debate over war picked up in September. The leading topics were plans by Iraqi expatriates to oust Saddam and the debate over the advisability of war and how it should be conducted. Those two issues dominated news coverage through the end of the year, with occasional reports on military actions in the Iraqi no-fly zones. As the year drew to a close, the debate over weapons inspections took center stage.

#7) *Disaster/Weather*

Coverage of natural disasters and weather was up 16 percent from 2001 (549 vs.475 stories) although still well

below the 634 stories we found in 2000. As in the past two years, wildfires were the biggest story (179). Led by fires in Colorado (61) and Arizona (50). Blizzards and severe winter storms were covered in 79 stories, and hurricanes were the subject of 78. Hurricanes Isidore (30) and Lilli (21) were the most heavily covered. Floods were covered in 49 and tornadoes in 41.

#8) *Sports*

Sports coverage took a bigger share of the news agenda in 2002 than in 2001, due largely to the Salt Lake City Olympics. Of 357 sports stories in 2002, the Winter Olympics accounted for 109. Olympic coverage was heaviest on NBC, which used its home turf advantage as the network covering the games. Following the Olympics in newsworthiness came reports on baseball with 32 stories. A possible baseball strike that was resolved in August accounted for 23 of these. The remarkable performance of the U.S. men's soccer team in World Cup play drew 22 stories. Finally, coverage of football and golf received 15 stories apiece,

auto racing drew 14, and Steve Fossett's successful solo trip around the world in a balloon attracted 10 stories.

#9) *Mid-term Elections*

The 2002 midterm elections were the subject of 276 stories. Election coverage was "backloaded," with the final eight days of the year's races receiving more network news airtime than the first eight weeks after Labor Day. The final week's total also exceeded the airtime devoted to the entire 1998 midterm campaign. (<http://www.cmpa.com/pressrel/Elect2002bPR.htm>)

After averaging a combined 2.3 minutes of airtime per night over the first eight weeks after Labor Day (130.6 minutes total), the three nightly newscasts devoted 17.7 minutes per night to the midterm races in the final eight days of the campaign (141.4 minutes total). Overall network attention to Election 2002 averaged 4.25 minutes per night – 53 percent higher than the 1998 midterms (2.0 min/night on the three newscasts) but 41 percent less than the 1994 midterms, which averaged 7.2 minutes of coverage each night. Following Senator Paul Wellstone's fatal plane crash on October 25th, the Minnesota race for his seat – and the controversial memorial service held in his honor – dominated political coverage, receiving 37 percent of all election-related airtime in the campaign's final days.

#10) *Accidents*

A wide variety of accidents combined to take tenth place in the news agenda with 236 stories. The single biggest story was a rescue of trapped Pennsylvania coal miners (41 stories). Collectively, aviation accidents received more attention (52 stories). Then ranged from a teenager who flew a plane into a Florida building to the investigation of the crash of American Airlines Flt. 587 over Queens in 2001, and the crash of an Air China jet in South Korea. The 43 stories on highway crashes included weather related pile-ups in California and Georgia, the

collapse of a highway bridge in Oklahoma after it was hit by a barge, and numerous other smaller crashes. Railway accidents (35 stories) included the Amtrak Autotrain derailment in Florida, a collision between a freight train and a passenger train in California and the derailment of an Amtrak train outside Washington, D.C.

Newsroom Diversity

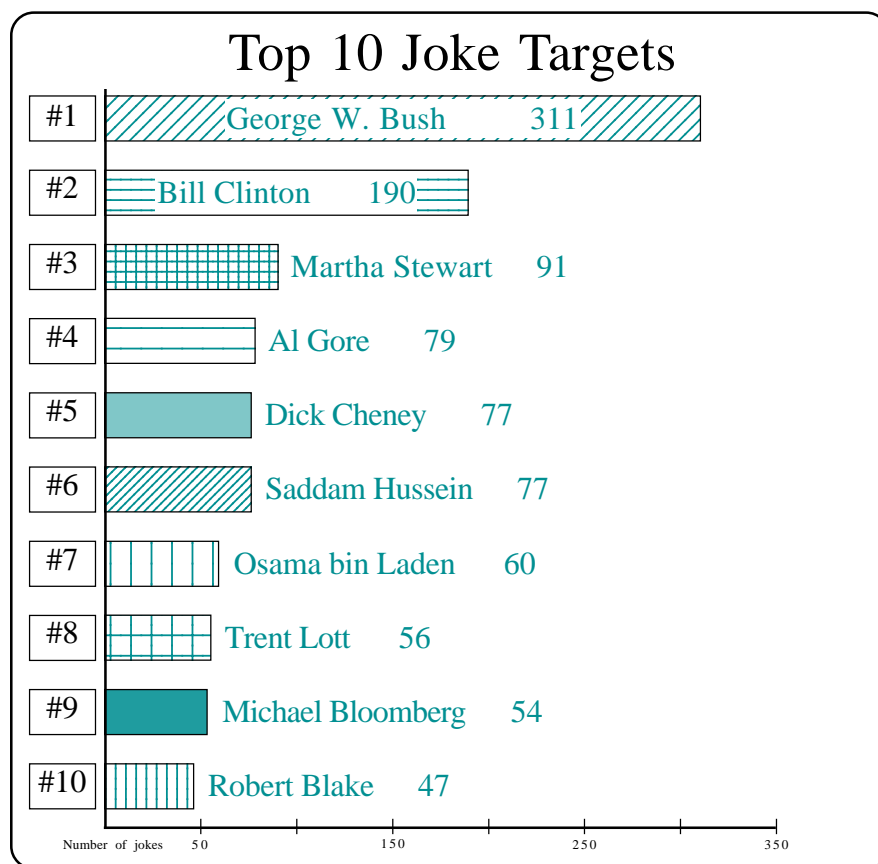
Newsroom diversity improved in 2002, as the presence of both women and minorities increased over 2001. Female reporters accounted for 29 percent of on-air reports, the highest total in the past 12 years. Minority reporters were represented in 14 percent of reports, which tied their peak visibility year of 1999.

For the second year in a row NBC was the most diverse network in terms of both minority and female visibility. On NBC "Nightly News," 31 percent of stories were narrated by women and 15 percent by minority reporters. ABC "World News Tonight" followed close

behind with 30% of on-air reports from women and 14 percent from minorities. CBS "Evening News" trailed its competitors, most notably in female representation: on CBS women reported 24 percent of reports, while minority reporters accounted for 13 percent.

Despite the overall increases, almost all of the most prominent reporters on the evening news were white. In a reprise of 2001, NBC's Jim Avila was the only minority reporter in the top 25. Mr. Avila's 113 stories once again placed him seventh on the list. Coverage of the collapse of Enron and the sex scandal in the Catholic Church contributed heavily to his total. The next most visible minority reporter was Pierre Thomas of ABC, who finished 27th with 70 stories. In all five minority members made the list of the top 50 reporters.

Women fared substantially better than they did in 2001. Two female reporters made the top ten, six were found in the top 20, and 17 of the top 50 reporters



were women. The two most visible women were both from NBC – foreign affairs correspondent Andrea Mitchell (123 stories) and national correspondent Lisa Myers (115).

Political Punchlines

As usual, the President dominated late night jokes, but at a much lower level than in recent years. In 2002, President Bush was the butt of 311 jokes, down from 521 in 2001, and less than one-quarter of the record 1341 jokes aimed at Bill Clinton in 1998. In a sure sign that things are returning to their pre-9/11 patterns, however, one in three Bush jokes (36%) questioned his intel-

lect. Former president Clinton held onto second place with 190 punchlines. He was followed by Martha Stewart (91), whose insider trading woes and public image made her a prime target. Presidential non-candidate Al Gore (79) and Vice-President Dick Cheney (77) rounded out the top five joke targets.

Saddam Hussein placed sixth with 77 jokes, which represented about half the jokes told about Iraq and the impending war. Osama bin Laden was the butt of 60 jokes, almost all of them in the first seven months of the year. Trent Lott came in eighth with 56 jokes

- all in the month of December following his remarks at Strom Thurmond's birthday party. New York Mayor Michael Bloomberg racked up 54 jokes, with 50 originating from David Letterman. Actor Robert Blake, facing murder charges, rounded out the top 10 with 47 jokes. Although the specific players in the sex abuse scandal rocking the Catholic Church were rarely identified, the scandal itself was the subject of 151 jokes. The corporate scandals that played such a large role in the news were also rich fodder for late night comics. Collectively they accounted for 170 punchlines.

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