

The long arm of spin doctors

News and commentaries after the televised debates

The debates between US President George Bush and his challenger John Kerry did not have a direct influence on voting preferences of the US population in the end. The analysis of the response shows clearly: Not the debates themselves, but rather the subsequent spin on television influenced the voters' image of the candidates. The so-called spin doctoring, that is the manipulation of public opinion, even reached as far as Germany.

After nine months of campaigning and an election coverage that was based on very little factual information, experts and voters had high expectations of the television debates between Bush and Kerry. „Many American voters have not learned the candidates' issue positions because the candidates have not stressed them and journalists have focused on the horse race. In the absence of good information, voters guess and often guess incorrectly.

The presidential debates may fix that”, explained Kate Kenski of the Annenberg Public Policy Center before the beginning of the first TV debate in September. The voters themselves honored the debates with record ratings. More than 60 million Americans followed the exchange, a third more than in 2000. In practice, both candidates took ad-

vantage of the platform: The content analysis of the three programs from the end of September until mid-October illustrates that more than 80% of all statements by Bush and Kerry related to their stands on factual issues.

Television news, however, fumbled the pass. In order to pick up the thread of their month-long, competition-, campaign- and polling-oriented election coverage, the news media first and foremost needed a “winner” after the first debate. Comparing the candidates' standpoints on factual issues was of secondary importance (graph 1).

Questionable polling results

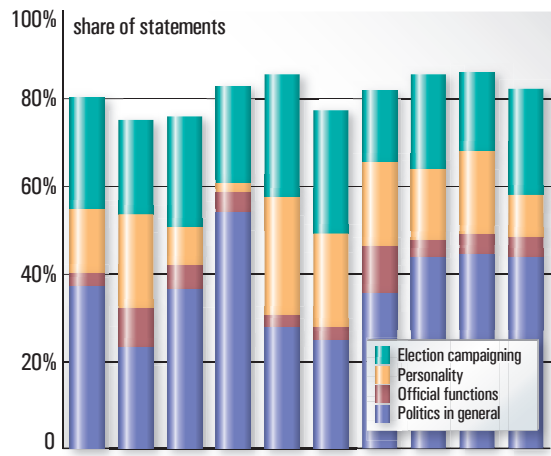
Directly after the first debate, the experts almost unanimously pronounced John Kerry's victory (graph 2). The basis for their verdict remained unclear, because the pundits barely justified it by deciding who had had the more convincing arguments, focusing instead on who they thought had cut a better figure in the debate.

The Kerry-Spin was reinforced by “polling” results that ABC and CBS announced on the same night: According to CBS, Kerry had won the debate 43% to 28% (the fact that 29% had declared it a draw was mentioned far less often), while in the ABC poll, 45% had considered Kerry to be the winner and 36% Bush.

The rather dubious methods of the two polls were only mentioned in passing: The CBS one was based on 209 undecided voters, with a margin of error of 7 points. Moreover, the participants of this online sur-

Research Links:
<http://www.annenbergpublicpolicycenter.org/>
www.people-press.org
www.gallup.com
<http://www.cbsnews.com/sections/opinion/polls/main500160.shtml>
<http://abcnews.go.com/sections/us/PollVault/PollVault.html>

1 Topics in the news: ABC, CBS and NBC, Time and Newsweek

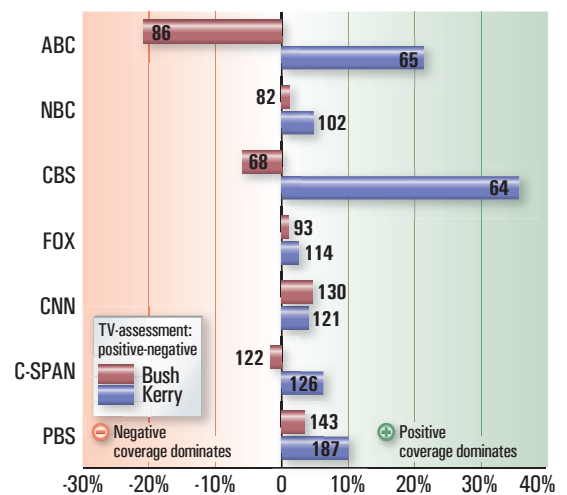


100%: All statements in the ABC, NBC, CBS prime time news, Time and Newsweek

Source: Media Tenor
07/19/2004 – 09/26/2004

Basis: 12,648 statements on ABC, CBS, NBC prime time news, Time and Newsweek

2 Evaluation of Bush and Kerry, commentaries in the after-debate



Difference between positive and negative TV news coverage on John F. Kerry and George W. Bush

Source: Media Tenor
09/30/2004

Basis: 724/ 779 statements by Bush and Kerry during “post-debate discussion”.

Larry Sabato:
 “Anybody, who declares a clear winner, obviously delivers a biased judgement.” (after the first debate)

vey had selected themselves previous to the debates. ABC interviewed 531 registered voters, resulting in a margin of error of 4.5 points. The questions were asked on the telephone, but participants had similarly been asked to consent to it previous to the debate.

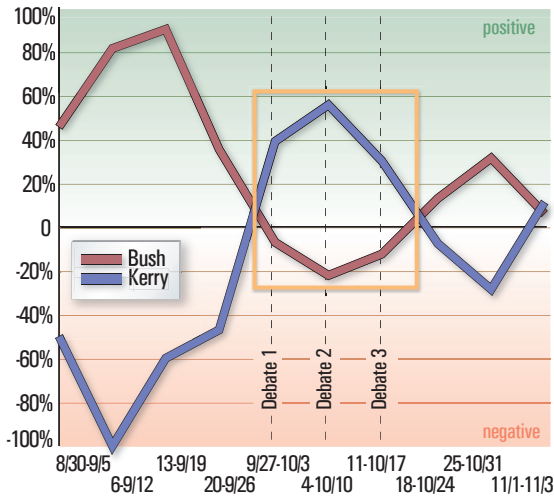
Despite their methodical flaws, these catchy results sufficed for the Kerry-Spin to take off in subsequent media coverage – affecting the opinion of voters. **Graph 3** shows the coverage on polling results. Compared with the results of Gallup surveys on voting preferences, for example, the media coverage on polling results mirrors the interviewees' voting intentions before and after the debates.

During the three weeks of the debates, TV journalists attributed a disproportionate amount of attention to the positive “John Kerry, winner of the debates” polls; far more than to the question of voting intentions, which, at least initially, had hardly changed.

Turning point after third debate

Three days after the first debate, however, the spin doctors' message had reached the voters: “Kerry has won the debate”. This is what 58% against 26% of interviewees said in a Pew study, who had only been asked three days after the first debate – and who had followed the general tenor of media coverage in their judgement. Still, their voting intentions remained largely unchanged. The inclination to vote for Kerry only increased slowly throughout the three weeks of the televised

3 Evaluation over time – ABC, CBS and NBC prime time news



Difference of positive and negative assessments in the coverage on polling results between Bush and Kerry

Source: Media Tenor 08/09/2004 – 10/17/2004 Basis: 10,356/ 11,745 statements about Bush and Kerry on ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox news

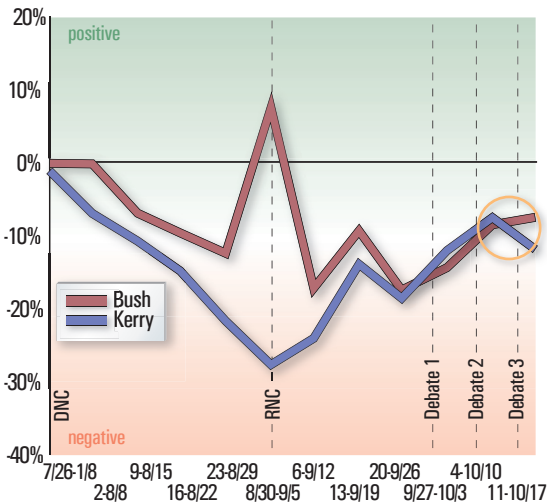
Between the first two debates, TV news knew how to quote positive polling results for John Kerry.

debates. It peaked after the second debate, when Kerry had been chosen the winner in a similar manner.

Whereas John Kerry had experienced a boom in television news and popularity ratings after the first two debates, the third one and its subsequent coverage benefited President Bush (**graph 4**).

In contrast to the German media, who announced a 3:0 for Kerry, the experts on US television considered the President to be leading in the last debate. And once again, the media and polling trends followed suit. The US media thus got their neck-and-neck race for the last three weeks of the campaign, which guaranteed tension until the very last minute. sp

4 Evaluation over time – ABC, CBS, NBC and FOX news



Difference between positive and negative assessments between Bush and Kerry

Source: Media Tenor 08/23/2004 - 10/31/2004 Basis: 586/ 387 statements about Bush and Kerry on ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox news

Open question:

Will the US media continue to lose credibility among citizens because of the poor quality of information?

Basis:

Media: ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX, CNN, C-Span, PBS, Time and Newsweek

Time: 07/19/2004 – 11/03/2004

Analysis: 1,503 statements on ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX, CNN, C-Span, PBS after the first debate on 09/30/2004

77,472 statements on ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX, Time and Newsweek on 07/19/2004 – 11/03/2004