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Are Voluntary Standards Working?

Candidate Discourse on Network Evening News Programs

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Key Findings

- None of the networks provided the recommended five minutes a night of candidate-centered discourse during the 30 days before the primary and general elections.
- There was more candidate-centered discourse broadcast during the general election than the primary. During the general election there was on average 64 seconds of CCD per night/per network.
- Strategy frames dominated the stories. During the general election 62 percent of stories employed a strategy frame. Twenty-seven percent employed an issue frame.
- During the general election, the length of the average sound bite remained short at nine seconds.

- NBC and CBS aired special interview segments with the candidates during the last week before the general election and these segments both contained significant CCD and employed issue frames.

Despite a trend away from network news watching, about 52 percent of Americans watch news on one of the major networks every night with an additional 19 percent saying they watch several times a week (Roper, 1999). Though television remains the dominant medium for finding out about election information, network news has been dropping in popularity. A recent poll by the Pew Research Center found that only 23 percent of people turned to the network news as their primary source of information about the election (down from 36 percent in November of 1996) (Digital Divide, 2000). The dropping popularity of network newscasts for election information may be a result of the dropping quality of election coverage.

A number of studies have shown that broadcast news is remarkably lacking in the kind of substantive discussion of politics that people need to make informed decisions. Rather than reporting on the candidates' stands and providing analyses of the relative merits of their positions, network news is far more likely to reduce an election to a game -- covering who is ahead and who is behind and what strategies the candidates are using in order to win (Jamieson, 1996). Broadcast news is more likely to tell voters why candidates said something than what they actually said. If a candidate makes a health care reform proposal, for example, network reporters tend to reduce their analysis to how the plan will appeal to certain interest groups, instead of discussing the specifics of the plan. Studies have shown that this type of strategy reporting not only leads to less learning on the part of audiences, but also encourages people to adopt cynical attitudes about politics (Cappella and Jamieson, 1997).

If the press tends to focus more on spin and strategy than issues and substance, it should come as no surprise that candidates themselves are relatively scarce in campaign coverage. After all, candidates on the stump spend most of their time making a case to voters for why they should be elected, and those arguments tend to be issue-oriented. Indeed, studies have shown that over the last 20 years candidates have been increasingly silent on the network evening news, with the length of candidate sound bites dwindling from an average of 43 seconds in 1968 to fewer than 9 seconds in 1988 (Hallin, 1990).

In order to improve the quality of broadcast election coverage, many have begun to lobby the networks to reverse the trend toward less candidate discourse. One prominent proposal came from the Advisory Committee on the Public Interest Obligations of Digital Television Broadcasters. The panel was established by President Clinton to study what obligations the stations had for operating in the public interest in light of the additional spectrum space that the FCC was allocating for digital television. The panel was comprised of representatives from the broadcasting industry as well as academic and civic organizations. The Committee recommended that television broadcasters voluntarily air five minutes a night of "candidate-centered discourse" (CCD) in the 30 nights before all elections in order to offer more voter education. This proposal came to be known as the "5/30 Recommendation." Though the recommendation called for

voluntary standards most of the Committee members had supported mandatory free time for candidates. However, since the broadcasters on the Committee had opposed making the provisions mandatory, the Committee adopted a proposal on which all members could reach a consensus (i.e., voluntary compliance).

This study, conducted by the Annenberg Public Policy Center of the University of Pennsylvania in conjunction with the Alliance for Better Campaigns and funded by The Pew Charitable Trusts, analyzed network news and news magazines (between 5:00 PM and 11:30 PM) for the 30 days prior to the Super Tuesday primaries on March 7, 2000 and the 30 days before Election Day on November 7, 2000 to see whether ABC, CBS, and NBC lived up to the voluntary standards set forth by the Committee (i.e., broadcasting five minutes a night of candidate-centered discourse for the 30 days before an election).

The first task in a study like this is to fill in the details left unaddressed by the Committee; specifically, what constitutes candidate-centered discourse? What if, for example, the candidates are simply asked strategy-oriented questions and never given the opportunity to discuss issues? Even if candidates are heard discussing their ideas and platforms, should newscasts be lauded for wrapping those quotes into stories that are otherwise dominated by horse-race frames? Clearly, these examples would not be in the spirit of the Committee's goal of encouraging more voter information. To this end, APPC and the Alliance, in conjunction with researchers at the University of Southern California's Annenberg School for Communication, adopted a formula that factored in both the total amount of time candidates were heard expressing themselves and the news frame of the stories. Thus, the following metrics were used in calculating candidate-centered discourse (CCD):

- If the story mainly used a *strategy* frame, only the total amount of time a candidate was heard speaking would be counted as CCD.
- If the story mainly used an *issue* frame, AND the total amount of candidate sound bites represented *at least* 30 percent of the total length of the story, then the *entire* length of the story was counted as CCD.
- If the story mainly used an *issue* frame, BUT the total amount of CCD represented *less than* 30 percent of the total length of the story, then *only* the length of the candidate sound bites was counted as CCD.¹

The advantage of this coding scheme is that it captures not only CCD, but also whether the networks ran substantive coverage. Without such a two-pronged analysis, it would be impossible to know if a substantial amount of CCD was mired in strategy coverage, or even if a lack of CCD obscured a laudable amount of issue-oriented news. If the networks provided any measure of useful coverage, it would be best captured by this approach.

During the primaries all three networks failed to meet the voluntary standard set out by the Committee. Indeed, only one of the networks — ABC — even averaged five minutes

of *total election coverage* a night during the 30 days before Super Tuesday. During the general election, the total campaign coverage was better with each network averaging about 7 minutes and 44 seconds a night of election coverage. ABC showed the most improvement by almost doubling its coverage from 5 minutes 5 seconds to 9 minutes 48 seconds a night. NBC also significantly increased its coverage from 4 minutes 34 seconds to 7 minutes 35 seconds. There was an increase in election coverage on CBS, too, but to a lesser extent. They increased from 4 minutes 19 seconds to 5 minutes 50 seconds a night.² (Table 1). In theory all three networks devoted enough time to election coverage during the general election to broadcast five minutes of candidate-centered discourse a night, but, in fact candidates themselves received little of this time.

Table 1: Average time devoted to campaign stories per night

Election coverage/Night	ABC	CBS	NBC
Primary	5:05	4:19	4:34
General	9:48	5:50	7:35

When we looked more closely at this coverage the results were less encouraging. During the primary, the average nightly CCD ranged from a scant 42 seconds on CBS to an even more paltry 28 seconds on NBC. The picture was better during the general election but still well below five minutes. NBC did the best. It more than tripled its CCD from 28 to 97 seconds per night. CBS also improved from 42 to 58 seconds while ABC held constant at 39 seconds of CCD a night (Table 2). All told there were only four nights in which any network broadcast the recommended 300 seconds (five minutes) of CCD or more (three on NBC and one on CBS).³ Despite the improvements from the primary, these numbers are far from the standards recommended by the Committee and these findings raise doubt about the effectiveness of voluntary compliance.

Table 2: Average amount of candidate-centered discourse per night

CCD/night	ABC	CBS	NBC
Primary	39 seconds	42 seconds	28 seconds
General	39 seconds	58 seconds	97 seconds

Though ABC had the most overall election coverage, it was the least likely to provide candidate-centered discourse. CCD made up only 7 percent of its news coverage. NBC and CBS actually provided more overall CCD even though their total election coverage

was less than ABC's (CCD made up 21 percent and 16 percent of their total election news respectively).

Because CCD is a function of both candidate sound bites and the news frame of each story, it should not be surprising based on the small amount of CCD that the vast majority of stories discussed strategy instead of substance. During the primary CBS was the worst offender — framing 77 percent of its stories in terms of a horse race. In fact during the primaries all three networks devoted at least two-thirds of their coverage to strategy-oriented discussions. At best, about one in four stories provided viewers with a discussion of the important issues in the primary campaign, and that dropped to about one in five or worse at ABC and CBS. For the general election over half of the stories on all the networks were strategy-oriented while about one in four were issue-oriented (Table 3).

Table 3: Issue frames by network

Election	Frame	ABC	CBS	NBC
Primary	Strategy	68%	77%	66%
	Issue	21%	17%	26%
General	Strategy	63%	54%	67%
	Issue	24%	27%	29%

In addition to being a function of the frame of the story, CCD is also a function of the seconds of actual sound bites in the story. The average length of a sound bite was consistently quite low and as a consequence the percent of the story in which a candidate was speaking also tended to be quite small. Of the 198 stories that mentioned a candidate in the 30 days before the general election, there were only eleven stories in which the sound bites made up 1/3 or more of the total story time. The average length of an individual sound bite was just nine seconds (NBC 12, CBS 9, ABC 7). It is not surprising to find that ABC, which had the lowest proportion of CCD in its newscast, also had the shortest average sound bite. This suggests an even lower quality of information since it is hard to imagine what a voter can learn in seven-second bites (no matter how many there are). Nor is it surprising that NBC, which had the highest proportion of CCD, would have the longest average sound bite (12 seconds). Thus, while ABC had the most election

coverage it provided less opportunity for candidates to speak and what it did provide was cut into shorter segments.

It is interesting to note that during the course of the general election both NBC and CBS made a special effort to provide time to candidates. In the week before Election Day, NBC invited both candidates to be interviewed live each night on the news. Gore accepted the offer and Bush rejected it (instead appearing taped on a single occasion). This was the most substantive example of CCD found on the evening networks. In each of these segments, news anchor Tom Brokaw asked substantive questions (on Social Security, education, foreign policy, etc.), and the candidates were given time to answer. In all there was 1,640 seconds (27 minutes 20 seconds) of CCD just in these NBC interview segments. That is just a little more than ABC's total CCD for the whole month (1,170 seconds), what NBC would have had for the month if not for these special segments (1,261 seconds), and just slightly less than the CBS' total for the month (1,730 seconds). Moreover all of these segments were issue-oriented and the average length of the sound bites for these five segments was about 35 seconds.

CBS also made an attempt to offer the candidates special air time in the form of a single interview that was then broadcast over three nights during the evening news. This approach seemed less effective in part because the questions were softer (including a bit about whether the candidates had prayed to win); there were fewer of these segments (three instead of five); they tended to be shorter (276 seconds on average compared to 328), and the network edited the interview so it seemed more crafted than NBC's special interview segments. Still, issues made up the dominant frame for all of these segments, and the average sound bite length was 17 seconds.

Together in the week before the election, these two networks tallied up 2,467 seconds (41 minutes 7 seconds) of CCD during their special interview segments or about 42 percent of the total CCD for the three networks for the month. These segments also accounted for three of the four nights in which any network met the recommended standard of five minutes a night of candidate-centered discourse.⁴ It is important to note that the special interview time on both NBC and CBS was issue-oriented and since the sound bites made up over 1/3 of the coverage, the whole story counted as CCD. In fact, of 11 stories where the sound bites made up 1/3 or more of the total story time, eight of these occurred during special interview segments aired by NBC and (3 on NBC and 1 on CBS).

While these segments show that it is possible to put higher quality information on the news, all of the networks (including NBC) still fell well short of the standard of five minutes a night of candidate-centered discourse for the 30 days before both the primary and the general elections. These data show that when the networks make an effort to provide candidate-centered discourse they can vastly improve their coverage, but they may be unwilling to do so on a voluntary basis.

⁴ The length of the story included anchor lead-ins. CCD included only direct quotes from candidates (not paraphrases by reporters or non-candidate sources). Neither election night coverage nor debates were coded

due to the fact that each is atypical and, in the case of election night coverage, inherently about winning and losing. Newsmagazines such as "Dateline" and "60 Minutes" were included in the analysis along with the evening news. Intercoder reliability greater than .70 was achieved on all subjective measures.

² One reason that CBS had less election coverage than the other two networks is that they pre-empted their weekend news for sports while ABC and NBS did not. CBS's total network coverage divided by the 21 days in which they aired the news resulted in an average of 501 seconds of total coverage a night — more than NBC but less than ABC. Thus it is not so much that CBS was airing less election news when they aired news. It was that they were less likely to air news at all.

³ NBC had an additional four nights where they had over 200 seconds of CCD. ABC had one.

⁴ The fourth occasion occurred when NBC ran an interview with Joe Lieberman and a story that used significant quotations from the debates.

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