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Networks Only Aired About One Minute of Candidate-Centered Discourse a Night in the Days Leading to the Election

More Stories Focused on Horse-Race & Strategy than Issues & Substance

The broadcast networks covered campaign 2000 primarily as a horse-race, rather than a discussion of substantive issues, according to the latest research from the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania. Only one in four of the network stories aired before the primaries and before the general election was issue-oriented, and the networks averaged a little over a minute per night per network in candidate-centered discourse.

The Annenberg researchers, in conjunction with the Alliance for Better Campaigns, examined network television coverage of the political campaigns for the 30 days preceding the Super Tuesday primaries and the November 7 election. The research was funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts.

“Network coverage is more likely to tell voters why candidates said something than what they actually said. They don’t provide voters much opportunity to learn about candidates’ issue positions,” said Kathleen Hall Jamieson, Director of the Annenberg Public Policy Center and the Dean of the Annenberg School for Communication.

The Annenberg report, *Are Voluntary Standards Working? Candidate Discourse on Network Evening News Programs*, surveyed how the networks responded to a recommendation that stations air five minutes a night of candidate-centered discourse in the month before elections. The voluntary standard was developed by the Advisory Committee on the Public Interest Obligations of Digital Television Broadcasters, a panel set up by President Clinton to study what obligations stations had for operating in the public interest. The panel included representatives from the broadcasting industry as well as academic and civic organizations.

The study reveals that during the month preceding the general election, there was, on average, 64 seconds of candidate-centered discourse per night/per network. Researchers determined the level of candidate-centered discourse (CCD) by examining both the total amount of time candidates were heard expressing themselves and the news frame (strategy- or issue -oriented) of the stories.

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During the general election, ABC devoted the most time to campaign stories (averaging 9:48 per night for campaign stories), but had the worst record in terms of CCD (with only 39 seconds of CCD per night). NBC had the best record of CCD, with 97 seconds per night, and an average of 7:35 per night for campaign stories. CBS averaged 5:50 per night for campaign stories, and had 58 seconds of CCD per night.

“The broadcast networks fell far short of the voluntary standard of airing five minutes a night of candidate-centered discourse in the 30 days leading up to the election,” said Paul Taylor, Executive Director of the Alliance for Better Campaigns. “This research calls into question the effectiveness of the voluntary approach and suggests the need for mandates.”

The Annenberg analysis of network coverage of campaign 2000 also found:

- In the days leading up to the general election, the average sound bite of the candidates was just nine seconds (12 seconds for NBC, nine for CBS and seven for ABC).
- The majority of each network’s campaign stories focused on strategy and not issues. However, in the days leading up to the election, the networks improved their performance compared to the days leading up to the primaries. In the days leading up to the general election, about one in four network campaign stories focused on the issues (29 percent for ABC, 24 percent for CBS and 27 percent for NBC). During the primaries, the numbers were lower, with only 21 percent of ABC’s stories focusing on issues, 17 percent of CBS’s and 26 percent of the NBC stories.
- The efforts on the part of CBS and NBC to provide time to candidates to discuss issues increased the level of CCD in the days leading up to the election. Not only did the average length of direct candidate sound-bites rise significantly during these segments, (averaging about 35 seconds for NBC and 17 for CBS), issues were the dominant frame. The CBS and NBC segments accounted for 42 percent of the CCD for the three networks for the month.

“NBC and CBS made an effort to improve the level of candidate-centered discourse in their campaign coverage,” added Jamieson. “But a focus on strategy at the expense of substance remains a disservice to the American voter.”

Previous Annenberg research has found strategy reporting not only leads to less learning on the part of audiences, but also encourages people to adopt cynical attitudes about politics and to become less engaged in the political process. The full report is available on the Annenberg Public Policy website, www.appcpenn.org.

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The Annenberg Public Policy Center was established by publisher and philanthropist Walter Annenberg in 1994 to create a community of scholars within the University of Pennsylvania that would examine the role of communications in public policy issues at the local, state and federal levels. The Center has four ongoing research foci: Information and Society; Media and the Developing Mind; Media and the Dialogue of Democracy; Health Communications. The Annenberg Public Policy Center supports research and sponsors lectures and conferences in these areas.