

Too little media momentum for Kerry

The Democratic candidate's media presence remains hollow

The challenger to the U.S. President has been trying to attract voters' attention for six months now. But the opinion polls speak for themselves: "Who is John Kerry?" the **Wall Street Journal** titled on June 30th, 2004, publishing the crushing results of a focus group study by the renowned Annenberg Public Policy Center. People on both sides of the Atlantic know that Kerry is running against Bush, but they have no idea what the Senator actually stands for, not even after the 2004 campaigns are two thirds over.

How can the citizens even gain access to this information, when the opinion forming media refuse, more and more, to offer a platform to issue-related politics? The bottom chart demonstrates the challenge that Kerry and others are facing: During the primaries, at the exact same time when registered Democrats should have been able to decide on the best alternative to President Bush, the share of information on Kerry's specific ideas about education, health care, Iraq or taxes was less than a third of all statements that were broadcast on U.S. network news of **ABC**, **CBS** and **NBC** and published in **Time**, **Newsweek** and the **Wall Street Journal**. Only after the Senator from Massachusetts had been pegged as the frontrunner did the share of factual information rise to at least one third. Still,

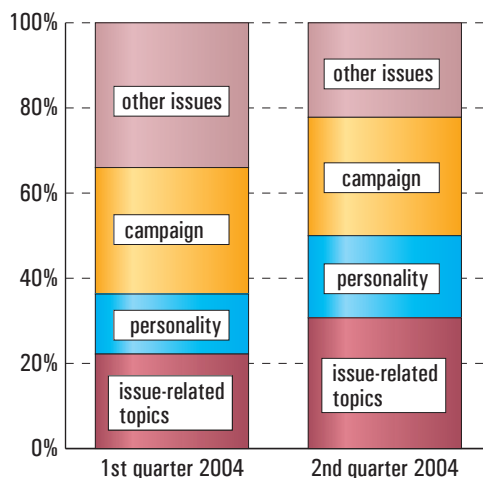
this was obviously too low to offer a clear answer to voters' question: Who is John Kerry?

The polling results of the Annenberg Public Policy Center also show that, compared to the incumbent, Kerry managed to win over significantly fewer people (see bottom chart to the right-hand side). Just before the summer break, this result is quite alarming, since challengers tend to have better chances in the first half of the campaign. After all, they cannot be measured so much against reality, but rather their demands. Four years ago, at a comparable point in time, George W. Bush was significantly better positioned against Vice President Al Gore, and during the 1998 campaign in Germany, the challenger Gerhard Schröder looked much better against then incumbent Chancellor Helmut Kohl, or challenger Edmund Stoiber against the incumbent Schröder in 2002. With the election day approaching, this early lead usually melts away, because the people no longer intend to teach their government a lesson via polls. Instead, they increasingly start to wonder: "How do we know that, with the new person arriving, the situation at least won't get worse?"

A challenger therefore needs broad support from all sides, in order to face off this grip by the 'tyranny of the status quo' effectively. The most important condition for pushing through the awareness thresholds is a strong position in the media. This is where it becomes obvious why Kerry has been

The share of issue-related topics is too low to answer the voters' question: Who is John Kerry?

Topical structure of news coverage on John Kerry



100 %: all statements on John Kerry

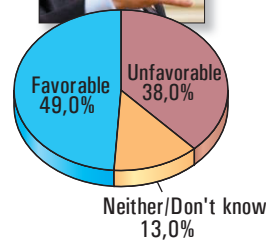
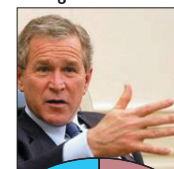
Source: Media Tenor 01/01 - 06/30/2004

Basis: 15,000 statements on Kerry in 7 media

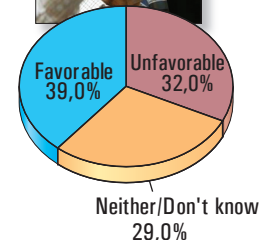
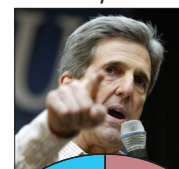
Voter survey: opinion on George W. Bush and John Kerry

Opinion on:

George W. Bush



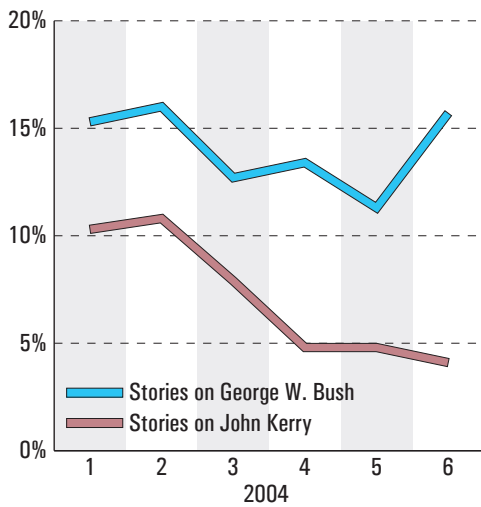
John Kerry



June 8-21, margin of error +/- three percentage points

Source: University of Pennsylvania's National Annenberg Election Survey, June 2004

Media presence of Bush and Kerry in ABC, NBC, CBS evening news



Share of all news stories in ABC, NBC, CBS evening news

Source: Media Tenor
01/01 – 06/30/2004

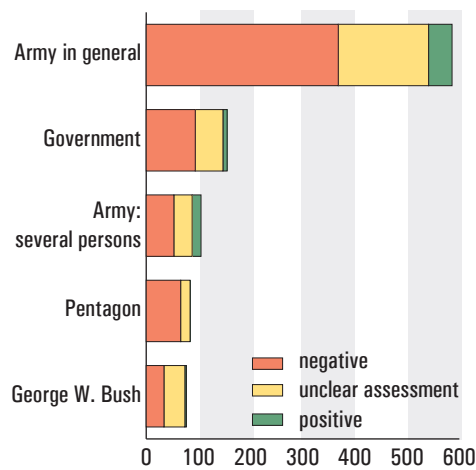
Basis: 11,311 news stories
in 3 US TV news broadcasts

doing so badly so far: On the one hand, journalists have been referring to him primarily in the context of campaigning, opinion poll results as well his successful performance during the primaries, instead of covering his ideas on issues and the question of what he would actually do as President of the United States. On the other hand, the platform offered by the media continues to be far too small for putting sufficient pressure on the public debate.

The top chart on the left-hand side illustrates the enormous discrepancy between media coverage of Kerry compared with the incumbent. The Kerry campaign team must have entirely miscalculated this White House bonus: They had instructed their candidate to hold back on topics such as Iraq, the torture scandal etc., because they believed that those would necessarily turn into a disaster for Bush. However, the second chart on this page shows that the U.S. media related those critical issues far less to the President, than to the U.S. secret services, the army or Secretary of Defense Donald Rumsfeld.

Meanwhile, most of the risky topics have left the President largely undamaged, including dealing recklessly with the terrorist threats before September 11th, 2001 and misleading the public when justifying the war against Iraq, the ballooning budget deficit, the general economic situation, etc. In the second quarter of 2004, the lead in opinion polls swung regularly from Kerry to Bush and back again, as they found themselves neck and neck. Thus the challenger has not been able to reach a position similar to the one that Bush had during the 2000 campaign: Until the party conventions in the summer, he had continuously been ahead of his competitor Al Gore in opinion polls. Week after

Debate about Iraq in U.S. television news: The protagonists



Number of news stories (positive/unclear rating/negative)

Source: Media Tenor
01/01 – 06/30/2004

Basis: 1,007 news stories
in 3 US TV news broadcasts

week, the American people were given the impression that Bush was a winning type and Al Gore a born loser. So far, Kerry has not worked up to that advantage in 2004.

Journalists' reactions to John Edwards' nomination as a running mate go some way to redress this imbalance. They had already portrayed the Southerner very positively during the primaries and accordingly reacted rather sympathetically to his nomination in the first days of July. Moreover, Edwards managed to strike a cord with the media on the exact same topics Kerry had previously been criticized on. Both with regard to his general political direction and special issues such as tax policies, the media assessed Edwards' statements significantly better.

Whether or not this will be enough to turn around the overall trend remains open to reasonable doubts. After all, the worst-case scenario for the incumbent was even outdone in the first half of the election year without creating sustainable damage to his media image or in opinion polls. What is left for Kerry and Edwards to attack Bush on? In the meantime, the economy produces good news like an assembly line.

Coverage on Iraq: George W. Bush was hardly damaged by the most critical issues.

Basis:

Media: ABC World News Tonight, NBC Nightly News, CBS Evening News; Wall Street Journal, Time Magazine, Newsweek, USA Today

Time: 01/01 – 06/30/2004

Analysis: 15,000 statements on John Kerry in 7 media; 11,311 news stories in 3 TV news broadcasts; 1,007 stories on the situation in the Iraq in 7 media

Survey: University of Pennsylvania's National Annenberg Election Survey, June 2004