

Media Watchdogs Gain Global Clout

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Ojr.org, the Online Journalism Review, is a Web-based journal produced at the Annenberg School for Communication at the University of Southern California.

The term “monitoring the media” has become so politicized in the United States that we instantly assume it has something to do with the obvious or ridiculous notion – depending on your political orientation – that there’s a liberal media bias. But there are many other reasons to monitor the media, whether it’s to track the way the media influences events or to track the treatment of journalists working at huge corporate behemoths.

While the Web has given numerous media watchdogs global reach, two groups in particular are using the Internet’s reach and interactivity to bring international attention to issues that might have languished.

Media Tenor, based in Germany, has been doing non-partisan media monitoring since 1994, and is knee-deep in its second scientific analysis of coverage for the U.S. presidential election.

A report for the week of March 22-April 1 2004 had a section headlined “CBS Maintains Firm Anti-Bush Stance” with far more negative statements made about Bush than on NBC or ABC. But CBS also had the most negative statements about Kerry during that week. One of **Media Tenor**’s top-line conclusions for the week was that “Criticism of the Bush administration around the 9/11 investigations had a damning effect on President Bush’s media image toward the end of March, but it improved in the last days of the month – Bush even received better ratings than his Democratic opponent John Kerry.”

CBS News spokeswoman Sandra Genelius had no comment on the work done by **Media Tenor**, but told me “the highest priority at **CBS News** is the fairness and accuracy of the reporting we put on the air, and that’s what we spend our time and energy on.”

Gaining prominence through partnerships

With the rise of ideological journalism online (Salon) and on TV (**Fox News**), a non-partisan media watcher can play a valuable role as neutral observer, if it builds credibility and backs its theories with strong research. For the 2004 U.S. presidential race, **Media Tenor** currently has 10 media analysts who “code” the media, and three researchers analyzing the data – and has plans to beef up staff. As you read through the reports online, you get a sense for how weekly news changes the negative and positive tenor of coverage at each outlet.

While **Media Tenor**’s findings rely heavily on sci-

entific research, it has worked with **MediaChannel.org**, a more liberal-leaning outfit that has attacked Bush regularly and works with **AlterNet**. **Media Tenor** took on the 2000 election as well, and came to a pretty stark conclusion about that historically tight race: The media gave more positive coverage to Bush than Gore, and helped sway the result.

“We monitored the media coverage of the 2000 elections, and the biggest finding of this analysis was about the immense role media played during the election, giving Bush the presidency,” said Isadora Badi, communications coordinator for **Media Tenor**’s U.S. office in New York. “We can say that without the media interference, the results would be different, for sure. The research of 2000 is still a brilliant case for studying the influence of media in politics, and we expect to bring an even broader discussion with this study in 2004.”

Media Tenor’s partnerships with American media watchdogs **MediaChannel** and the **Center for Media and Public Affairs** help bring its work to a broader audience – including the book “Mediocracy 2000: Hail to the Thief” which was co-edited by Roland Schatz and **MediaChannel**’s Danny Schechter.

Though the book and **MediaChannel**’s general tone is anti-Bush, the work of **Media Tenor** on the whole remains grounded in research data. Badi told me via e-mail that the group’s data is coded to have no personal influence from the people working on it.

“I understand it may sound we’re adding our opinions in our reports, but the base of our work is to research without any personal views,” she said. “If media is giving more favorable coverage to one candidate or another, our role is to show the results to society and allow journalists, researchers and voters to draw their own conclusions. If our results show Bush is being benefited by media, liberal sources will find this data useful to their purposes, and vice versa. If **MediaChannel** is eager to show them, we’re glad in having our research used.”

MediaChannel executive director Timothy Karr told me via e-mail that they worked with **Media Tenor** in 2000 as well as now in 2004 because of the group’s neutrality.

“We worked with them during the 2000 elections and chose to go with them this year because of their rigorous methodology and political neutrality,” Karr said. “While oft-cited in Europe and South Africa press, **Media Tenor**’s media monitoring gets little attention in the States. They deserve more focus from U.S. media given the sketchy backgrounds of the other groups that have laid claim to unbiased analysis.”