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Network News Flip-Flops on Candidates

Study: More, Better News Coverage in 2004 than 2000

WASHINGTON, DC- Nightly network news coverage of President Bush and Senator Kerry reversed course once the debates began, according to a new study released by the **Center for Media and Public Affairs** (CMPA). The study also found the coverage this year more thorough and substantive than the 2000 campaign.

These results come from the **2004 Election Watch** project, conducted by CMPA—an affiliate of George Mason University—in cooperation with Media Tenor. This is the eighth and final **Election Watch** report of Campaign 2004, covering the 504 stories broadcast on the ABC, CBS and NBC nightly newscasts from Labor Day through Election Day.

MAJOR FINDINGS:

Before The Debates: Before the first debate, the candidates' coverage was mirror images of each other—evaluations of President Bush were 83 percent positive, while Senator Kerry received 83 percent negative coverage.

“Kerry, who is still struggling to clarify his war stance, sought to define the war in economic terms.”

--David Gregory, NBC, September 7th

After The Debates: Once the debates commenced, Kerry's coverage rose to 71 percent positive while Bush's press sank to 58 percent positive.

“He's sharper, more precise, a light bulb seems to have switched on: That less is often more.”

--Jim Axelrod, CBS, October 4th

Nets Bullish For Bush: When discussing horserace issues—poll numbers, tactics and likely election outcomes—the network newscasts painted an accurate picture: 65 percent of the on-air assessments were favorable, as opposed to only 55 percent for Kerry.

More Coverage, Better Coverage: The network nightly newscasts covered the campaign 23 percent more than in 2000—9 stories a night, compared to 7.3 stories four years ago. There was more substance than fluff this campaign, as 49 percent of the stories covered substantive policy issues, compared to 48 percent that discussed horserace poll numbers. (In 2000, 71 percent of the stories featured horserace coverage and only 40 percent included substantive coverage.)