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Clinton's China Syndrome

TV News Coverage of President Clinton's Trip to China

Major findings:

■ **What Scandal?** The China trip eclipsed White House sex scandal news. *Page 2*

■ **Cheers for China** Three out of four sources supported Mr. Clinton's China policy. *Page 2*

■ **Not Bill's Choice** NBC aired the most criticism of both Mr. Clinton's trip and the Chinese government. *Page 4*

■ **Bull's-eye Bill** Late night TV comics have zinged Bill Clinton over 1,000 times this year. *Page 5*

■ **Sex Is a Big Joke** Five of the six leading joke targets in 1998 are figures in the White House sex scandals. *Page 5*

How did the media cover Bill Clinton's trip to China, and how did it affect their coverage of the president's problems at home? This month's *Media Monitor* looks at the network evening news coverage of the President's controversial trip to China.

Also in this issue: How have Bill Clinton's scandal troubles translated into late night laughs? What other political figures find themselves grist for the joke mill? *Media Monitor* updates the latest political jokes from Jay Leno, David Letterman, Bill Maher, and Conan O'Brien.

Bill Clinton's controversial trip to China generated heavy and predominately favorable coverage on the three network evening newscasts. As an adjunct of the heavy coverage the trip received, there was a dramatic decline in airtime for the various scandal allegations that have recently preoccupied the White House. Thus the President not only dominated the news agenda during this period, but his TV image focused largely on his accomplishments, not his problems at home.

We examined all stories broadcast from June 24 through July 4 on CBS, ABC, and NBC. During this period the networks broadcast 58 stories on the president's trip and his policies toward China, an average of over five per night. The China coverage nearly doubled that of the next most heavily covered topic, business and the economy (31 stories). More significantly in the context of domestic politics, this was one of the few extended periods so far in 1998 that coverage of Mr. Clinton's policies eclipsed media attention to scandal allegations concerning sexual improprieties on the part of the president. Coverage of the China trip more than tripled (by 58 to 19 stories) that of the ongoing scandal investigations, which lagged

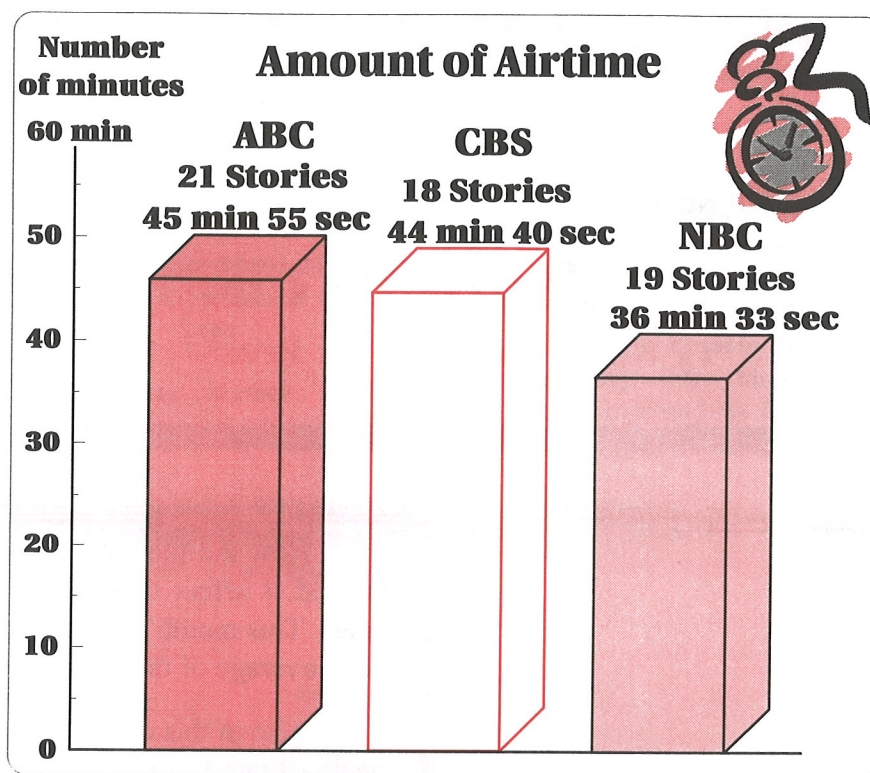
(continued on page 2)

behind business, health, and natural disasters as news topics during this period.

The 58 China-related stories totaled 127 minutes, eight seconds of airtime that was spread fairly evenly across the three networks. Twenty-one reports appeared on ABC (45 minutes, 55 seconds), 19 on NBC (36 minutes, 33 seconds) and 18 on CBS (44 minutes, 40 seconds).

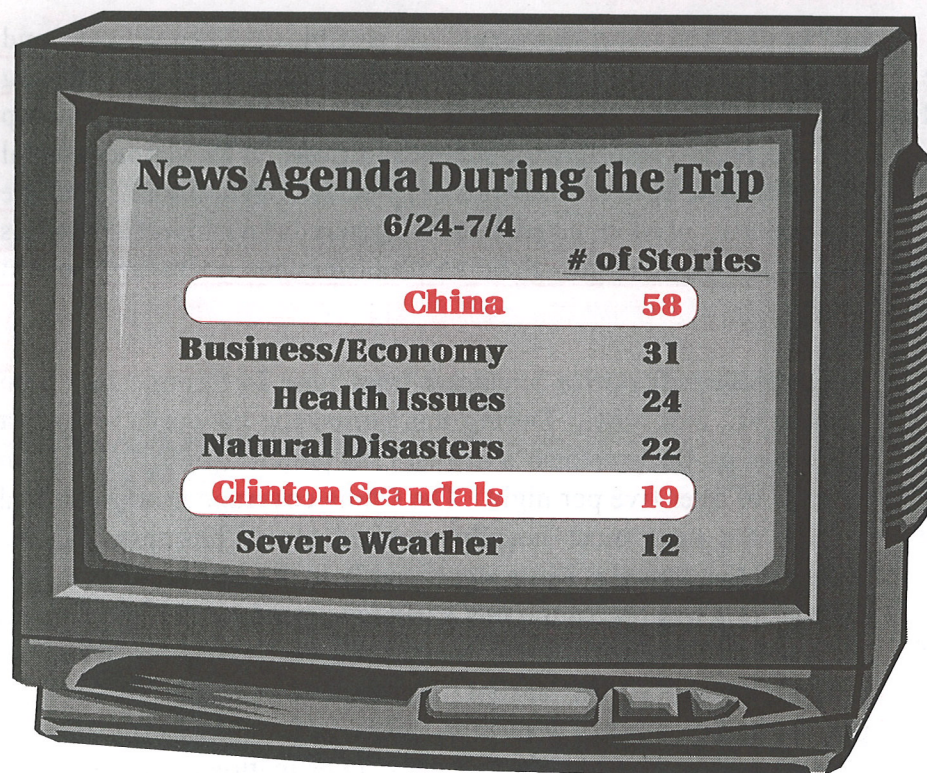
Rating The Administration

Despite the prominence of the China summit, the networks rarely presented the contentious debate that preceded Clinton's state visit. (Those objecting to the trip cited China's use of lethal force against student protestors in Tiananmen Square a decade ago that stalled US-China relations. Various critics charged that,



by going to Tiananmen Square, Clinton would legitimize a regime that

engaged in human rights abuses.) But few of these voices were heard on TV news during the summit.



Of all sources we coded, more than three-quarters (78%) gave the President's China policies a favorable evaluation during his trip, while only about one in five (22%) gave them a negative review. Characteristic of support for the trip was this statement from the President himself: "I think the American people will see when I go home that it was a good thing that I came here." (ABC, 6/30/98). Among journalists who echoed his position, NBC's David Bloom reported, "Mr. Clinton argues that America now has a strategic partnership with China, one that he's not prepared to walk away from, no matter how long the march from Communism to democracy may be." (NBC, 7/4/98). And on ABC, Sam Donaldson praised the debate over Tiananmen between Mr. Clinton

and Chinese President Jiang Zemin. "The predictions of dire consequences if he went to Tiananmen Square have turned into widespread hosannas of praise for President Clinton on the issue of human rights." (ABC, 6/28/98).

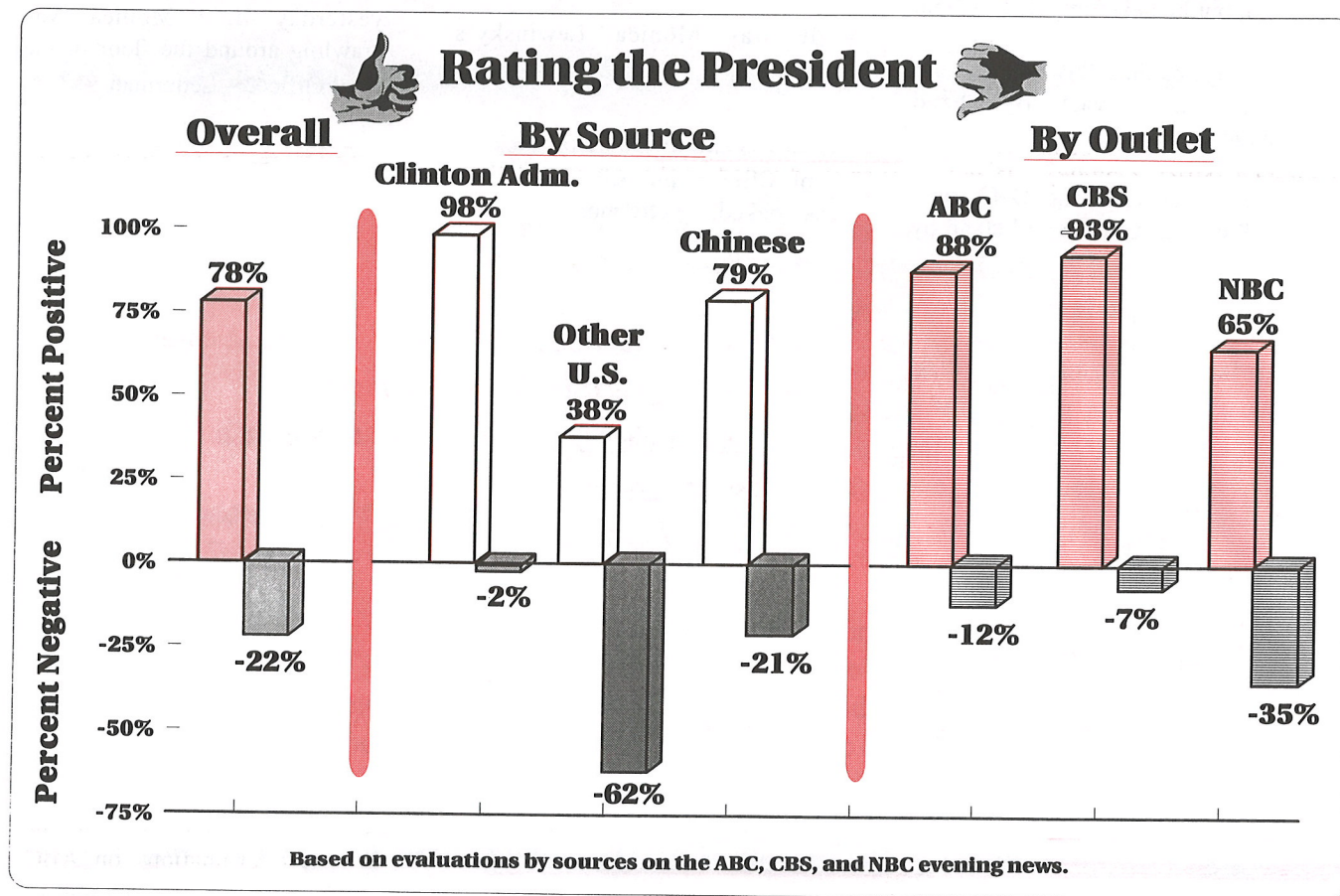
This pattern of favorable commentary applied to both American and Chinese sources. Among the Chinese

which we cannot say for ourselves." (ABC, 6/29/98).

Among the few Chinese dissidents heard objecting was Harry Wu, who told NBC, "Verbal condemnation is not enough. I wish when Clinton comes back to the United States, that he put some real teeth in his China engagement policy." (NBC, 6/27/98).

vis-a-vis Chinese control: "We have a consistent policy that will bear fruit if everyone is patient and works hard." (CBS, 6/30/98).

Only a third of all sources quoted came from outside the administration. These included Congress, policy analysts, political commentators, and journalists. Of those, about three in five (62%) criticized the trip. NBC's



supporting the President and his policies on camera was one student who said, "I don't think China has any leader that can speak as well as Clinton does." (NBC, 6/29/98). Describing reactions to Clinton, Deborah Wang of ABC said, "Many of these students came here to see President Clinton because they were impressed by his comments over the weekend on democracy and human rights." Wang interviewed a student who remarked, "He said a lot of things

A breakdown of all sources on the evening news reveals the extent to which administration voices dominated on this issue. The President and other administration officials accounted for two-thirds (67%) of all American sources. Not surprisingly, evaluations of the visit from this group of sources were overwhelmingly positive (98%). For example, President Clinton defended his statements on Taiwan, that some claimed had compromised its future

Brian Williams noted that, "The President's words and actions will be closely watched during a trip that's already being sharply criticized back home." (NBC, 6/26/98). But David Bloom of NBC presented a different view of Clinton's visit after his debate on human rights with the Chinese president. "The mere fact that this remarkable debate was broadcast throughout China helped Mr. Clinton argue to those who watched, 'We are making progress.'" (NBC, 6/27/98).

While the majority of China summit stories on every network portrayed the President's policies in favorable terms, only NBC gave substantial attention to his critics. About one-third (35%) of all evaluations reported on NBC were negative, compared to only 12 percent on ABC and seven percent on CBS. For example, NBC featured these comments from Wei Jingsheng, a dissident recently released after 18 years in prison: "I think that President Clinton, the representative of the greatest democracy in the world, going to shake hands with the butchers of Tiananmen Square, I think that is a very bad signal being sent to the world." (NBC, 6/27/98). David Bloom of NBC described the trip in equally negative terms. "This was an extraordinary day in U.S.-China relations. It was, to many, unconscionable. The American flag flying over Tiananmen Square, President Clinton reviewing Communist troops on the very ground where Chinese soldiers massacred pro-democracy demonstrators nine years ago." (NBC, 6/27/98).

Conversely, positive ratings across the board were striking, especially on CBS (93%) and ABC (88%). NBC

lagged behind at 65 percent. Typical of positive comments were those from CBS's Scott Pelley. Reporting on the President's defense of political freedom for the Chinese, Pelley said, "With his forceful statement in the news conference, the President was able to offer a sharp rebuke to his critics, even while standing in Tiananmen Square."

Analyzing the specific sources quoted on each network highlighted this divergence between NBC and the other networks. On both ABC and CBS, Chinese sources were unanimously positive. Opinions were evenly divided only among US sources outside the administration, but they accounted for a scant 23 percent of sources on ABC and 13 percent on CBS. NBC offered comparatively greater diversity of opinion among all types of sources, especially those identified as Chinese. Two-thirds (65%) of Chinese sources on NBC were positive. Among American sources outside the administration, nearly three-quarters (73%) on NBC disapproved of Clinton's China policies. John Palmer noted that, "Congressional critics are expected to resume their attacks on the

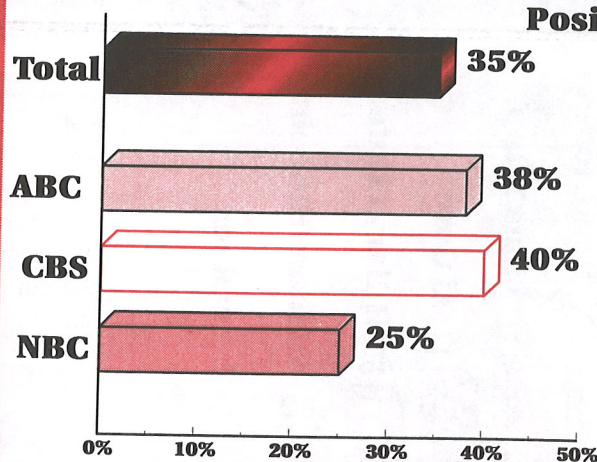
administration's China policy when Mr. Clinton returns." (NBC, 6/27/98).

But some outside the administration supported Clinton. Interviewed by ABC's Sam Donaldson, Martin Lee, the opposition leader in Hong Kong, said, "I thought it was a very successful trip for the President, as far as my country China and Hong Kong is concerned." (ABC 7/3/98)

Rating The Chinese

The Chinese government was a frequent target of criticism for all three networks. For example, commenting on China's detention of dissidents during Clinton's visit, foreign policy advisor Sandy Berger said, "I think China's human rights record is terrible. I think China is an authoritarian nation." (ABC, 6/26/98). Overall, about two-thirds (65%) of evaluations of China were unfavorable. Once again, however, NBC had the highest proportion of criticism. Three-quarters of China's evaluations (75%) on NBC were critical, compared to 62 percent for ABC and 60 percent for CBS. While about two in five evaluations on ABC and CBS were positive, only a quarter of those on NBC expressed approval of the Chinese government. Among the favorable evaluations was the President's assessment of Jiang Zemin. "He has a very good imagination. He has vision. He can visualize. He can imagine a future that is different from the present." (ABC, 7/3/98).

Rating the Chinese Government
Percent Positive



Punchlines

President Clinton's trip to China may have given him a brief respite from scandal news, but the late-night television comedians have

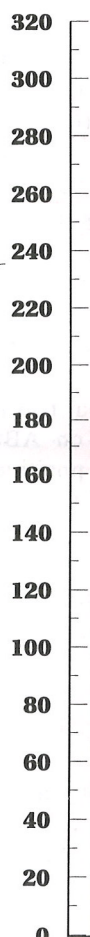
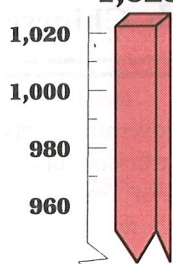
been unrelenting throughout 1998. In the first seven months of this year, scandal allegations involving Mr. Clinton produced a combined 1,172 sex-oriented jokes from late-night funny-men Jay Leno, David Letterman, Bill Maher, and Conan O'Brien.

Moreover, five of the top six joke targets so far in 1998 are figures associated with the White House sex scandals. Clinton sex scandal jokes got off to a fast start in the new

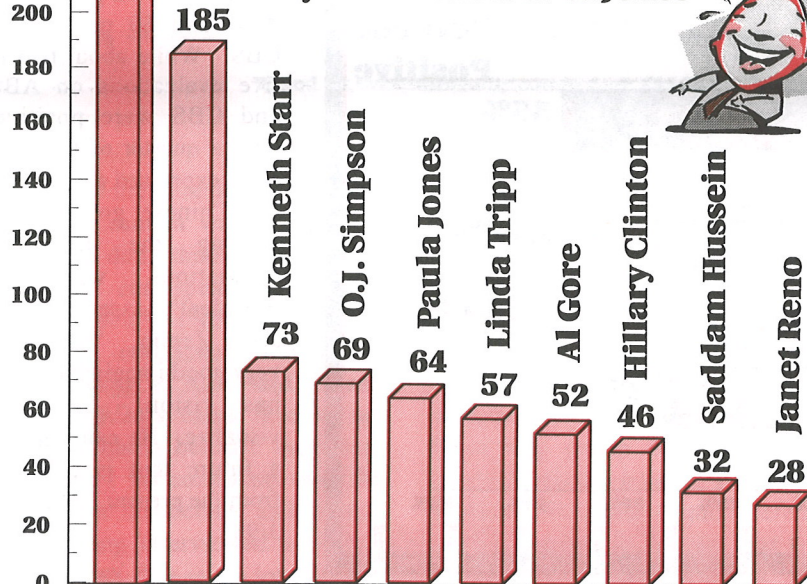
year, averaging nearly ten per night during January and February, as first Paula Jones and then Monica Lewinsky dominated the headlines. They slowed down to about three per night from March until late July, when Ms. Lewinsky's immunity deal produced 71 sex-oriented jokes (over 14 per night) during the last week of the month. By far the most sexual material (545 jokes) came from Leno, followed by Letterman (364), with Maher (152) and O'Brien (111) farther behind.

Counting jokes on all topics, President Clinton lapped the field with 1,028 jokes, more than the other nine individuals on the top ten list combined. Mr. Clinton is well on his way to becoming the top joke target for the fifth time since taking office in 1993. Not surprisingly, Monica Lewinsky holds the number two spot at 185 jokes. Independent Counsel Kenneth Starr (# 3, 73 jokes), Paula Jones (# 5, 64), Linda Tripp (#6, 57), and Hillary Clinton (#8, 46) were also the focus of much scandal-oriented material. In the gone-but-not-forgotten category were O. J. Simpson

Bill Clinton
1,028



Top Ten Joke Targets Number of Jokes



Based on the number of jokes in the monologues of TV late-nite comedians from 1/1/98 to 7/31/98.

Sample Jokes

☺ It was so hot in Washington today, that...

...Monica Lewinsky's dress had stains on it just from perspiration.
- Leno

...Kids who couldn't find an open fire hydrant went over to Ken Starr's office and stood under the leaks. - Maher

...The only chilly spot in town was Clinton's dinner table.
- Letterman

...Even Republicans were having sex. - Leno

☺ Clinton's latest plan is to hit on Linda Tripp and then plead insanity.
- Leno

☺ Linda lashed out at people in the entertainment industry who have made fun of her. I just hope they find those responsible. - Leno

☺ At one point she choked up so badly all four of her chins were quivering. - Leno

☺ There was an awkward moment in Washington. Monica went to a party and ran into another woman with the same stain on her dress. - Leno

☺ The stock market went down faster than a White House intern. - Letterman

☺ Remember when the biggest laundry problem in the country was ring around the collar? - Leno

☺ What is this going to do to Clinton's legacy? Lincoln went down in history for saying "of the people, by the people, and for the people," Roosevelt—"the only thing we have to fear is fear itself." Clinton—"Oops, do you think this will come out?" – Leno

☺ Clinton's going to say he experimented with having sex with Monica, but he never impaled. – Leno

☺ Hillary blames the whole stain business on a vast right-hand conspiracy. – Leno

☺ No matter what the DNA tests show, President Clinton will stand by

his story, according to his new lawyer Johnny Cochran. – Maher

☺ Clinton's in so much trouble, even Tom Hanks couldn't save him. – Letterman

☺ Remember the old days when the girls used to just save a corsage as a memento? – Leno

☺ It was Monica Lewinsky's birthday...

...At the end of the party, President Clinton jumped out of a cake naked. – Letterman

...President Clinton showed up at her party disguised as a candle. – O'Brien

...She's like one of those professional athletes-only 25, but with the knees of a 40-year old. – Leno

...Doesn't it seem like only yesterday little Monica was crawling around the floor of the Oval Office? – Letterman ■

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