

Diagnosing Health Care Reform

How TV News Has Covered President Clinton's Health Security Act

Major findings:

■ **Second Opinions** Debate over the Clinton plan's provisions has been balanced . . .

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■ **Physician, Heal Thyself** . . . but most support came from administration officials, and the Clintons got mostly bad press.

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■ **Gain Without Pain?** Most sources favored universal coverage but rejected employer mandates.

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■ **The Bottom Line** The Clinton plan's cost got twice as much attention as any of its provisions.

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■ **Frontloading** TV coverage dropped from four stories a night in September to four stories a week since November.

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On September 22, 1993, President Clinton unveiled his proposed Health Security Act in a televised address to Congress. This issue of *Media Monitor* examines how TV news has covered the president's proposals since the administration began its big push for health care reform.

TV news coverage of health care reform started with a bang but may end with a whimper. Our content analysis finds that the Clinton health care plan has averaged less than one story per night on the "big three" network evening news shows combined, since the president delivered his televised speech on health reform. The debate over policy issues raised by the Clinton plan has resulted in balanced coverage, but the White House itself has suffered mostly bad press. Further, few sources apart from administration officials have supported the president's proposals.

We analyzed all coverage of President Clinton's proposed Health Security Act (HSA) on the ABC, CBS, and NBC nightly newscasts from September 1993 through March 1994. Our analysis excluded discussions of rival reform plans or health care problems that did not explicitly reference the Clinton plan. During these seven months the networks broadcast 247 stories on the HSA. But nearly half of these (114) appeared in September, including 91 speculation-filled reports that aired during the three week build-up to the president's address to Congress.

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The networks lost interest in the story once the initial hoopla died down. Just 38 stories aired in October, the bulk of them during the last week of the month, in anticipation of the Health Security Act's (S.1757) formal delivery to Congress on October 27. Interest in the plan plummeted once the legislation was delivered to Capitol Hill, dropping to only 24 stories in November and a mere three in December, despite Hillary Rodham Clinton's attacks on the insurance industry. Coverage has remained low during 1994, averaging 23 stories per month through March.

CBS provided the heaviest coverage with 94 stories totalling 3 hours 12 minutes of airtime. The other networks provided nearly identical amounts of coverage: NBC aired 78 reports (2 hours 36 minutes) and ABC 75 (2 hours 21 minutes). The "CBS difference" reflects the network's heavy follow-up coverage to the president's speech and subse-

Sources	
Clinton Administration	230
Bill Clinton	73
Hillary Rodham Clinton	48
Congress	181
Democrats	105
Republicans	76
The Public	103
Medical Associations/Doctors	61
Health Insurance Industry	43
Other Business	36
Activist Groups	33
Analysts	26

Based on the number of sources quoted.

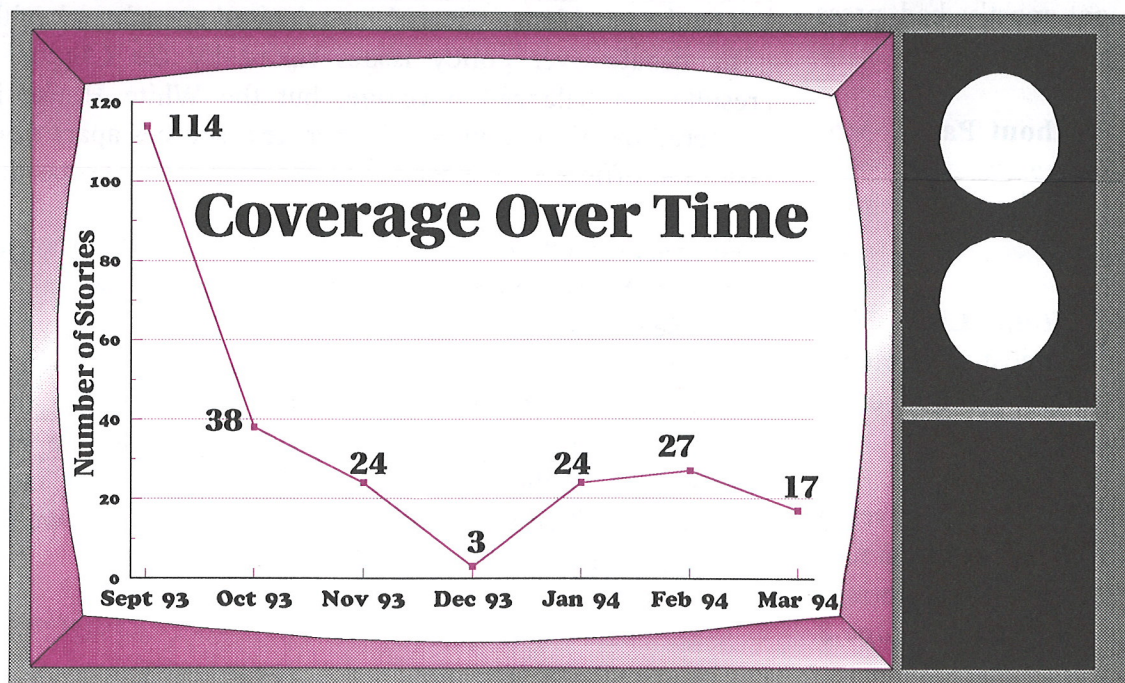
quent congressional activity. From September 22 through the end of the year, CBS gave more coverage to the Clinton plan than ABC and NBC combined. After this period, all three networks have devoted about equal amounts of airtime to the HSA.

Speaking Up

Not surprisingly, the Clinton administration has provided the largest group of sources for television news stories on the HSA. Members of the administration were cited or quoted 230 times on the health reform plan, averaging nearly one quote per story. The White House media offensive started at the top: The president led the way with 73 quotes, and the first lady followed with 48. Apart from the Clintons, no other individual connected to the

administration collected a significant number of citations.

The administration was followed by Congress as a principal source of sound bites (181 citations). Congressional Democrats led Republicans by 105 quotes to 76. Among individual members, however, Bob



Dole (R-KA) topped the list with 28 appearances as a source, over twice as many as Democrats Jay Rockefeller (D-WV) and Daniel Moynihan (D-NY). On the House side, the newly prominent Jim Cooper (D-TN) edged out veteran quotemeister Newt Gingrich (R-GA) on this issue by eleven to ten.

From the outset, health care reform has been presented as an unusually personalized story. All sides in the debate have used personal anecdotes and vignettes to support their positions. The networks followed the politicians' lead, frequently putting average individuals on-screen to assess the impact of the proposed reforms on them. Thus, the American public accounted for 103 appearances as sources, either individually or collectively (including 14 citations of polling results).

A second tier of sources was led by medical associations and doctors, who were heard from 61 times. The health insurance industry showed up 43 times, represented most frequently by the Health Insurers of America Association (36 mentions). Other businesses and trade associations were cited 36 times. Consumer activists and other activist groups, such as Families USA, were cited 33 times. The only other group to provide fairly frequent comments consisted of health care and economic analysts, who assessed the provisions, costs, and likely impact of the Clinton plan 26 times.

Reaching Out

Two subjects dominated discussion of the Health Security Act -- the plan's scope and its cost. The most frequently mentioned issue was the goal of universal insurance cov-

erage for all Americans (69 stories), followed closely by discussions of the costs of implementing the HSA (67 stories). These two topics were discussed about twice as frequently as any other. When we restricted the comparison to topics that received extensive discussion within a story, however, the primacy of cost concerns became clear. The HSA's costs were a major focus of 36 stories, more than double the 16 stories that

to control costs in the health care sector (as opposed to the costs of health care reform) were both mentioned in 28 stories. Proposals to increase tobacco taxes appeared in 27 stories. The strategies and tactics of HSA supporters were discussed 24 times. (By contrast, tactics of HSA opponents were discussed only 13 times.) Reforms to Medicaid under the HSA came up in 22 stories. Rounding out the top ten topics with



Top 10 Issues Discussed

Number of Discussions

	Total	Extensive
Universal Insurance Coverage	69	16
Costs of Implementing the HSA	67	36
Tax Increases for the HSA	34	6
Employer Mandated Contributions	28	6
General Discussions of Cost Controls	28	9
Increased Tobacco Taxes	27	4
Strategies of HSA Supporters	24	5
HSA and Medicaid Reforms	22	4
Limits on Insurance Premium		
Rate Increases	18	5
Drug Costs Under Medicare	18	4
Improve Consumer Information	18	8

Based on the number of stories in which each issue was discussed.

revolved around universal coverage. No other topic broke into double digits as the focal point of television news stories on the Clinton plan.

A large second tier of issues received about one-third to one-half as much attention as the key considerations of scope and cost. Tax increases associated with the HSA were discussed in 34 stories. Mandated employer contributions to their employees' health insurance and the general need

18 discussions apiece were proposals to limit the rate of insurance premium increases, controlling prescription drug costs under Medicare, and increasing the information available to consumers to permit more informed medical choices. Apart from cost containment (9) and consumer information (8), no other topic was discussed extensively in more than 6 stories. Even less coverage went to such controversial issues as long term care and mental health care, the

HSA's impact on the budget deficit, and coverage of family planning services (including abortion).

One reason for this lack of attention was the networks' increasing preoccupation with the legislative process rather than the substance of the health care reform debate. Early coverage of the plan was heavily focused on policy issues. For example, in order to assess its differential impacts, CBS asked the White House to calculate actual costs for a variety of average families and individuals for different services and overall insurance coverage. Following the president's speech, however, attention shifted from substantive aspects of the plan to the daily struggle over its progress through Congress. Discussions of strategy and tactics, accusations of blame for current problems in the health care sector, and counter-accusations of factual misrepresentation all became increasingly newsworthy as the months went by. Before the HSA went to Congress in October, only ten percent of all extensive issue discussions concerned such matters. After that point, coverage of the political process doubled, consuming 20 percent of the health care reform newshole.

Split Decision

Debate on the issues raised by the HSA was evenly balanced over the seven months of TV news coverage that we studied. The 159 on-air opinions over portions of the Health Security Act split almost down the middle, with 51 percent in support of the president's reform proposals and 49 percent opposed to them. The only period that saw a marked imbalance of opinion was the two weeks surrounding delivery of the HSA to Congress. With a strong push from

Rating the Health Security Act

Percent
Positive

Overall Plan n=159

51%

By Issue

Employer Mandated Contributions n=26	8%
Universal Insurance Coverage n=23	100%
Costs of Implementing the HSA n=13	31%
General Need for Cost Controls n=11	36%
Mental Health Care Coverage n=8	50%
HSA and Medicaid Reforms n=6	17%
Abortion Coverage n=6	67%
Cost Controls on Drugs n=6	67%
HSA Paperwork Reductions n=6	80%
Increased Tobacco Taxes n=5	100%

By Source

Administration n=54 (The Clintons n=18)	100% (100%)
Congress	
Democrats n=15	33%
Republicans n=16	0%
Business n=25	4%
Medical n=10	30%
Public n=11	82%

Based on evaluations by news sources.

the White House and Congressional Democrats, opinions shot up to 86 percent positive. But the coverage quickly returned to its previously balanced tone. This brief spurt of pro-HSA opinion had little impact on the overall totals.

This balance was not achieved through vigorous debate on each point of contention. Instead of contrasting pro- and con- sound bites, the networks mostly broadcast each side's talking points on its own favored issues. Rather than debating the same issues, critics of the plan would attack on one front, while supporters responded by praising other elements (thereby at least implicitly criticizing the status quo).

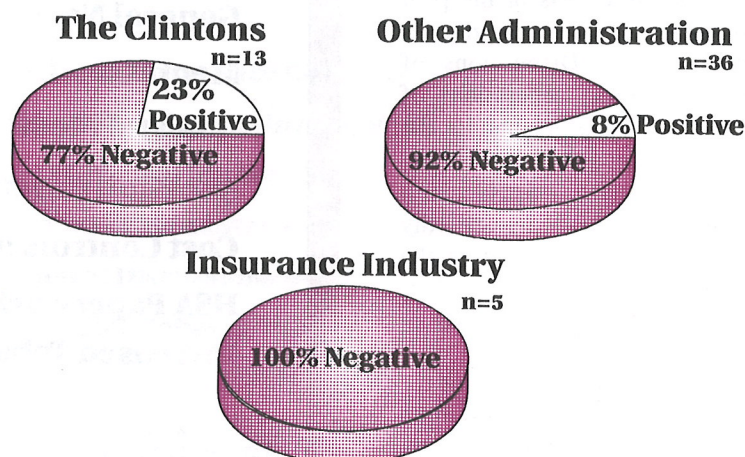
Televised debate over the Clinton plan has revolved primarily around two issues, employer mandates and universal coverage. The former was almost always raised by the plan's critics, the latter by its supporters. Thus, all but two out of 26 opinions on employer mandates criticized the HSA-mandated employer contributions to employee health insurance. For example, one business spokesman warned, "we will have to lay off people... stop hiring new people... freeze wages, salaries... (and) cut other benefits that we may now offer." (NBC, 9/23/93) Opposition was not confined to business sources. Rep. Jim Cooper (D-TN) called mandates "a tax on jobs... a clumsy, expensive way of trying to achieve... universal coverage." (NBC, 9/22/93) The goal of universal health insurance coverage, by contrast, received unanimous support from the 23 sources who addressed it. This theme was frequently voiced by President Clinton, who hailed the HSA as "a plan that gives health care security to everybody in this country for the first time in history." (CBS, 3/3/94) Some sources outside the administration added support. ABC quoted one ordinary American, "If it means that we have to pay a little more for the

masses to get coverage, we'll be a better nation as a whole." (9/23/93)

In addition to employer mandates, other areas of contention concerning the plan's cost remained mostly the province of critics. General Mills CEO, Brewster Atwater, called it, "a huge politically determined entitlement program on a scale never before attempted." (NBC, 2/2/94) Opponents also ridiculed heavy government involvement in health care decisions. Sen. Phil Gramm (R-TX)

cials raised the total above two-thirds (68%). Although no one from the administration ever criticized the HSA, almost every other group of sources was dominated by critics of the plan's provisions. Republicans were unanimous in their opposition, and business sources were nearly so (96% negative). Even among Congressional Democrats, two out of three opinions on the Clinton plan were negative. The only significant source of external support came from the general public. Among ordinary

Rating the Players



told CBS, "When my mama gets sick I want her to see a doctor and not a bureaucrat." (11/24/93) By contrast, supporters prevailed on such issues as increased tobacco taxes, promised paperwork reduction, and cost controls on prescription drugs. One government physician argued, "Individual plans and Medicare will negotiate with manufacturers -- that's a very important step (in controlling drug costs)." (CBS, 11/16/93)

In general, statements in support of the Clinton plan rarely came from outside the Clinton administration. The president and first lady together accounted for nearly half (45%) of all supportive sound bites, and the addition of other administration offi-

cials who were interviewed, 82 percent supported the president's specific reforms. (In contrast, public opinion polls show only 43% support the Clintons' HSA overall.)

Panning the President

Although coverage of the issues involved in health care reform was balanced, coverage of the reformers themselves was usually negative. Seven out of every eight sources (88%) criticized the Clinton administration's role in the health care debate, including 77 percent dis-

approval of the Clintons' personal handling of the issue. For example, CBS quoted Rep. Bill Thomas (R-CA), "What the Clintons need to know is that they've got to do something else. What they've offered is unacceptable." (3/23/94) On NBC, Rep. Newt Gingrich (R-GA) seized on a technical glitch in the president's address to Congress to attack the administration's competence in re-

forming health care: "An administration which can't get the right speech in the right teleprompter for the president of the United States... probably can't get the right CAT-scan in the right operating room for you." (10/26/93)

The Clinton team responded in kind, although less frequently, with attacks on its critics. For example, Hillary

Rodham Clinton dismissed the insurance industry's "Harry and Louise" advertising campaign, "Now they have the gall to run TV ads that there is a better way -- the very industry that has brought us to the brink of bankruptcy because of the way they have financed health care." (ABC, 11/1/93)

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