

CENTER FOR MEDIA AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS

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The Incredible Shrinking Sound Bite

Network Election News Study Finds Decline in Candidate Airtime

WASHINGTON, DC—The average sound bite length for the presidential candidates on the network nightly news has plunged 26 percent from 1988, according to the latest findings from the **Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA) ELECTIONWATCH** report. The study also finds the candidates' sound bites make up only 11 percent of election news airtime, while reporters get more than 6 times as much time to speak as candidates do. According to CMPA President Dr. S. Robert Lichter, "It's no wonder Bush and Gore have hit the talk show circuit. They can hardly get a word in edgewise on the evening news."

ELECTIONWATCH is published weekly by the **Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA)**, a nonpartisan and nonprofit research and educational organization. **CMPA's** ongoing scientific content analysis of the nightly news programs on ABC, CBS and NBC measures the focus and tone of news coverage by examining all on-air statements from reporters and their news sources from Labor Day to Election Day.

OTHER MAJOR FINDINGS:

More of Less—Since Labor Day, the networks' average sound bite length has been only 7.3 seconds, a 26 percent decline since 1988 (9.8 seconds) and an 83 percent drop from the 1968 presidential election (42 seconds).

Invisible Men—The proportion of airtime given to the candidates' own words shrank to 11 percent, a record low. In contrast, reporters accounted for 72 percent of election news airtime. All other sources (voters, pundits, campaign staffers, etc.) received a combined 17 percent of airtime.

Al Getting Gored—Al Gore suffered his first bad week in the race for good press, receiving 78 percent negative on-air evaluations from reporters and other non-partisan sources. For example, on NBC (9/21), Newsweek reporter Bill Turque criticized Al Gore's tendency toward "embellishing and...stretching [a story] beyond where the facts would take it." (George W. Bush received too few evaluations last week for meaningful analysis.) For the entire campaign since Labor Day, however, Gore still leads with 45 percent favorable evaluations overall, compared to only 32 percent positive press for Bush.

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This study is being done in collaboration with the Brookings Institution. Research results will be posted each week to www.cmpa.com and www.brookings.edu and will be featured the following Monday in Brookings Senior Fellow Stephen Hess's USA Today column.