

## THE TOWER REPORT: The Iran/Contra Story Continued

The Tower Commission report on February 26 brought the Iran/Contra story back into the headlines. Media Monitor examined the scope and substance of network news coverage during weeknights from February 19 through March 5, from pre-report leaks through instant analysis to media post-mortems. This issue compares coverage during the Tower phase to the first burst of media attention during November-December 1986, reported in our last issue.

- \* Massive coverage equaled last fall's levels--37% of network news airtime, averaging 13 stories a night. ABC again led the pack (p. 2).
- \* Narrower focus--Questions of leadership and legality dominated the news agenda at the expense of policy debates (p. 2).
- \* Networks switch on unnamed sources--ABC used unnamed sources most often, citing them in 51% of its stories. Previous leader CBS cut its use of unnamed sources in half since last fall, from 70% to 36% of its stories (p. 2).
- \* More critical coverage--Use of sources became less balanced. Administration critics got 61% of the airtime, supporters only 39% (p. 3).
- \* Watergate references diminished--CBS continued to make the most Watergate comparisons (p. 3).
- \* Zingers held steady--One story in six finished with a zinger--a closer with negative spin--the same level as last fall. Negative closers were eight times as numerous as positive ones (p. 4).

The networks followed similar patterns on the topics they covered, the sources they used, and even the spin they put on closers. Yet differences began to mount in their extent of coverage, use of unnamed sources, and even Watergate references. These differences illustrate the continuing role of news judgment in helping to shape the story.



## BIG NEWS

Iran/Contra coverage returned to the same massive levels we clocked last fall--over one-third of the entire network newshole through the two weeks surrounding the Tower report's release. ABC continued to lead the pack, but NBC closed the gap, leaving CBS well behind.

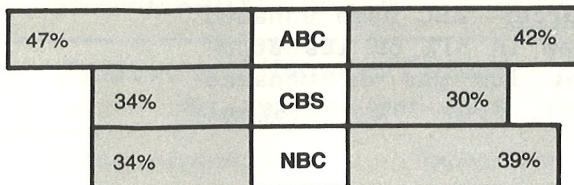
### The scorecard:

- An average of 9 stories a night the week before the report.
- 26 stories on the night of the report.
- Then 14 stories a night for the next week.

### Airtime Devoted To The Story (%)

November-December

February-March



## THE STORY SHIFTS

The Tower report focused media attention on legal questions and Reagan's leadership. Broader policy concerns receded sharply, dropping from 27% of last fall's coverage to only 3% currently. Hostage stories almost disappeared, down from 7% to 1%. So the story shifted to topics long favored by TV news--presidential leadership, personalities, and "whodunit" questions. More complex issues of foreign policy, such as the desirability of renewed contacts with Iran, were shunted aside.

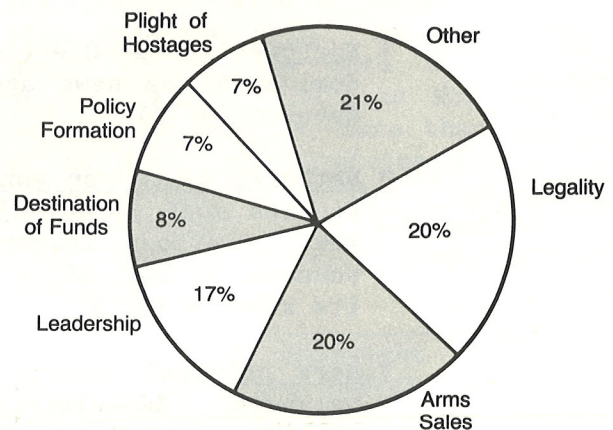
## SOTTO VOCE SOURCES

Leaks and background briefings continued to play a major role in the coverage, but less so than last fall. Use of unnamed sources dropped on all networks, but differences persisted. ABC emerged as the new leak leader, with a majority of stories citing unnamed sources. Previous leader CBS cut its use of these sources in half, down to 36% from a remarkable 70% last fall. Dropoff at the other networks was much more modest--down 7% at ABC and 5% at NBC.

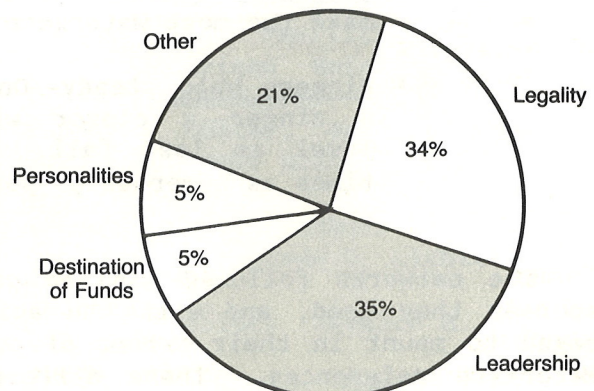
Continuing differences among networks showed that "sourcing" reflects the practices of news organizations as well as newsmakers. CBS's drop from top to bottom of the backgrounder brigade shows how quickly these practices can change.

### Major Topics Covered (%)

November-December



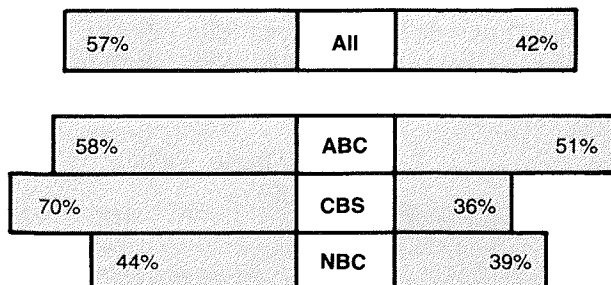
February-March



## Stories Citing Unnamed Sources (%)

November-December

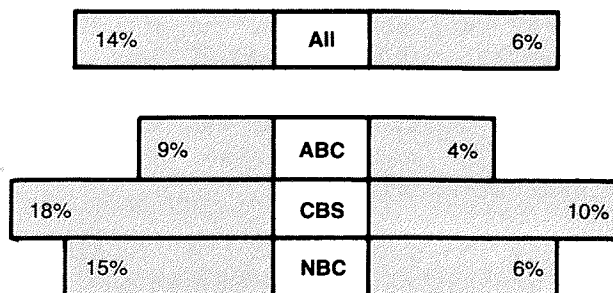
February-March



## Watergate References (% of stories)

November-December

February-March



### SCANDAL TIME

Some media critics have argued that Watergate cast a shadow over Iran/Contra coverage. Are reporters reliving their salad days by casting aspersions of scandal? We can't measure how much fun Ben Bradlee is having, but we can determine how often Watergate is mentioned in news stories.

After the contra connection was announced on November 25, Watergate came up about once a night, in one story out of seven. This time around, Watergate references were about half as frequent and usually less pointed.

...a Watergate-style scandal in the making.

Dan Rather (CBS)  
11/25/86

[Chief of Staff Howard] Baker is harking back to the lessons of Watergate—unless you get the facts out they fester.

Lem Tucker (CBS)  
2/27/87

### BALANCING ACTS

Media fairness is often gauged in terms of equal access. So we measured the airtime given to sources who either criticized or supported Reagan administration policies and practices.

Last fall the coverage was relatively balanced, with a slight edge to the critics. Lately the gap has widened, so that critics now enjoy a three to two advantage in airtime.

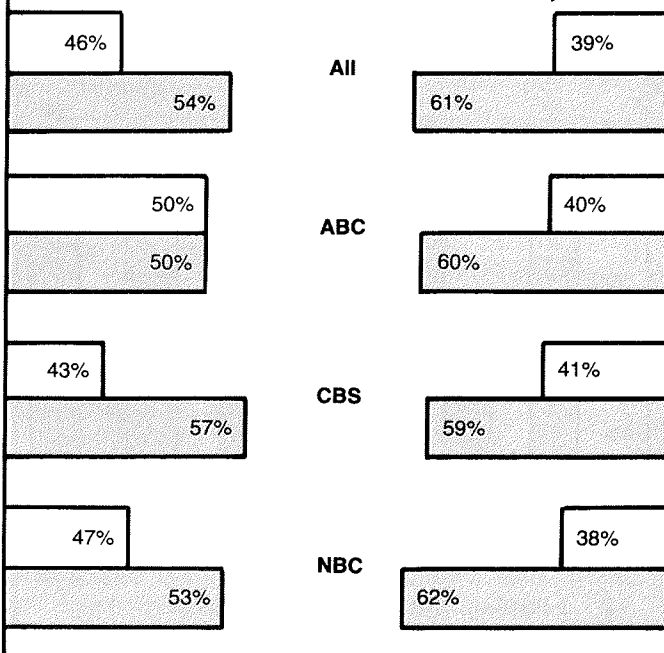
## Airtime for Pro- and Anti-Administration Sources (%)

Pro

Anti

November-December

February-March



Though references were down at all three networks, relative differences were unchanged. In both periods, CBS called attention to Watergate about twice as often as ABC.

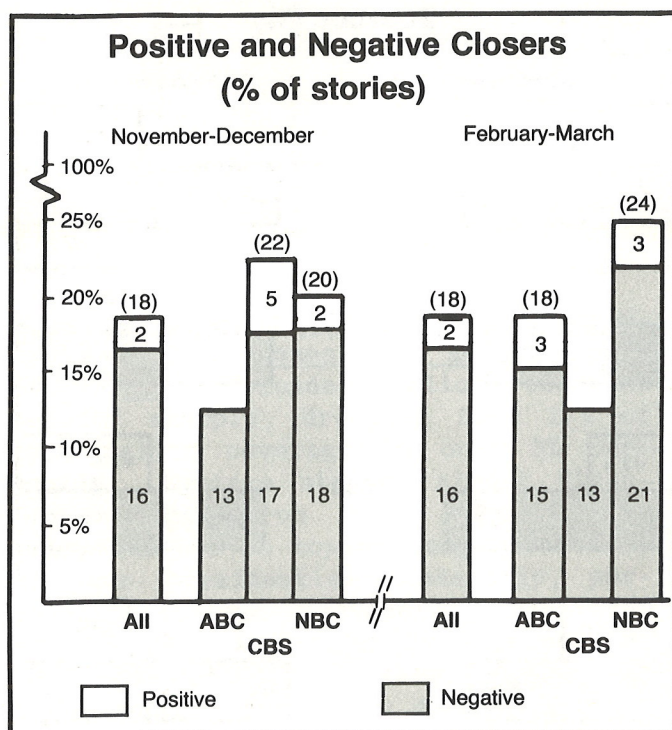


Differences between the networks have almost disappeared since last fall. The biggest change came at ABC, where a 50-50 balance became a 60-40 advantage for critics. ABC's heavy coverage heightened the magnitude of this shift. Close behind was NBC, where anti-Reagan airtime was now greatest. Least changed was CBS, with only a 2% percent rise in anti-administration airtime.

Major on-camera sources continued to be administration spokesmen and key senators. But the story took on a more partisan cast. Last fall much of the criticism came from within the administration (e.g. Schulz, Weinberger). In the Tower phase, Republican sources fell in step behind the President, while Democrats never had a good word to say about him. Among frequently quoted Republicans, only Senator Durenberger (R-MN) continued to play the consistent critic.

### ZINGERS

The closer offers reporters an opportunity to sum up, emphasize important points, or impart spin--a judgment or slant on the story.



### Positive Spin

[FBI Director] Webster and Baker immediately give the President improved relations with Congress ....That doesn't get the President completely off the defensive, but it helps.

Brit Hume (ABC)  
3/4/87

### Negative Spin

So Mr. Reagan's ship of state is taking on a lot of water. When that happened to his predecessors, they sank.

Dan Rather (CBS)  
3/2/87

The proportion of closers with negative and positive spin has been remarkably consistent throughout the Iran/Contra story. Both last fall and again this time around, one story in six finished with a "zinger"--a closer with negative spin. An additional 2% ended on a high note with positive spin. By small margins NBC continued to lead in zingers--more than one closer in five, outdistancing its positive closers by seven to one. CBS used the fewest zingers (13%) but had no positive closers at all, compared to 5% last fall.

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