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LOCAL TV NEWS GIVES COLD SHOULDER TO POLITICAL CANDIDATES

Campaign Stories Are Scarce, and Only a Fifth of Them Include Candidates Talking

When They Do Speak, Candidates Talk for 9.5 Seconds, On Average

As the political season heated up, little more than a third of the over 2400 local news broadcasts analyzed in a new study contained any election coverage.

The findings – released by the Lear Center Local News Archive, a collaboration between the USC Annenberg School’s Norman Lear Center and the Department of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin-Madison – result from an analysis of the highest-rated half-hours of early- and late-evening news on 122 stations from September 18 through October 4, 2002.

The stations studied are a large representative sample of the 50 largest media markets in the country. Researchers analyzed 1227 hours of regular local news programming during the 17-day period. This ongoing study represents the largest and most systematic study ever conducted of local news, the main source of information for a large majority of Americans.

Regular updates of findings from the study will be released throughout the remainder of the campaign. Principal investigators on the project, which is funded by the Pew Charitable Trusts, are Martin Kaplan, associate dean of the USC Annenberg School for Communication and director of the Norman Lear Center, and Ken Goldstein, associate professor of political science at the University of Wisconsin at Madison and director of the of the University of Wisconsin Advertising Project.

Researchers analyzed a total of 2,454 half-hour local news broadcasts. Of those broadcasts, 1,311 carried no campaign coverage at all. On those broadcasts which included campaign coverage, the average campaign story length was 90 seconds on the top-rated early evening news, and 70 seconds on the top-rated late-evening news, for an overall average of 80.5 seconds.

Of the 1,037 campaign stories that were captured by the research study, less than 20% contained any sound bites from candidates. The average length of a sound bite was 9.5 seconds.

Although both parties are focused on gaining control of the Congress, it is proving difficult for Congressional candidates to get news coverage. To date, coverage has focused on

state level contests for governors' mansions. Overall, while gubernatorial campaigns made up 48% of campaign stories analyzed, 17% of campaign stories focused on U.S. Senate contests, and only 5% of campaign stories focused on campaigns for the U.S. House of Representatives. The remaining stories focused on other state and local election contests and ballot initiatives.

“With national attention focused on the high-stakes and high-rewards fight for control of the United States Congress, what little attention is paid to campaigns by the main source of political information for most Americans is dedicated overwhelmingly to local and state contests,” said University of Wisconsin political scientist Ken Goldstein.

There are some exceptions to the national averages. Finding them is made possible by an oversample of 22 additional stations, which were chosen to enable comparisons within the total of 144 stations by ownership, affiliation, and other characteristics. These attributes include membership in a voluntary consortium of stations, organized by the Pew Charitable Trusts, committed to journalistic “best practices” such as in-depth reporting on issues; they also include station groups whose owners have made a public commitment to offering “free air time” to candidates within their news broadcasts.

Fifty percent of broadcasts analyzed on best practices stations contained campaign stories, compared to 34% of the broadcasts of other stations. Forty-five percent of broadcasts analyzed on free air time stations contained campaign coverage, compared to 32% of the broadcasts of other stations.

On best practices stations, the average sound bite length was 11.7 seconds, compared to 8.8 seconds on other stations. On free air time stations, candidate sound bites averaged 11 seconds, compared to 9 seconds for other stations.

Average campaign story length of best practices stations was 103 seconds, compared to 79 seconds on other stations. But free air time stations had an average campaign story length of 76.7 seconds, compared to 81.9 seconds for other stations.

“Local news stations face murderous pressure for ratings,” said Martin Kaplan, director of the Norman Lear Center. “It’s heartening that at least some stations are trying to do a better than average job of covering campaigns, informing voters, and fulfilling their public interest obligations. If more stations did a better job, maybe the public would reward them by watching them more.”

To conduct the study, field staff in 54 markets (about 65% of the country) capture local news broadcasts using newly-available DVD recorders. These DVDs are then sent every two days to the University of Wisconsin, where project staff log and encode close to 150 hours a day of high resolution digital video. Using specialized video editing software, codes are appended directly onto the video, enabling substantive searches through thousands of hours of video. The software also captures scripts of the broadcasts and makes the video searchable by face, voice, and key word. Coders go through every news broadcast and make video clips of all campaign-related stories, which are then coded for over 50 attributes, including length of story, candidates covered, focus of story, issues discussed, and journalistic practices.

The Lear Center Local News Archive, a unique new resource, will make all these campaign stories available and searchable on the Web by scholars and other registered users. More information about the Archive, whose resources will include 10,000 hours of local news broadcasts, will be announced shortly.

The Norman Lear Center is a multidisciplinary research and public policy center exploring implications of the convergence of entertainment, commerce, and society. Based at the USC Annenberg School, one of the nation's leading institutions offering undergraduate and graduate degrees in communication and journalism (www.annenberg.usc.edu), the Lear Center bridges the gap between the entertainment industry and academia, and between them and the public. The impact of entertainment on news is a principal focus of the Lear Center. For more information, visit www.entertainment.usc.edu.

The Department of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin has consistently been ranked in the top ten political science departments in the country. It is currently home to another major project on political communication in America, the Wisconsin Advertising Project (www.polisci.wisc.edu/tvadvertising). This project gathers and analyzes political advertising from the country's top 100 markets and has become the major source of information for journalists, policy makers, and scholars on the volume and tone of political advertising.

The Pew Charitable Trusts support nonprofit activities in the areas of culture, education, the environment, health and human services, public policy and religion. Based in Philadelphia, the Trusts make strategic investments that encourage and support citizen participation in addressing critical issues and effecting social change. The opinions expressed in this research are those of the investigators and do not necessarily reflect the views of The Pew Charitable Trusts.

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