

Limping towards the Convention Bounce

Bush's incumbent bonus in the media is turning into a problem for John F. Kerry

In election campaigns, challengers generally have a much harder time than incumbents to make it onto the media agenda and into public awareness. In the US election campaign, the party convention with its centerpiece, the official nomination of the presidential candidate, is considered to be one of the greatest opportunities for the challenger to create the necessary awareness through the media. Still, two weeks before this year's Democratic convention, ABC, NBC and CBS announced that they were not planning on covering the party convention for more than one hour each day of the three days of the event. For John Forbes Kerry, this reduced media attention means a loss of a much-needed platform for himself and his stances on issues. While President Bush has been the subject of daily media reporting by virtue of his official functions, John Kerry, after the first half of the 2004 campaign year, has been unable to convey either his program to his voters or the reasons why they should elect him the next President of the United States.

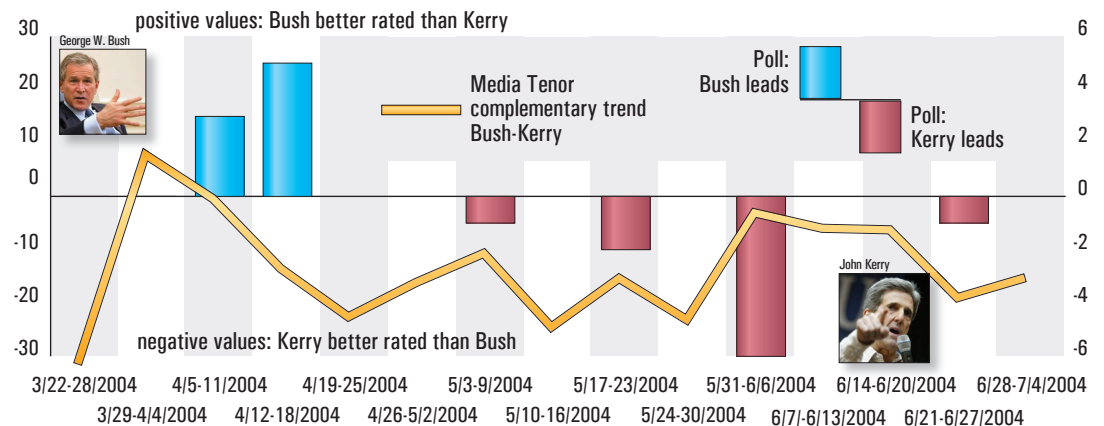
Kerry's lack of media profile made him lag in opinion polls

Although leading opinion research institutes occasionally suggest otherwise, John Kerry does not have a stable lead over President Bush in popularity ratings. A look at the media analysis illustrates what opinion polling data alone cannot. The first

graph shows the extent to which the portrayal of candidates on ABC, NBC and CBS correlates with voting intentions. Since the end of the primaries, the networks have been portraying Kerry much more positively than the President. After a certain time lag, the variations in media portrayal were clearly reflected by voting preferences – to a slightly different degree for each candidate, however. John Kerry seemed to need a long-term and far more positive media echo than President Bush in order to score points with voters. If the media's assessment of the candidates turns only slightly in favor of the President, John Kerry starts losing ground in opinion polls. One obvious explanation for this asymmetry is the Senator's lack of a clear media profile. As a challenger, Kerry has to fight against President Bush's incumbent bonus: Voters have had the opportunity of getting to know him during his four-year presidency, while John Kerry still appears to be a somewhat unknown quantity. President Bush must keep his supporters happy, while John Kerry still needs to convince them.

The opinion-leading US media did not do much to counteract Kerry's inherent disadvantage. On the contrary: Once John Kerry had practically won the nomination on Super Tuesday, the media began to lose interest in the Senator (see chart 2 and 3). In June, they covered President Bush twice as often as the challenger. The low media attention for Kerry had immediate effects: According to a Gallup opinion poll in July, the number of voters claiming not to have an opinion on the Senator from Massachusetts was just as high as last March. The current results of a Pew Centers study confirm the assumption that

Comparison of evaluations in ABC, NBC and CBS evening news, 3/22 – 7/2004



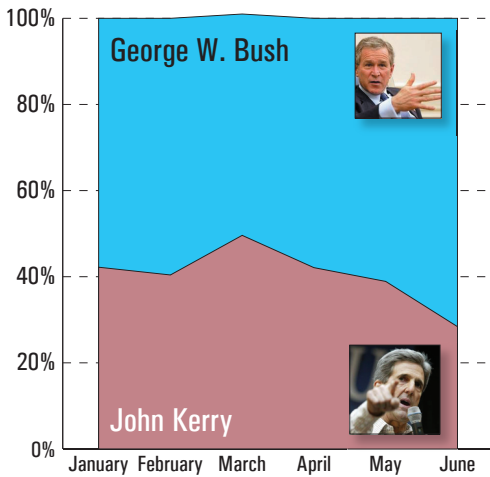
John Kerry needs media attention more than President Bush, in order to lead in opinion polls.

Media: Difference between share of positive and negative evaluation of both Bush and Kerry (Bush: +, Kerry: -)
 Poll: "As of today, do you lean more toward Kerry, the Democrat or Bush, the Republican?"

Source: Media Tenor
 03/22 – 07/04/2004

Basis: 5,995 statements about Bush and Kerry
 in ABC, NBC, CBS evening news

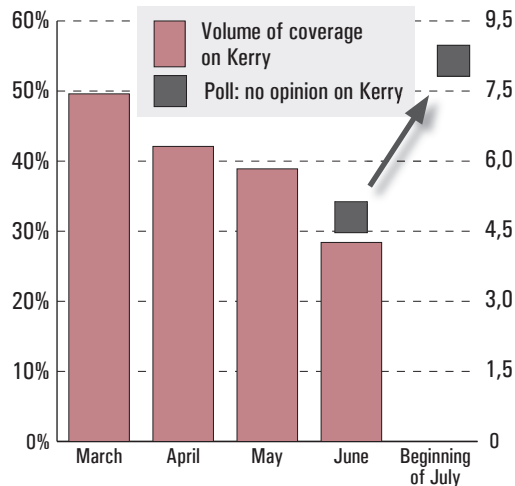
Presence of Bush and Kerry January – June 2004



100%: All statements by or about the candidates

Source: Media Tenor 01/01 – 06/30/2004 Basis: 35,907 statements by or about Kerry and Bush in 7 US media

Presence of Kerry and opinion poll



100%: All statements by or about the candidates; poll

Source: Media Tenor; Gallup 01/01 – 07/13/2004 Basis: 15,000 statements by or about Kerry in 7 US media

“So far, Kerry’s most formidable political talent seems to be “not-ness”. He won the Democratic primaries by not being Howard Dean; now he is a whisker ahead in the polls because he is not George Bush.” (The Economist, July 24th)

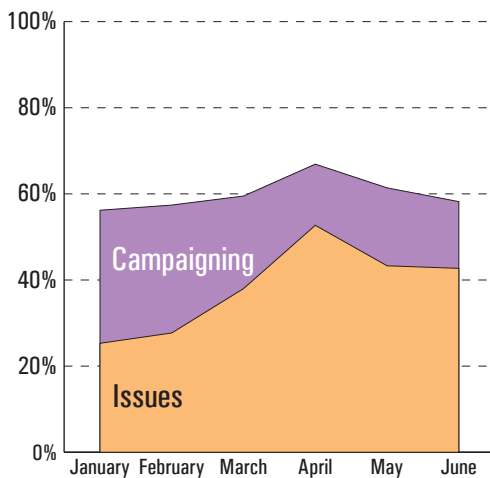
media coverage affected this lack of opinion. According to that study, voters are more interested in the election this year than in the past three election years. They follow the media coverage of the campaign more attentively and think about the election more intensively. Thus, the fact that voters have no opinion of Kerry cannot be explained by a general disinterest of the voters in the campaign or general indifference towards the candidates. The most plausible cause is the fact that the

media have simply informed the public poorly in the second quarter.

Focus on foreign policy gives Bush incumbent bonus

While President Bush was struggling with the consequences of Richard A. Clarke’s revealing book as well as the repercussions of the prison torture scandal in Iraq, the **New York Times** advised John Kerry to concentrate his campaign on voting Bush out of office, instead of trying to distinguish himself with his stances on factual issues. However, after the first six months of the campaign, it has become obvious that a candidate simply cannot create a sustainable and impressive profile without addressing factual issues. The fourth graph illustrates the topical structure of candidate coverage by the opinion forming US media in the first half of the 2004 campaign year over time. In the first quarter of 2004, the media focused on the Democratic candidates’ campaigning during the primaries. At that time, voters received only little information on factual issues, and John Kerry, by virtue of winning most of the ballots, received almost the entire media attention. In March, after the primaries were practically over, the media increasingly provided information on factual issues. Campaigning only played a secondary role in the second quarter. Simultaneously, the media continued to lose interest in Kerry. The chart on top of page 14 demonstrates the topical structure of reporting on John Kerry and George W. Bush.

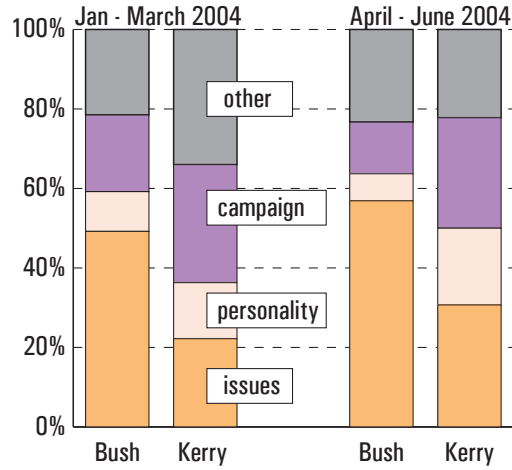
Candidate coverage in the campaign year: Topic structure



100%: All statements by or about John Kerry

Source: Media Tenor 01/01 – 06/30/2004 Basis: 63,432 statements in 7 US media

Coverage of Bush and Kerry: Comparison of topic structure



Share of coverage

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

Basis: 20,256/15,000 statements about Bush and Kerry in 7 US media

John Kerry's presence in the media primarily depended on the journalists' interest in campaign issues, both in the first and the second quarter. When campaign coverage diminished, so did John Kerry's presence in the media. Had the senator succeeded in raising attention by tackling factual issues, he would have had an easier time to keep up his media presence.

Who or what was the reason for the fact that John Kerry has not been able to create a clear, is-

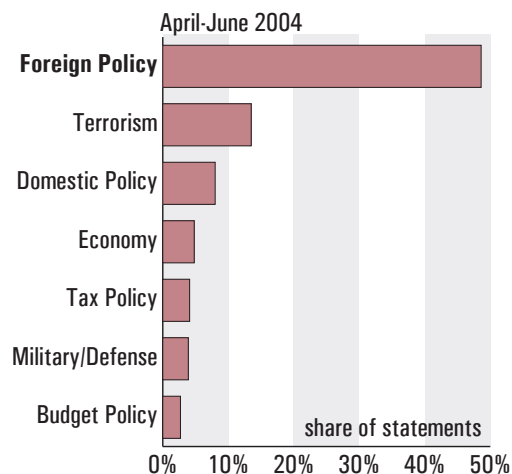
sue-focused profile of himself in the media? The following two explanations are possible: Either Kerry's communication advisers purposefully and strategically decided to hold back issue-oriented concepts, or the

John Kerry only appeared in the media as long as his campaign was interesting.

media, in their news selection, simply ignored the information Kerry provided. A look at the media agenda suggests the answer.

The charts below show the topical agenda of the opinion forming American media on leading US politicians in the second quarter of 2004, compared with that of the same time period in 2000. In the first election year since September 11 the campaign agenda has entirely shifted towards foreign policy, which stands out as a topic in the current election year, receiving five times more attention than four years ago. The second most important topic is terrorism. This year, both issues seem to push all other issues below the awareness threshold that used to be very important in 2000: domestic policy, social security, the economy and health care. The strong focus on foreign policy automatically translates into yet another incumbent bonus for President Bush. First of all, it keeps social policy, a traditional Democratic strength, off the media agenda. Secondly, foreign policy is a topic that is easily transmittable through images, which generally favors the incumbent like no other. The president

Topical agenda on leading US politicians in 2004

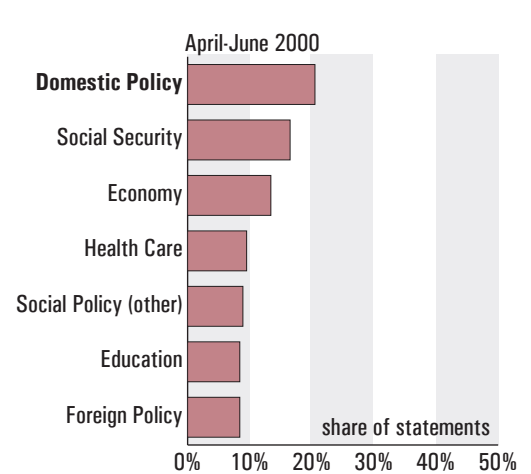


100%: all statements on leading US politicians, remaining %: other topics

Source: Media Tenor 04/01 - 06/30/2004

Basis: 12,065 statements in 7 US media

Topical agenda on leading US politicians in 2000



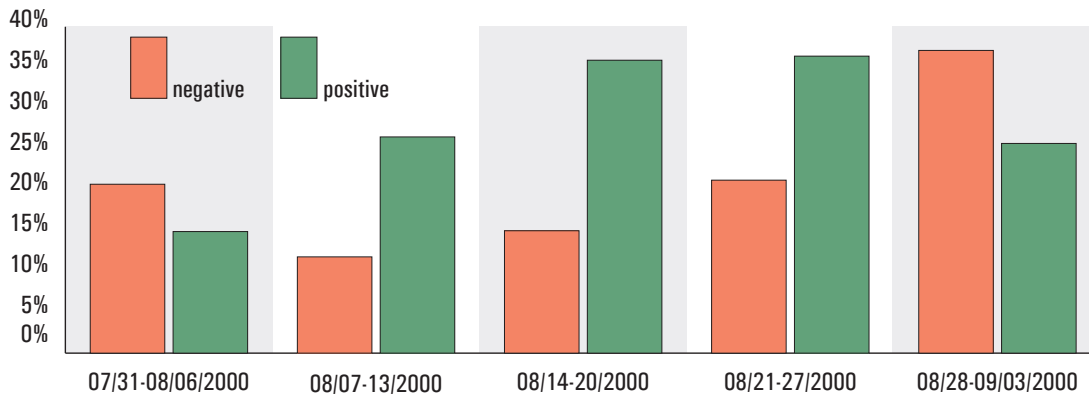
100%: all statements on leading US politicians, remaining %: other topics

Source: Media Tenor 04/01 - 06/30/2000

Basis: 2,139 statements in 3 US media

In the first presidential election year after 9-11, foreign policy and terrorism are pushing all other relevant campaign issues off the media agenda

Assessment of Al Gore on ABC, NBC and CBS evening news, 7/31 – 9/4/2004



Rating: Share of positive and share of negative statements

Source: Media Tenor
07/31 – 09/03/2000

Basis: 2,144 statements
in 3 US media

can play out his representative role at state visits, state receptions and international conferences. Television news programs show statesmanlike handshaking or applause for a speech in front of a foreign parliament. The images of the D-Day celebrations in France, which Americans got to see during Bush’s trip to Europe, were only one example.

Foreign policy issues certainly make Bush vulnerable, as well. But despite all the criticism of the president, voters at least get to see that he exists and must face the problems. Conversely, Kerry remains non-existent for most of them. If Bush’s foreign policy continues to dominate the media agenda, journalists will make Kerry’s potential success dependent on Bush’s foreign policy failures, rather than on Kerry’s own competence. John Kerry will not have a fair chance to stand up to President Bush, as long as the media drops topics like healthcare, social policy and education in favor of foreign policy coverage.

Voters gave bad marks both to the media and the campaigns of the two candidates

Despite the fact that the networks reduced coverage of the convention, Kerry’s official nomination in Boston will still produce significant media hype. When Al Gore was nominated as a candidate in Los Angeles in August 2000, he was the center of network news coverage for two weeks, receiving a positive media assessment for three weeks (see chart above). But Al Gore is also an example of just how short-lived the convention bounce can be. John Kerry and the journalists will have a chance to prove themselves before the voters. It is Kerry’s job to give issue-related

reasons for electing him President of the United States, while journalists should actually transmit Kerry’s positions to the voters. After all, this is another result of the Pew study: Voters consider this year’s election to be far more important than the past two presidential elections, while feeling dissatisfied with the campaign thus far. They gave bad marks both to the media and the campaigns of the two candidates. sp

Basis:

Media: ABC World News Tonight, NBC Nightly News, CBS World News Tonight;
Wall Street Journal U.S. Edition, Time Magazine, Newsweek

Time: 01/01 – 06/30/2004;
07/31 – 09/03/2000

Analysis: 35,907 statements by or about John Kerry and George W. Bush; 12,065 statements on leading politicians in 2004; a total of 63,432 statements on campaigning of the candidates and factual issues; 2,139 statements on leading politicians in 2000; 2,144 statements by or about Al Gore

Studies/Polls: Gallup report July 13th

Open questions:

What role will factual topics play when the duel begins?

Will the president and his challenger engage in a dialogue?