

Contest lacks content

US coverage of the presidential campaign was weak in content

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The campaign coverage of US network news offered voters little information on the candidates' positions on issues, while speculating to no end on the horse race. Even after the presidential debates, which turned out to be rich in content, journalists quickly took the focus away from factual political issues such as the state of the economy.

The 2004 campaign coverage by the US media smoothly followed a long established trend: Journalists trailed the campaign primarily as observers along the race track, interpreting the candidates' actions as tactical moves and putting general events repeatedly into one and the same context. What does the news from Iraq, the latest labor market statistics or terror warnings mean for the candidates' positions in the presidential race?

The **Media Tenor** analysis of media coverage on the US election confirms previous scientific studies, according to which journalists are less interested in issue reporting than in campaign leadership and strategy or simply the horse race for the presidency (Robinson/Shahen, 1984, Patterson, 1993, Lichter, 2004).

The 2004 US campaign coverage followed this trend: Throughout the election year, **Media Tenor** analyzed every program of **ABC**, **CBS** and **NBC** prime time news, every issue of **Time** and **Newsweek**, the **Wall Street Journal** and, starting in August 2004, every Special Report program with Brit Hume on **Fox News** – statement by statement. **Graph 1** illustrates what network prime time news and the weeklies **Time** and **Newsweek** have focused on in their coverage on candidates.

The coverage of campaigns as horse races – that is emphasizing strategy and polling results – invariably peaked whenever voters had to make a decision: More than 30% of the information voters received in January at the start of the primaries related to the campaign itself, and was largely without substance. From July until October, information and news on aspects of the candidates' personalities together made up more than 45%.

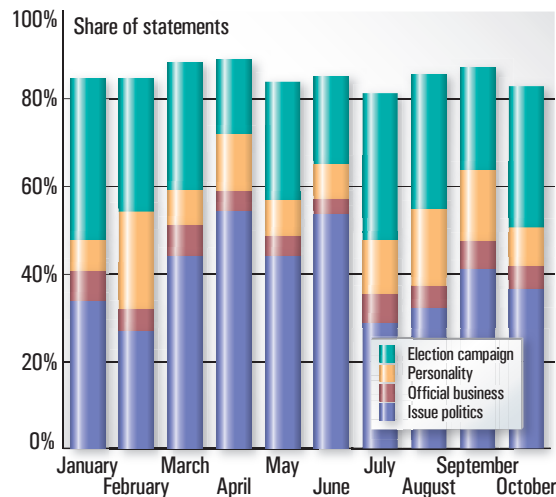
Voters' information needs versus media's offer

The opposite was true about the share of information on factual issues and the candidates' performance in previous political office: In the last month of the campaign, this information took up a share of less than 40%. Thus, less than one in two statements actually contained "hard" political information.

Meanwhile, the information needs of voters differed significantly from what the media had on offer. Throughout the entire election year, the media failed to provide information on the issues that

Evaluated for this story:
 totally 39,148 statements
 about Bush and Kerry in
ABC, CBS, NBC prime time
 news, **Time** and **Newsweek**

1 Campaign coverage at ABC, CBS, NBC, Time, Newsweek

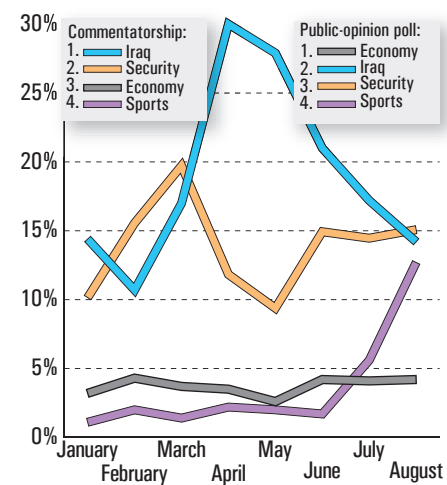


100%: all statements in ABC, NBC, CBS prime time news, Time and Newsweek

Source: Media Tenor
 01/01 – 10/31/2004

Basis: 39,148 statements on ABC, CBS, NBC evening news, Time und Newsweek

2 Coverage on ABC, NBC, CBS News, opinion poll: topical structure

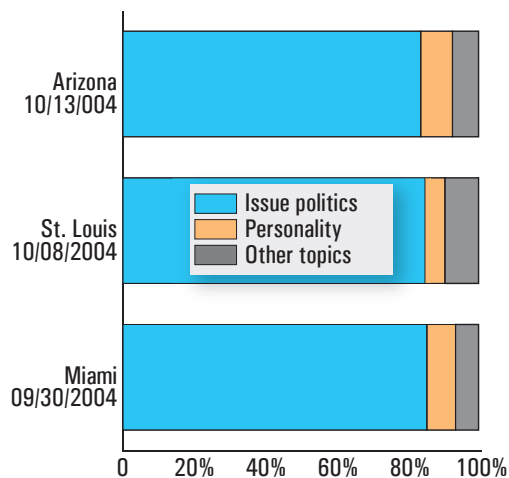


100%: all stories in ABC, NBC and CBS prime time news

Source: Media Tenor
 01/01 – 10/31/2004

Basis: 15,199 stories on ABC, CBS, NBC evening news

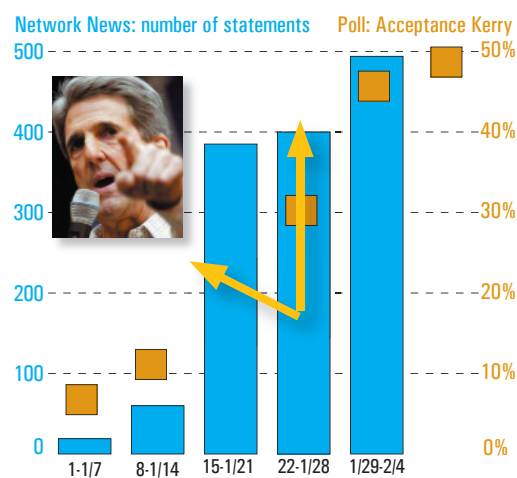
3 Topical structure of TV debates: share of reporting on issues



100%: all statements during the respective debate

Source: Media Tenor 09/30;10/08;10/13/2004 Basis: 1,402/ 1,456/ 1,346 statements from Bush or Kerry

4 John Kerry at ABC, NBC, CBS and in polls 01/01 until 02/04/2004



Number of statements by or on Kerry/ polling results

Source: Media Tenor 01/01 – 02/04/2004 Basis: Totally 1,358 statements from or about Kerry on ABC, NBC and CBS

John Kerry's rise in January 2004 would not have been possible without the media: TV news coverage strongly increased after his success in Iowa. Subsequently his support among Democratic voters improved.

were most important to the people.

Graph 2 shows that – even when the media did cover factual issues – there was a significant gap between their agenda and the voters' interests. According to polling results throughout most of the year, voters considered the economy to be their most important issue. The US networks almost entirely ignored this interest: Information on the state of the economy, the job market and tax policies was virtually absent in TV news. With the second televised presidential debate between President George W. Bush and his challenger John F. Kerry on October 8th, the gap between media content and the voters' needs became more than obvious. During that debate, voters had the opportunity to address the candidates directly on issues that were most important to them – and they used it to ask specific questions on the contestants' perspectives and plans.

Voters wanted to know what the candidates thought about foreign, economic and environmental policies, homeland security or the future of health care. The contestants answered in great detail and the share of factual information peaked at more than 80% in all three presidential debates (graph 3).

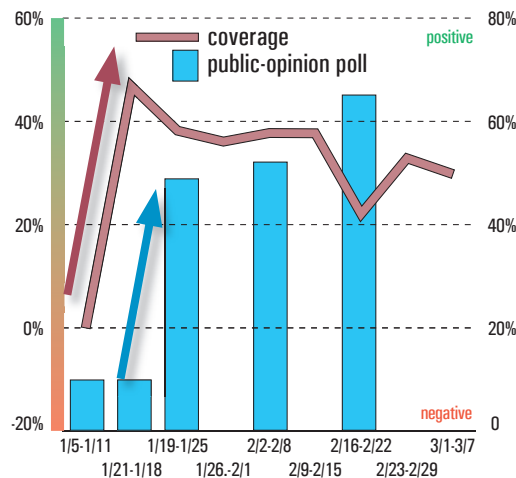
But as soon as journalists and pundits took to the microphones again, the focus shifted: Their main preoccupation was the candidates' performance, including mimics, gestures, rhetorical aptitudes, and, most importantly, the question who had "won" the debate.

The journalists saw and communicated the campaign in general and the debates in particular from an entirely different perspective than the candidates and voters: Instead of taking it as an issue-focused exchange between the candidates, they primarily considered it as a show. Graph 4 illustrates that the following excerpts from an Associated Press report

after the second presidential debate was not an exception:

*"AP, October 9, 2004
NEW YORK – Friday's rematch between President Bush and John Kerry proved to be a livelier affair, and a more revealing show, than their first debate.
The big difference, of course, was the town-hall format that surrounded the two candidates with 140 voters, some of whom got to ask the questions they had brought. (...) Both candidates seemed to relish the chance to play to a group (and, afterward, to do what politicians do best, shake hands with everybody). Kerry seemed quite at home with the format. Bush, clearly improved from the first debate, was fired up, too, though at times overheated in his delivery. After listening to Kerry at one point, he bulldozed through Gibson's setup, declaring, „I gotta answer this,“ and never looked back. As with the first debate, reaction shots were interesting*

5 TV-news assessment of Kerry and approval in the polls



Coverage on Kerry's campaign (line); opinion poll
 Source: Media Tenor; Gallup 01/05/2003 - 03/07/2004
 Basis: 1, 383 statements about Kerry's election-campaign on ABC, NBC, CBS

to note. Again, Kerry appeared composed, often scribbling notes as Bush responded to questions.”

Everybody loves a winner

It is easy enough to understand the reasons why news media reduced the campaign to its show ingredients. The journalists' focus on the campaign as a horse race guarantees easy new material on a daily basis, whereas the candidates' political programs do not change every day. They do not offer material for small, self-contained stories, but would require continuous, profound and sometimes even repetitive coverage. Horse race coverage is quite different from that. Throughout the election year, polling results are subject to strong variations, and, depending on the state of events, can change from one day to another. The candidates' actions and every event that is covered allow for speculations – so called “analyses” – on how they affect polling results and therefore the race.

In turn, the horse race coverage has its effects on voters. By quoting polling results and permanently focussing on the candidates' strategies for taking a lead in the race, the media quickly solidify their image in the campaign: Who is the winner type and who is the loser type?

There is no doubt that, at the time of the primaries, the media contributed to John Kerry's triumph and Howard Dean's demise. **Graph 4** shows the extent to which Kerry's reputation among voters depended on his presence in prime time news.

Before mid-January, the Senator from Massachusetts had been practically non-existent in television; accordingly few Democratic voters considered him as a candidate. Only when journalists started to spend more time on John Kerry, voters expressed a growing inclination to choose him as presidential candidate for the Democratic Party.

Election campaigning as a horse race: ABC, NBC and CBS news as well as Time and Newsweek focused primarily on campaigning styles and personality.

Homeland security and Vietnam on the agenda

The volume of coverage alone cannot explain Kerry's rise in popularity, however. The type of coverage was equally decisive. **Graph 5** shows that his appeal among voters followed the sudden positive media coverage, which Kerry received after putting homeland security and his military service in Vietnam on the campaign agenda.

Only after watching a week of positive coverage on prime time news, receiving from it the idea that John Kerry was the most promising candidate to confront Bush on issues like homeland security, voters suddenly approved of the Senator. Kerry's success in the primaries was therefore also a result of the horse race coverage: A week before the Iowa Caucus, network prime time news had picked the previously rather pale-looking Kerry as a hopeful candidate and covered his campaign and polling results in a positive way.

The actual boost in the polls and the first election success in Iowa once again offered enough material to the media for continuing their enthusiastic coverage on Kerry's campaign and for framing him as the most promising candidate.

In particular, undecided voters heavily base their decision for one or the other candidate on current events or campaign coverage. Opinions may change from one day to another and polling results may already be outdated by the time they are published.

Opinion research institutes identify voter types in different ways. The definitions of “likely voters”, for example, differ slightly between institutes. Moreover, opinion researchers are increasingly faced with methodical problems: falling response rates and increasing inaccessibility.

Orientation in the polling jungle

The published polling results in October varied

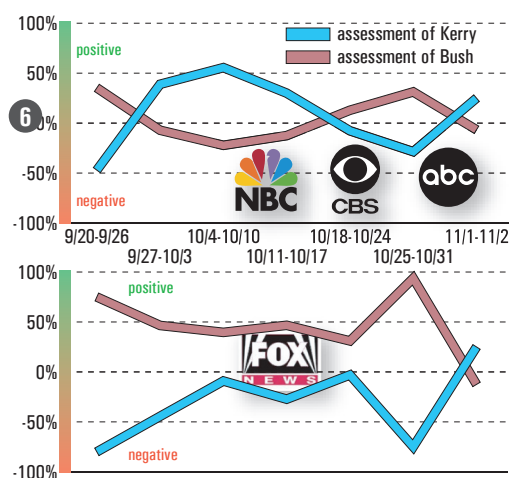
accordingly – some announced a clear victory for Bush, others for Kerry and yet another group was convinced that a similarly ambiguous result as in 2000 was looming. Yet the voters received hardly any explanations for these variations or information on the inherent flaws of opinion research.

Still, it was not entirely impossible to get oriented in the polling jungle. The median result of polls among undecided voters by the Pew Center for the People and the Press, CBS, the George Washington University (data for the beginning of September were not available), Gallup, TIPP and ABC/Washington Post resulted in the following timeline how potential voters might have decided since the beginning of September:

	% BUSH	% KERRY
end Oct./beg. Nov.	49	47
mid-October	49	45
beginning October	48	46
September 22-26	48	43
beginning September	50	43

The median from seven opinion surveys clearly shows that President Bush was consistently lead-

Assessment of Kerry and Bush on ABC, NBC, CBS versus FOX



Balance of positive and negative assessments

Source: Media Tenor
09/20 – 11/02/2004

Basis: 579 statements in
4 US-news programmes

ing John Kerry among undecided voters, even if, after the end of the presidential debates, his lead was much reduced. Immediately before the election, the opinion trend was evidently in favor of

President Bush. Bush also lead the question who US citizens expected to win, and undecided voters often vote on the basis of an expected victory, in order to end up on the winner's side. Given the rather clear indications for President Bush's victory as well as the impact of the media's horse race coverage on voters' decisions, the question remains: How did the media portray the horse race in the last weeks before the election?

Graph 6 illustrates the tendencies of the horse race coverage in the prime time news of the networks ABC, CBS, NBC and Fox.

The opinion survey coverage of the network news (ABC, CBS, NBC) differs significantly from the polling results quoted by Fox in Special Report with Brit Hume: All told, network news portrayed the race between the two candidates starting in September as being much closer than Fox News. Brit Hume consistently quoted polls, in which President Bush clearly scored better than John Kerry, never questioning Bush's lead.

Whatever the motives of Fox or the network news might have been, coverage on polling results obviously depended on arbitrary selection rather than objective and factual criteria. With the backdrop of the extensive horse race coverage in the 2004 election campaign the question remains: What's the point of opinion polls in the news, any-

Sudden jump:
After Kerry put his military service in Vietnam and homeland security on the agenda, the media quickly turned to positive reporting – and voters followed the trend.

ful to evaluate the mood in the country at a given moment. But as was shown by the above examples, horse race coverage not only fails to provide meaningful orientation, but also, through news selection, potentially steers voters in one or the other direction without any factual basis. sp

Basis:

Media: ABC, CBS, NBC, FOX, Time and Newsweek

Time: 01/012004 – 11/02/2004

Analysis: Totally 39,148 statements about Bush and Kerry in ABC, CBS, NBC prime time news, Time and Newsweek (1/1–10/31/2004);

15,199 stories in ABC, CBS and NBC prime time news (1/1–8/31/2004);

1,402/ 1,456/ 1,346 statements during the TV-crosstalks