

The Media at the Millennium

The Networks' Top Topics, Trends, and Joke Targets of the 1990s

In the 1990s:

■ **If It Bleeds...** Crime was the #1 TV news topic with five stories nightly since 1993.

Page 1

■ **...It Leads** Murder coverage increased over 500% while real world homicide rates dropped over 40%. Page 3

■ **World Weary** Foreign coverage dropped from one-third to one-fifth of the news agenda. Page 4

■ **TV Votes No** Campaign news this year is 25% lower than in the past three presidential elections. Page 5

■ **Comedians for Clinton** Bill Clinton was the butt of six times as many jokes as anyone else in Leno's and Letterman's monologues. Page 5

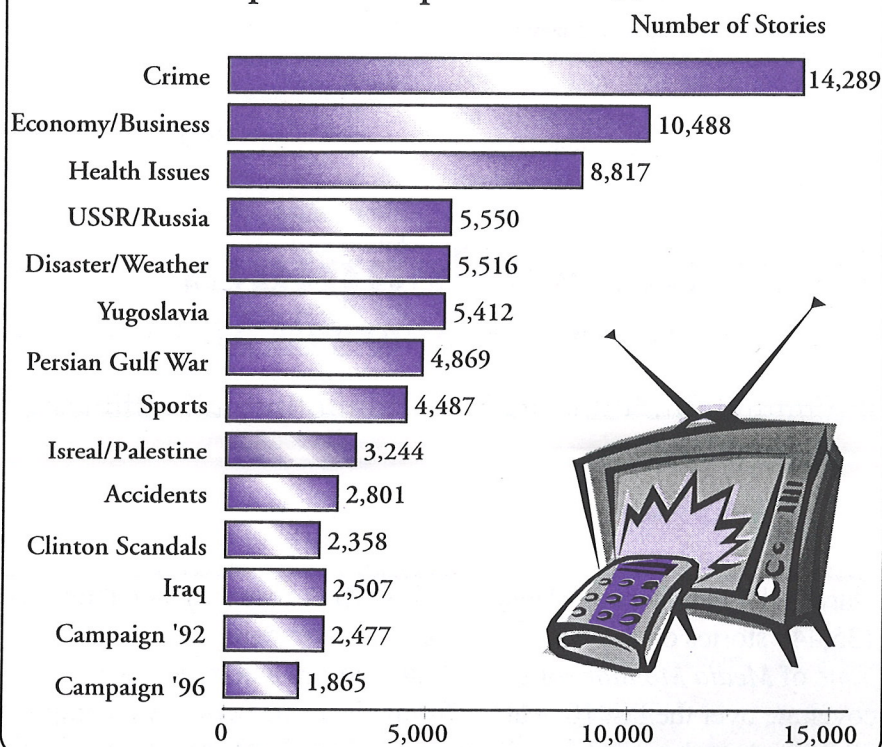
During the past decade (1990 -1999) CMPA researchers catalogued 135,449 stories on the ABC, CBS, and NBC evening newscasts. This issue of *Media Monitor* sorts out leading topics and trends in TV news coverage over the last 10 years. During the same period, we compiled 28,311 jokes about public affairs on Jay Leno's "Tonight Show" and David Letterman's "Late Show." This issue charts their top joke targets of the decade.

C rime was the decade's number one news topic. Driven by the O.J. Simpson murder trial, crime has swallowed up an increasing share of the news agenda as the decade continued. This topic is discussed in depth on page 3. Economic and business news took the number two spot in the news agenda. The early 1990s featured frequent heavy reporting on a recessionary slow economy and those areas or industries that were slow to turn around. As the decade progressed and the economy improved, attention turned to the phenomenal rise in the stock markets. The most recent coverage has focused on the new economy of high tech companies and "dot coms." Along with these general economic trends also came news of various corporate mergers (e.g. Daimler-Chrysler, AOL-Time Warner) and inappropriate corporate behavior (e.g. accusations of racism at Texaco and Denny's restaurants, and illegal technology transfers by Lockheed Martin).

Health issues covered a wide range of medical discoveries about the causes, treatments or cures of diseases. Over the years AIDS, cancer, heart disease and Alzheimer's disease have been among the most frequently discussed diseases. News about the USSR and,

(continued on page 2)

Top News Topics of the 1990s



Saturation coverage of the international crisis and subsequent war in the Persian Gulf spanned the last quarter of 1990 and the first half of 1991. While the war did not end Iraq's troublemaking in the region it did redefine the media-military relationship in ways that continue to be seen in war reporting.

Sports news has become more prominent in recent years, driven largely by weekend reports on sporting events. There have also been scandals like Cincinnati Red's owner Marge Schott's racist remarks, basketball coach Bobby Knight's behavior, and baseball pitcher John Rocker's insults to various minorities.

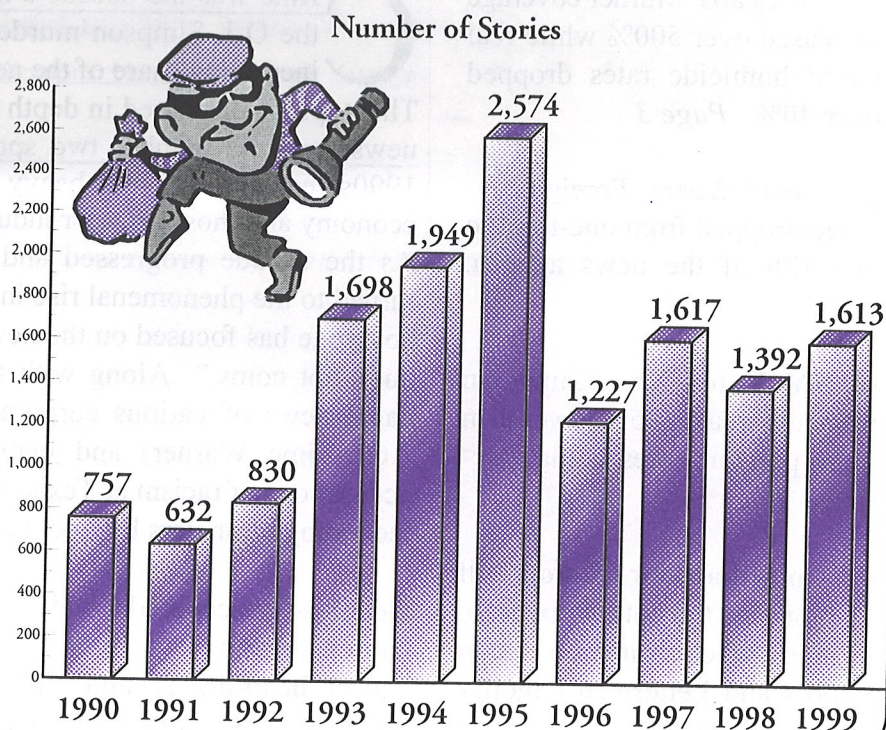
Israel and the Palestinians have regularly made news throughout the decade. Peace efforts have been the dominant focus, including a treaty signed in 1993, an Israeli-Jordanian treaty in 1994, the withdrawal of troops from some of the occupied

subsequently, Russia has tracked the transition of the economy and government from the old communist system to a fledgling democracy with a quasi-market economy. Conflicts with breakaway republics such as Lithuania and Chechnya also made news, as did a failed coup attempt in the summer of 1991.

Natural disasters and severe weather have been an increasing part of the news agenda in the last few years. Earthquakes, mudslides, floods, and tornadoes, as well as the annual hurricane season have all garnered attention. Severe weather ranging from winter blizzards to summer heatwaves has drawn increasing notice as well.

The dissolution of Yugoslavia and subsequent waves of ethnic cleansing placed sixth on the decade news agenda. Battles in Bosnia and NATO intervention in Kosovo, as well as international peacekeeping efforts, have all made news over the years.

Crime News 1990-1999



territories in 1995, and the long-running negotiations over the future of the occupied territories. Reports on renewed strife have occasionally interrupted the quest for peace, most dramatically in the assassination of Prime Minister Yitzhak Rabin.

Reports on accidents, which round out the top ten, cover a wide range of mishaps. Included are everything from TWA flight 800 and John Kennedy Jr's plane crash to a deadly Amtrak crash in Illinois and the collapse of a bonfire at Texas A & M.

TV News Is a Crime

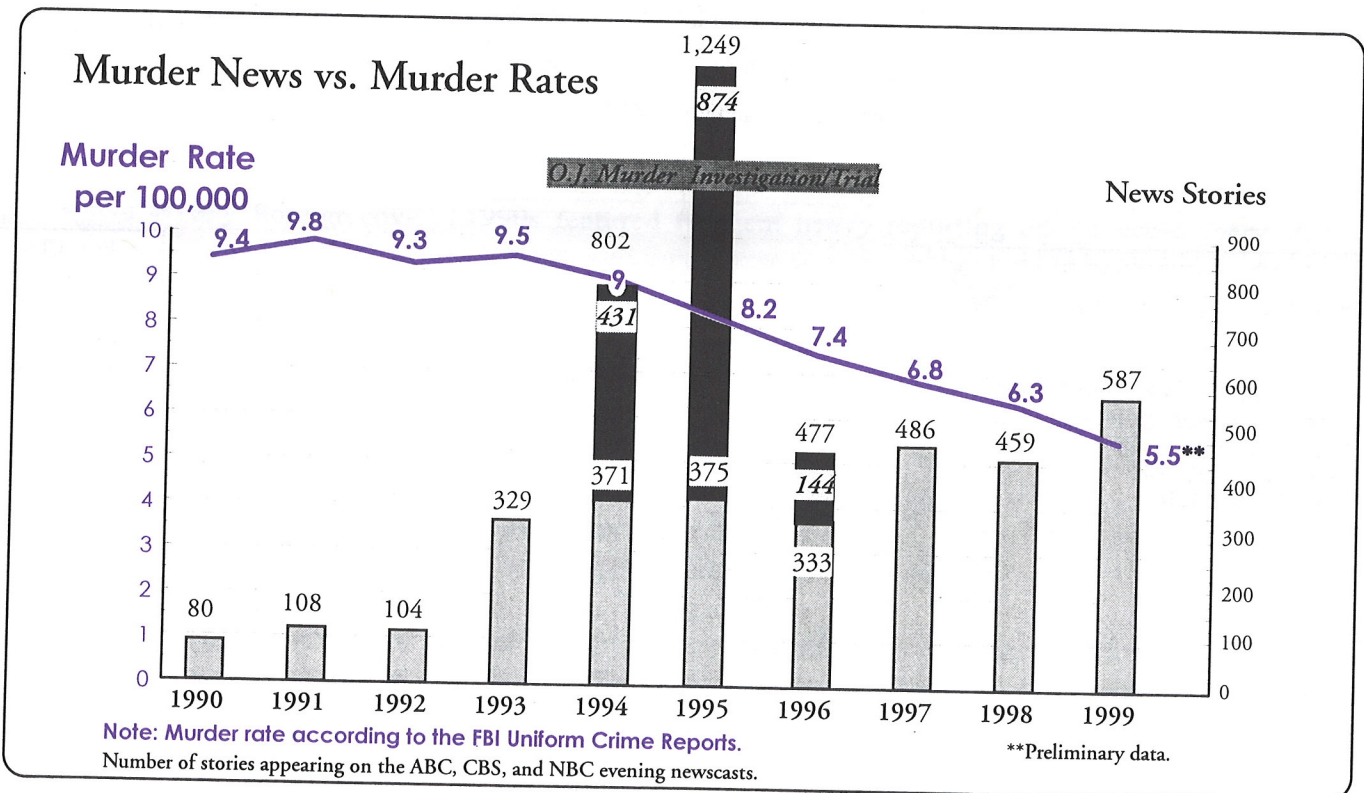
The 1990's was the decade of crime news on network television news. Since 1993, when the networks' infatuation with crime began, crime has been the number one news topic four out of seven years. During the past ten years the networks have offered an astonishing 14,289 crime stories, an average of almost

four per day. During the past seven years, since crime coverage began to soar, the annual average has been almost five stories per night.

Coverage of crime rose dramatically in 1993 in the wake of the 1992 Presidential election, when concerns about crime played a role in the campaign. The O.J. Simpson trial in 1994 and 1995 drove the coverage to new heights. Crime news never regained the remarkable O.J.-abetted level of 1,249 stories that it reached in 1995, but crime has remained one of the top three news topics every year since. Network news coverage typically features a mix of celebrity misdeeds and lurid or sensational acts of violence (e.g., the murders of Jon Benet Ramsey and Gianni Versace, the shooting of two Capitol police officers in the Capitol building, and the beating death of gay teenager Matthew Shepard). In the post-O.J. era, the network agenda has expanded to include stories on robberies, murders and police chases which, prior to 1993, were judged more often to be of only local attention.

Beginning in 1997 a new phenomenon caught the attention of network journalists – school shootings. From Pearl, Mississippi to Springfield, Oregon, a series of shootings in schools across the country caught the media's eye. We analyzed coverage of eight of these incidents on the nightly news (*Media Monitor* July/August 1999) and found that the shootings at Columbine High School made the most news (151 stories). News accounts most often traced the causes to broader social trends, particularly a violence-ridden popular culture and the easy accessibility of guns. In the quest for solutions, most sources who were quoted supported some type of gun control or improved school security.

The overall doubling of crime coverage since the early 1990s pales next to the increased attention given to murders in particular. In the peak year of O.J. coverage (1995), the networks devoted an astonishing 1,249 stories to homicide, with the Simpson case accounting for more than two-thirds of that total (875



stories). In 1995 alone, there were more homicide stories than in the first five years of the decade combined, after excluding the O.J. coverage that began in 1994. Even apart from the landmark Simpson case, however, murder coverage was on the rise throughout the 1990s. During the first third of the decade (1990-92), the networks averaged fewer than 100 homicide stories per year. During the mid 1990s (1993-96), even after excluding O.J. coverage, murder news leaped to 352 stories per year on average. In the final third of the decade (1997-99), homicide coverage jumped once more to 511 stories per year, more than a five-fold increase from just a few years earlier. Ironically, this media trend represents a reversal of reality. Even as media coverage of murder rose, the real world murder rate was falling steadily. In fact, preliminary Justice Department data for 1999 projects the lowest homicide rate of the decade. The murder rate has fallen 42 percent from 1990 levels, in the face of a seven-fold increase in media attention, from a low of only 80 stories in 1990 to a high of 587 in 1999.

Stop the World...

The 1990s witnessed a retreat from foreign news coverage at the broadcast networks, which began closing foreign bureaus and consolidating overseas operations during the late 1980s. The result was a gradual reduction in news about foreign countries throughout the decade. At the beginning of the decade international news accounted for one-third of the network evening news agenda. If we include news about the crisis and subsequent war in the Persian Gulf, the proportion jumps to half (50%) of the entire newshole during 1990 and 1991. Coverage of foreign countries started dropping off in 1992 and reached a low of 20 percent in 1996.

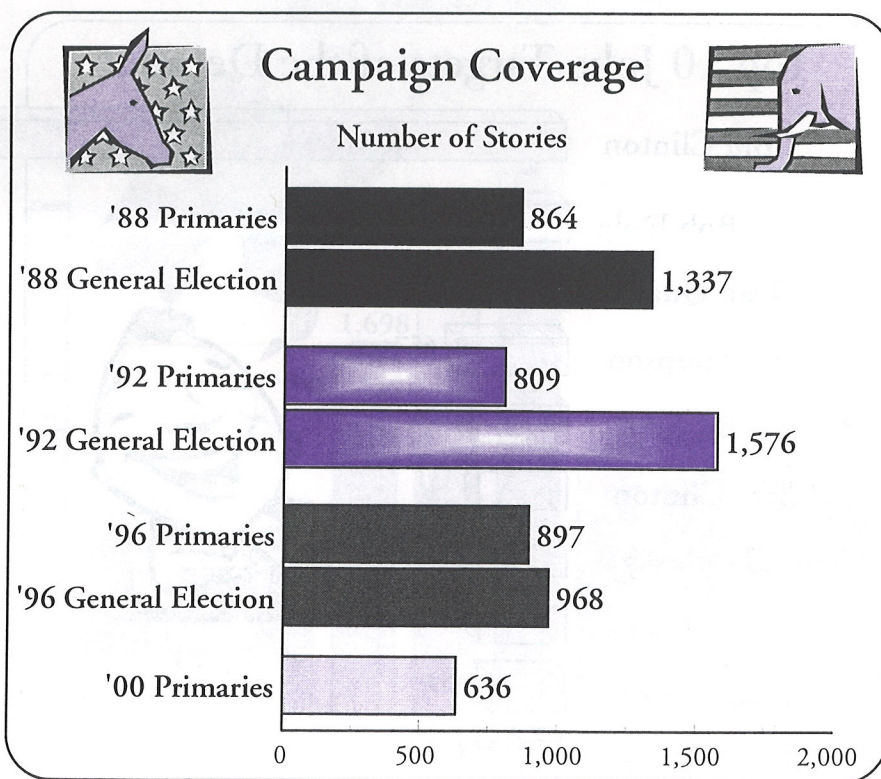
The closing years of the decade saw a stabilization in international news levels. In 1997, foreign news held steady at 20 percent before rising slightly to 24 percent in 1998. Coverage dropped again in 1999 to 21 percent of the news agenda. If we include the air war and subsequent peacekeeping mission in Kosovo, then international news accounted for 28 percent of all stories during the last year of the decade. The decline in foreign news occurred across all three networks, but it was most precipitous at NBC, where foreign news fell by more than half (52%) between 1990 and 1996. Since 1996, NBC has closed the gap to within two percentage points of foreign news leader ABC. ABC has continued to provide the highest proportion of international news ever since taking the lead in 1991. At the dawn of the new millennium, coverage of most foreign countries ranks below the attention given to news about outer space. Last year only two countries received more attention than did extraterrestrial matters. There were 193 stories about space, outdistancing

coverage of every nation except Serbia (1,596) and Russia (208). In 1998, only Iraq (583 stories) outpaced coverage of space (288).

Social disorder (wars, coups, demonstrations, etc.) has been the number one foreign news topic of the 1990s. From 1990 through 1993 about one out of five foreign stories dealt with actual or threatened violence. The proportion jumped in the middle of the decade (1994-96) to one out of three foreign stories. Recent years have seen a return to the pattern laid down at the start of the decade. Since 1997, coverage of social strife has accounted for between one-fourth and one-fifth of all foreign news.

Election Tuneout

Election news isn't what it used to be. The Campaign 2000 primaries attracted only 636 stories,

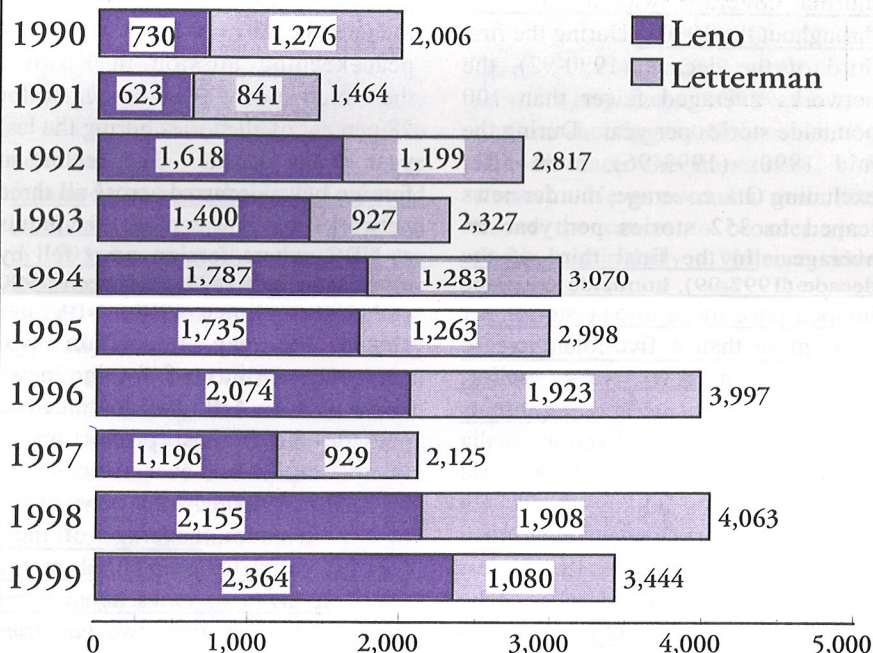


down 29 percent from the Campaign '96 total of 897 stories, despite the fact that both parties' nominations were contested this year, whereas the Democrats renominated President Clinton without opposition four years ago. However, the downward trend in campaign news began with the 1996 general election. The Clinton vs. Dole race was the subject of only 968 stories, a decline of 39 percent from the 1,576 stories on the 1992 general election. CMPA will be tracking election news throughout the general election campaign this fall to see whether the networks continue to be absentee voters.

Political Punchlines

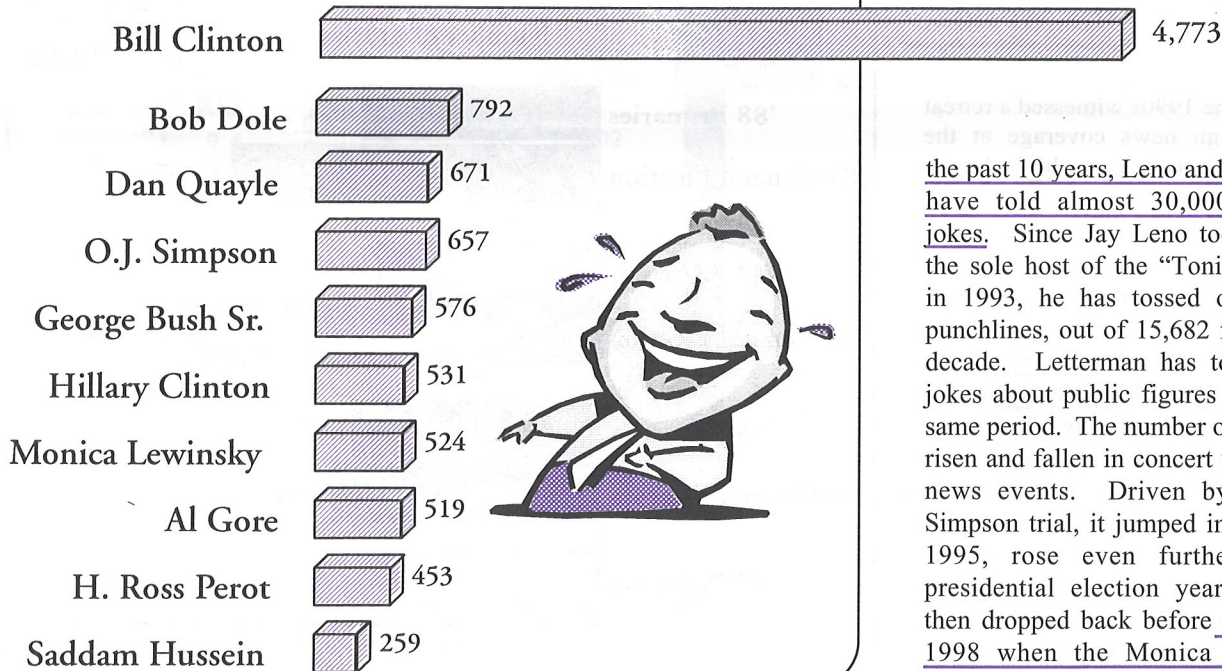
Since 1989 CMPA has tracked the political targets of late night talk show monologues. Of the various entrants only Jay Leno's "Tonight Show" and David

Number of Political Jokes by Leno and Letterman



Letterman's "Late Show" have been on the air for the entire decade. Over

Top 10 Joke Targets of the Decade



the past 10 years, Leno and Letterman have told almost 30,000 political jokes. Since Jay Leno took over as the sole host of the "Tonight Show" in 1993, he has tossed out 12,862 punchlines, out of 15,682 for the full decade. Letterman has told 12,629 jokes about public figures during the same period. The number of jokes has risen and fallen in concert with major news events. Driven by the O.J. Simpson trial, it jumped in 1994 and 1995, rose even further in the presidential election year of 1996, then dropped back before peaking in 1998 when the Monica Lewinsky

affair helped to produce a record number of 4,063 jokes. In the two years since the story broke, the two comics have told 2,331 jokes about the various players in the White House sex scandal.

Bill Clinton reigned supreme as the number one target of late night humor in the '90s. Together Leno and Letterman told a combined 4,773 jokes about the president, nearly six times as many as any other target. Trailing far behind in second place

was Bob Dole (792), followed by Dan Quayle (671), O.J. Simpson (657), and George Bush Sr. (576). Hillary Clinton (531) and Monica Lewinsky (524) reached the top 10 list mainly on jokes from last few years, as scandal and controversy raised their comedy profiles. Rounding out the top ten were Al Gore (519), Ross Perot (453) and Saddam Hussein (259).

How much of a boon has the Clinton Presidency been to late night comedians? During George Bush's

term of office from 1988 through 1992, Leno and Letterman sent 618 barbs his way, an average of 154 per year. During Bill Clinton's first term, he was the butt of exactly 2,000 jokes, or 500 per year. His second term has produced 3,339, or 835 per year, with the total still climbing.

Media Monitor (Copyright © 2000) is published bi-monthly by the Center for Media and Public Affairs, a non-partisan and non-profit 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*

Project Directors: *Jasmine Lee, Brandie Riddick*

Research Assistants: *Christine Aseron, Anne Champlin, Matthew Curry, Federico Gil, Dustin Gouker, Elizabeth Gross, Keith Kincaid, Jennifer Kostyniak, Sarah McLeod, Jeannine MacKay, Sheila Nandi, Atif Qarni, Mary Meghan Ryan, Sarah Rooney, Gabriel Santos, Joshua Slansky, Erica Spector, Michelle Umansky, Carolyn Walkley, Toniann Wright, Antoine Wright*

Production and Graphics: *Margie Singleton, Mary Carroll Willi*

Managing Director: *Christine Messina-Boyer*

Publications Manager: *Margie Singleton*



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

First Class
U.S. Postage
PAID
Washington, DC
Permit No. 827