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STUDY FINDS FAULT WITH TV NETWORKS' COVERAGE OF '92 RACE

Big Three Coverage No Improvement On '88

Study of '92 Sees Negativity, Shorter Soundbites, Less Substance

WASHINGTON, D.C. -- **Major TV network coverage of the 1992 general election was more negative, less substantive, and had shorter soundbites than in 1988**, according to a year-long study by the Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA). These findings call into question the networks' efforts to improve upon their much-criticized election coverage of four years ago. This final report from a year-long study by the independent research group analyzed 730 campaign stories aired on the nightly news programs of ABC, CBS, and NBC from Labor Day (Sept. 7) to Election Day (Nov. 3), totaling over 23 hours of coverage.

The Center's scientific content analysis found that during the fall 1992 campaign, there were 258 stories on the election "horse race" compared to 233 on policy issues. In 1988, the order was reversed, as the networks aired 232 issue-oriented stories and only 145 on the horse race. As a proportion of total election news, **issues declined from 40% in 1988 to 32% of the coverage this fall, while the horse race increased from 25% to 35%**.

Economic policy dominated the issue debate this year. The top policy issues discussed: the state of the economy (84 stories), taxes (54), unemployment (31), and the budget deficit (28). Absent from the agenda this time were the two top issues of 1988--crime and defense.

The Center also found that candidate **soundbites continued to shrink, falling from an average of 9.8 seconds in 1988 to 8.4 seconds in 1992.** Of 1,024 candidate soundbites during the fall campaign, only 67 (6.5%) were longer than 20 seconds (including only 19 (2%) of 30 seconds or greater duration), despite one network's efforts to air only soundbites of that duration. No network had more than 10% of its soundbites longer than 20 seconds. In 1968, the average soundbite was 42.3 seconds.

Overall, the **candidates' speaking time made up only 12% of total campaign airtime, while reporter statements made up over 70%.** The remainder consisted of other sources such as voters and political pundits.

Coverage of the major party candidates was as negative as in 1988, when both George Bush and Michael Dukakis received 66% negative evaluations from network sources. In '92, Bush was evaluated negatively by 69% of sources, Bill Clinton by 63%. The difference widened considerably when partisan sources were filtered out: Bush had a 71% negative rating among non-partisan sources, while Clinton actually got more praise than criticism, with only a 48% negative rating.

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Examples of positive and negative evaluations:

“Throughout his life, Clinton has been committed to public service and doing good.”

--Lisa Myers, NBC News, 10/21

“I will not trust my future...to someone who has done such a poor job the last four years.”

--voter, CBS News, 9/18

Perot received the most balanced press of the three candidates, getting just slightly more negative evaluations (54%) than positive ones (46%), with little difference between partisan and non-partisan sources. However, **reporters’ own comments were extremely critical of Perot in the fall campaign, evaluating him negatively 81% of the time**, compared to 71% for Bush and 54% for Clinton. Examples:

“This country owes Ross Perot a great debt of gratitude because he’s saying some things that need to be said.” --voter, CBS News, 10/16

“[Perot’s TV ads] don’t show how temperamental, thin-skinned, and downright mean Perot can be.” --Bill Lagattuta, CBS News, 10/22

The Center also found that almost all on-air sources who evaluated the election process were critical of it. Among these sources, 93% rated the quality of the campaign as poor, 94% criticized the role of campaign ads, and **100% expressed dissatisfaction with the choice of presidential candidates available to voters this year.**

“I think that the politicians are looking out for themselves and not looking out for my interests.”

--voter, ABC News, 10/6

Peter Jennings: “Give me your definition of politics 1992.” Voter: “Screwed up. It’s messed up.”

--ABC News, 10/6

This contrasts dramatically with a November 3 Times-Mirror poll of **the general public**, which found that 77% learned enough from the campaign to make informed choices, 38% found the candidates’ commercials helpful, and **61% were satisfied with the choice of candidates.**

The **Center for Media and Public Affairs** is a non-partisan, non-profit research organization that conducts scientific analysis of news and entertainment media. Findings from this study appear in the November issue of *Media Monitor*, the Center’s monthly newsletter. Copies are available upon request.
