

The 1988 News Agenda How the Networks Covered the World in 1988

From January 1 through November 30, 13,387 stories were broadcast on the ABC, CBS, and NBC nightly newscasts. We examined the topic of every story to provide an overview of the 1988 news agenda.

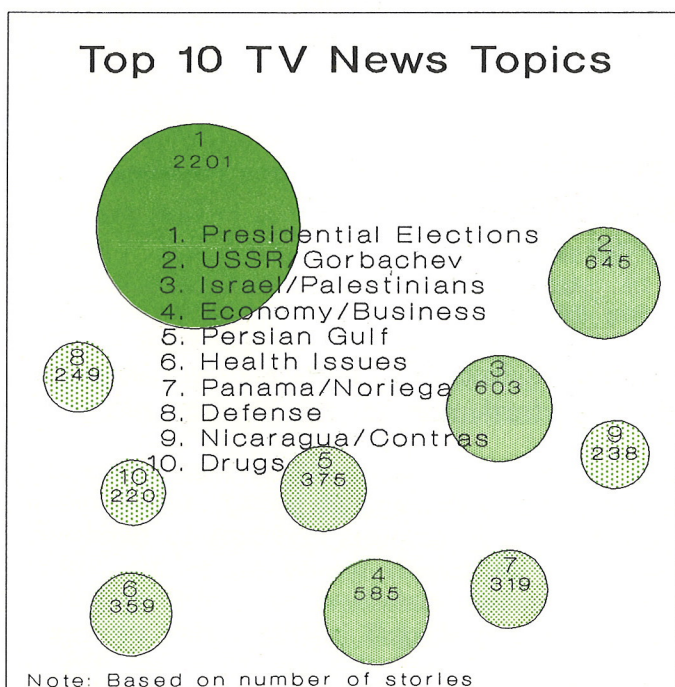
- * TV Votes Yes - The presidential election was the biggest news of 1988 with 2201 stories - one-sixth of the entire network newshole. (p.2)
- * News of the World - Four of the top six news topics were international stories - the USSR, Israel, Persian Gulf, and Panama. (p.2)
- * Winners and Losers - Lloyd Bentsen and Jesse Jackson got the best press among major candidates this year. Dan Quayle edged out Gary Hart for the worst press. (p.4)
- * Fall Pall - During the primaries all candidates combined received 54% good press. During the general election combined good press fell to 38%. (p.4)
- * Media Masochism - Three out of four TV news sources criticized the media's performance in the 1988 election. (p.4)

What's News

What were the biggest news stories of 1988? From January 1 through November 30, 1988, we logged all 13,387 stories broadcast on the ABC, CBS and NBC evening news. (Scanning of December newscasts, which aired after our publication deadline, revealed no changes in the ordering that follows.) The 1988 domestic news agenda was dominated by a mixture of perennial stories, like economics, defense, and health issues; one quadrennial reliable, the presidential elections; and one social issue that has surged into the headlines - the drug problem. The dominant foreign news mixed unexpected flareups in Panama and the Persian Gulf with new developments in areas that have long attracted attention - the Soviet Union, Israel, and Nicaragua. CBS had the most distinctive profile, combining the heaviest coverage of the USSR and economic news with the lightest coverage of Israel among the three networks.

The Top Ten

#1 The Election Election coverage filled one-sixth of the entire newshole on the nightly newscasts - 2,201 stories in all. From January 1 through November 7, the networks broadcast a nightly average of more than seven election stories, ranging from 80 stories in May (less than three per night) to 298 stories in October (nearly ten per night). The amount of coverage was nearly identical on the major networks, ranging from 747 on ABC to 731 on CBS and 723 on NBC.



#2 USSR The Soviet Union placed second on our list even before Gorbachev's visit to New York and the Armenian earthquake in December. The coverage was heaviest on CBS (262 stories) followed by ABC (205) and NBC (178). Gorbachev's policies of glasnost (openness) and perestroika (restructuring) have been big news for some time (*Media Monitor*, June '87). This year the coverage was swelled by the continuing Soviet pullout from Afghanistan, ongoing domestic protests from the Black Sea to the Baltic states, and the Moscow summit. Heavy coverage of the Moscow summit in June (*Media Monitor*, July '88) provided the most concentrated dose of stories on Soviet culture, history, and lifestyles ever witnessed by American audiences.

#3 Israel News of Israel focused mainly on the continuing West Bank strife, especially during the first few months of 1988 (*Media Monitor*, April '88). Other news focused on the Israeli elections in November, incursions into Lebanon, and the trial of accused Nazi war criminal John Demjanjuk. CBS, the network which led in USSR coverage, ran the fewest stories on Israel - 164, compared to 223 on ABC and 216 on NBC.

#4 Economy/Business Economic and business news was the primary source of domestic news aside from the election. (Our figures do not include the brief daily stock market reports.) The monthly release of government statistics makes the economy a stable and predictable source of stories throughout the year. The networks made little effort to flesh out the meaning or importance of these statistics, however, and the tone of their feature stories was often more downbeat than the straight statistical reporting (*Media Monitor*, October '88). Once again there were sharp differences in the amount of coverage across networks. CBS led with 237 stories, followed by ABC (180) and NBC (168).

#5 Persian Gulf Stories on the Persian Gulf region focused on the war between Iran and Iraq. Increasing coverage of U.S. involvement in the Gulf peaked in July after the U.S.S. Vincennes' shooting of Iranian Flight 655 (*Media Monitor*, July '88). Coverage of the region dropped off sharply after July.

#6 Panama Panama and its ruler General Noriega received heavy coverage during the first half of 1988, then disappeared from the airwaves. Most stories focused on civil violence, a general strike, and U.S. sanctions intended to oust Noriega, along with questions about his connections to Vice-President Bush and the Reagan administration. After various moves against Noriega proved ineffective, media interest dropped in tandem with decreasing U.S. government activity.

#7 Health Health issues, a staple of domestic coverage, got an unwanted boost from the AIDS epi-

demic. AIDS generated 64 stories, nearly one-fifth of all health-related news. However, AIDS was not as heavily covered this year as in 1987 (*Media Monitor*, December '87). More typical health stories concerned medical breakthroughs, new information about Alzheimer's, Parkinson's, and other diseases, and new treatment strategies.

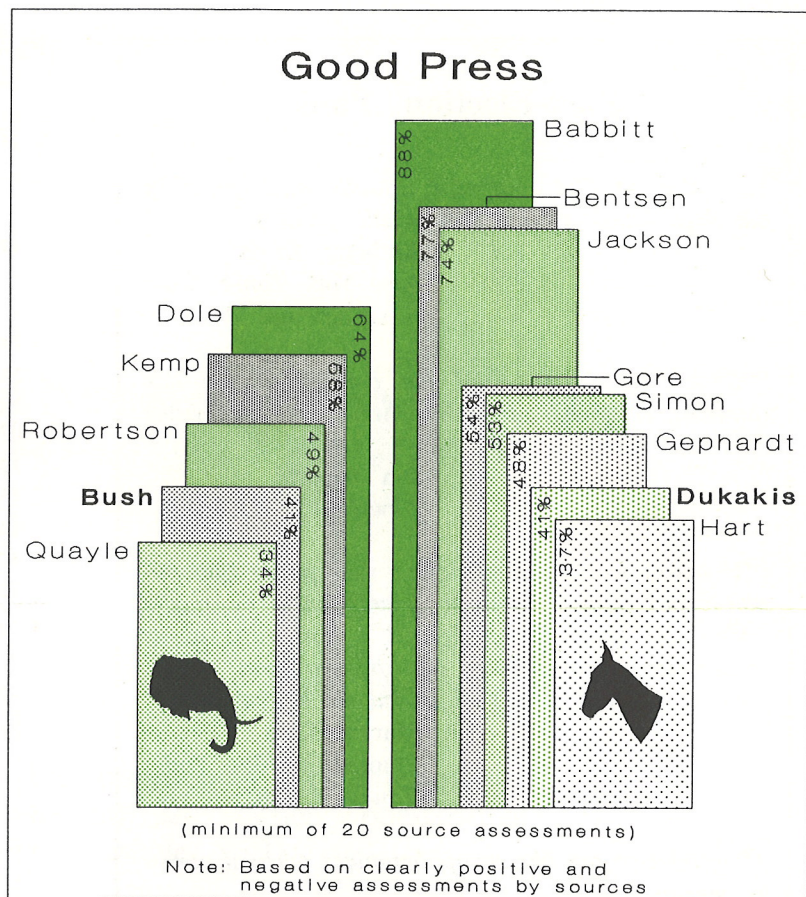
#8 Defense Defense and weapons coverage centered on the Defense Department procurement scandal and other problems with military purchasing. These included cost overruns, flaws that showed up in accidents, and systems that failed to work. U.S. deployment of forces in the Persian Gulf and Honduras also prompted some broader discussion of defense strategies and capabilities.

#9 Nicaragua Nicaragua and the American-backed contra forces were the "stealth" issue of the 1988 news agenda. They received fairly steady but low-key coverage throughout the year, although no major news peg developed after the Congress turned down President Reagan's request for renewed military support in February.

#10 Drugs Drugs were a major topic of TV news in 1988, but they were often discussed in the context of other stories - crime news, Noriega, election issues, etc. The drug issue made our top ten list even after those stories were excluded. The media's coverage of illegal drug use and the war on drugs will be the topic of the January 1989 *Media Monitor*.

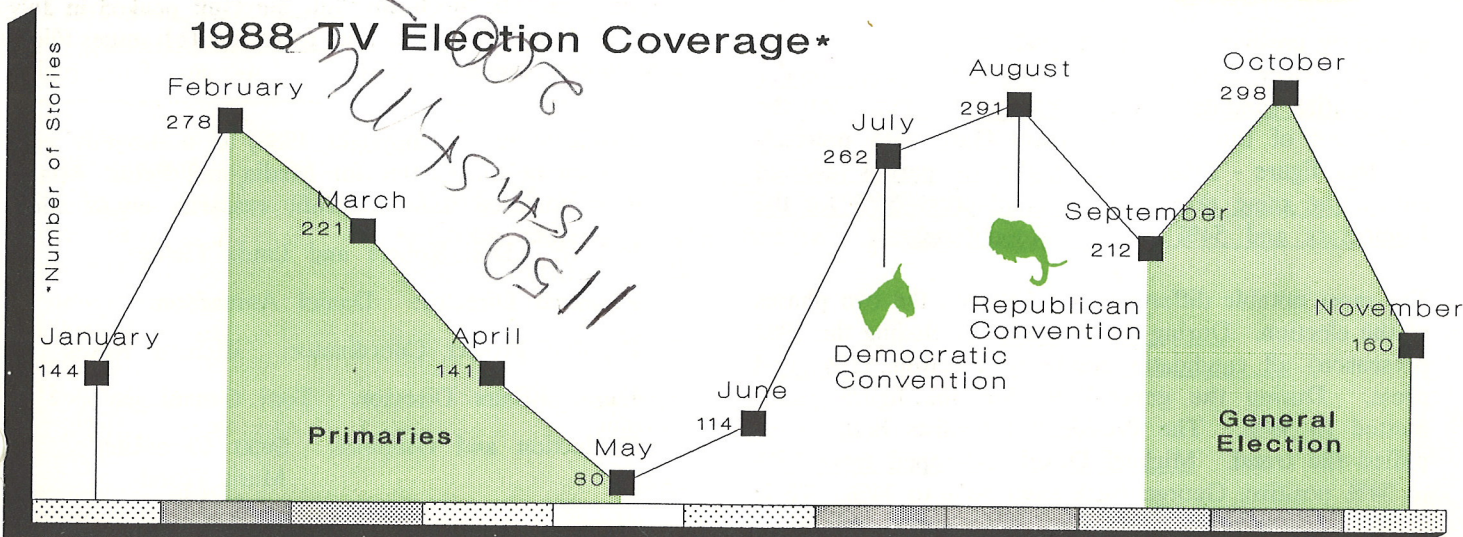
The Lead Story

The leitmotif of 1988 TV news was the presidential election. It was a year-long phenomenon, dropping below the 100-story per month level only once



(in May). General election coverage began with the summer solstice: Because of the party conventions, there were even more election stories in July and August than in September and October.

Over the course of the year nearly every candidate complained about the style, slant, or spin of his coverage. Senator Dole took to the Senate floor in April to voice his objections. Yet he fared best among Republican candidates, and better than most Democrats, according to our analysis of good and bad press (defined



Post-Election Pans

The press in this campaign actually participated in the degradation of the democratic process.

-Anthony Lewis
New York Times, from
a speech on 11/28.

Political "news" was still the conflict of the day (however contrived) and the "horse race" (however poor the handicapping).

-Jon Alpert
Newsweek, 11/21.

(TV news) was so preoccupied with photo opportunities and sound bites, so manipulated by media experts, so driven by polls that it lost sight of its journalistic responsibilities and became part of the political process it was supposed to be covering.

-Marvin Kalb
Quoted in New York
Times, 11/28.

TV producers are like nymphomaniacs when it comes to visuals.

-Albert Hunt
Wall Street Journal,
quoted in Newsweek,
11/14.

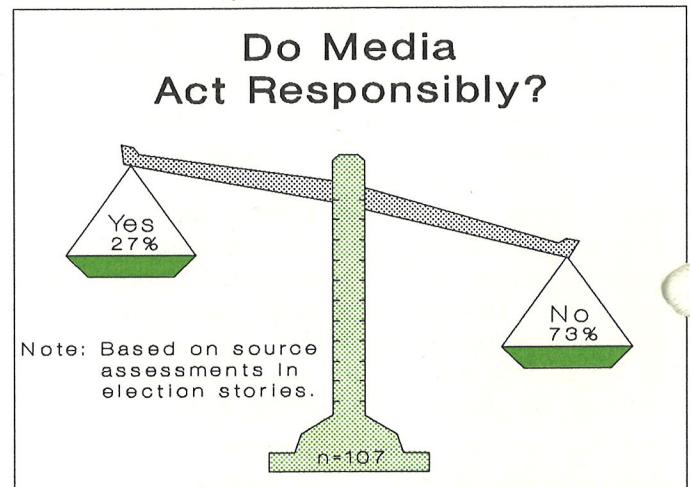
TV news helped do the liberals in ...(because) reporters bend over backwards not to seem at all critical of Republicans.

-Mark Crispin Miller
New York Times,
11/16.

running mates however, fared very differently. Lloyd Bentsen scored higher than Jackson had, with 77% positive ratings. Dan Quayle did even worse than Gary Hart, finishing at the bottom of the heap with only 34% good press.

Media Bash

If the presidential candidates didn't fare well in the coverage, neither did the media itself. Media controversies during the long campaign ranged from the Gary Hart affair to the Bush-Rather confrontation, the Dan Quayle nomination, and the general role of the media in electoral politics. TV news broadcast 107 evaluations of whether the media was acting responsibly in covering the campaign. Nearly three out of four sources (73%) turned thumbs down. Support for the media fell from 32% of sources quoted during the primaries to only 9% during the fall campaign.



The reviews didn't get any better after election day. Samples of press criticism of television's performance appear in the box on this page. Ironically, our systematic content analysis contradicted much of this criticism. We found that the networks' fall coverage was notable for its toughness, balance, and focus on the issues (Media Monitor, November '88).

as clearly positive or negative evaluations aired from all sources.) Rev. Jesse Jackson stood tallest among major Presidential candidates with 74% good press. At the other end of the scale was Gary Hart, with precisely half that figure - 37%. Overall, the two parties received almost the same proportion of good press--56% for the Democrats and 54% for the Republicans.

The most notable difference was between the two phases of the election. During the primaries (including the 1987 preseason) all candidates combined received 55% good press. During the general election the figure plummeted to 38%. The Presidential finalists both exemplified the trend. Michael Dukakis dropped from 55% to 34% positive, George Bush from 50% to 34%. Their

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