

# ***How The Networks Stole The Debates***

**Network News Coverage of the 2000 Presidential Debates**

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## Introduction

This research analyzes the network news' coverage of the 2000 Presidential debates and focuses on three main issue areas: first, the importance that the networks attributed to the debates; second, the extent to which coverage focused on policy issues *versus* campaign issues; third, the networks' propensity to declare a candidate as the winner of the debates. By addressing these themes, the general question whether networks introduce selection and presentation bias in their coverage of the debates will be answered.

Since the Kennedy-Nixon debates in 1960, televised debates between Presidential candidates have always been considered crucial moments of campaigns, clashes that can create momentum for a candidate, potential turnaround events that can "move votes." Presidential debates, however, are long and complex texts that require a significant amount of knowledge and interpretive skills from the audience.

Even if research shows that voters do learn from watching the debates<sup>1</sup>, acquiring information from them is not a simple task for three main reasons. First, most voters follow politics with little attention and interest and lack fundamental background knowledge that is necessary to interpret the candidates' statements on many issues. Secondly, less and less people watch the debates: viewership ratings for Presidential debates have steadily decreased over time, and in every campaign viewership decreases after the first debate<sup>2</sup>. Third, the format of the debates does not allow focusing on the key statements of the candidates since follow-up questions and comments by both the candidates and the moderator are restricted. Thus, after watching a 90-minute exchange of opinions between the candidates, it is hard to put the pieces together and make sense of this flow of words.

The news media can play an important part in filling out some of these attention, information, and communication gaps that remain after the debates have been broadcasted and, possibly, watched. The news helps voters frame the debate by evaluating the candidates' performance, pointing out defining moments in the debate, commenting on the validity of candidates' statements and the issues discussed, and linking the debate to the overall campaign.

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<sup>1</sup> See for instance K.H. Jameson and C. Adasiewicz, "What Can Voters Learn from Election Debates?" in S. Coleman (ed.), *Televised Election Debates. International Perspectives*. London: The Hansard Society for Parliamentary Government, 2000, and Annenberg Survey "First Presidential Debate Stimulated and Educated", available online at <http://appcpenn.org>.

<sup>2</sup> According to Nielsen Media Research, the number of viewers of the 2000 Presidential debates dropped from 46.5 million for the first debate to 37.6 million for the second and 37.7 million for the third debate. Reported by J.M. Marshall, "The Debates: One-Man Band." *Columbia Journalism Review*, January/February 2001, available online at <http://www.cjr.org/year/01/1/marshall.asp>.

The flipside of this role of the news as “information fillers,” however, is the possibility that the news media introduce bias in their coverage of the debates. Scholarly research (see Literature Review below) pointed out in the past that the network news focus mostly on “campaign issues,” such as candidates’ performance, debate tactics, and standing in the polls, and less on the policy issues that are discussed in the debate. Moreover, the news often plays a critical role in declaring a winner of the debate. Research shows that voters’ judgments about candidates’ performance tend to mirror those of the mass media, with the candidate declared as the winner by the news experiencing significant surges in the polls after voters are exposed to favorable news verdicts.

Three key issues are addressed in this research with respect to the 2000 Presidential campaign. First, how intensely did the networks cover the 2000 Presidential debates? Second, did the network news coverage of the debates emphasize campaign issues more than policy issues? Third, to what extent did the networks declare a winner of the debates? By answering these questions, this research will cast light on important aspects in the relationship between the news media, the political system, and modern democracy.

## **Literature Review**

The scholarly research about news coverage of presidential debates has mainly focused on two broad issues: the content of the coverage and the effects of exposure to the news.

Research based on content analysis shows that the news focuses primarily on candidates’ performance and tactics but pays little attention to the issues debated. The most conclusive study in this field<sup>3</sup> shows that focus on issues in television news coverage of debates decreased from 38.4% in 1976 to 5.7% in 1988, debate performance coverage remained stable over time (about 45%), while an increasing amount of time was devoted to tactics (from 12.7% in 1976 to 25.9% in 1988), candidates’ competence to govern (from 1.6% in 1976 to 8.1% in 1988), and candidates’ previous record (from 1.6% in 1976 to 9.7% in 1988). In the 1988 post-debate specials, issues were discussed for only 6.2% of the total time, while debate tactics and candidate performance combined for 78.6%. Previous studies show very similar patterns<sup>4</sup>.

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<sup>3</sup> J.B. Lemert, W.R. Elliott, J.M. Bernstein, W.L. Rosenberg, K.J. Nestvold, *News Verdicts, the Debates, and Presidential Campaigns*. New York: Praeger, 1991, chapters 3-4.

<sup>4</sup> A.H. Miller and M. MacKuen, “Informing the electorate: A national study”. In S. Kraus (ed.), *The Great Debates: Carter vs. Ford, 1976*. Bloomington: Indiana UP, 1979. F.F. Berquist and J.L. Golden, “Media rhetoric, criticism and the public perception in the 1980 presidential debates.” *Quarterly Journal of Speech* 67 (1981).

The same study analyzes how the network news and the post-debate specials pronounce judgments of “who won the debate.” The focus is not only on whether a winner is declared, but also the source of the winning verdict. In 1988, journalists pronounced 30% of all verdicts of candidates’ performance. Compared to the previous elections, networks relied more on polls and members of the political elite and less on interviews with “the man of the street.” Positive verdicts about debaters’ performance outweighed the negative by a ratio of 5 to 3.

These trends were confirmed by a study of the 1996 debates<sup>5</sup>. According to this research, attention to the candidates’ strategies overwhelmed coverage of their standings on the issues. Moreover, the networks focused on “moving votes” as the only relevant effect of the debates, as opposed to, for instance, informing voters. Seventeen out of the 30 campaign stories examined cited polls results to determine who won the debate. On the other hand, only four stories reported excerpts from the debates for a total 33 seconds, while more stories featured the candidates speaking about the debates. The attention devoted to performance and strategy was not counter-balanced by a similar attention to the validity of the arguments proposed and the evidence of the candidates’ claims: only CBS’s *Reality Check* took care of scrutinizing what the candidates said and pointing out false or inconsistent claims. The study concludes: “As though assuming that everyone watching the news had seen the debates, the networks showed virtually nothing of the candidates’ own words, nor did they review their policy position.”<sup>6</sup>

The news usually focuses on a single defining event that is used to frame and characterize all the debate and, possibly, all the campaign. As a long, seamless discourse, a debate is difficult to cover for reporters who need to find a focal point and few sound bites around which to organize their story. Steven Clayman<sup>7</sup> analyzes the criteria by which journalists decide what parts of the candidates’ speeches to quote. The criteria include *narrative relevance* (whether the quote is seen by the journalist as summarizing and defining the story), *conspicuousness* (whether the quote captures the attention because of its intrinsic features), and *extractability* (whether the quote would easily be understood if extracted from the original speech). Narrative relevance favors quotes that denote dramatic conflict (the “knockout punches”) and fatal blunders; conspicuousness takes into account the candidates’ use of rhetoric devices, quotes from other famous speeches, audience’s exceptional reactions

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<sup>5</sup> K.E. Kendall, “Presidential Debates Through Media Eyes.” *American Behavioral Scientist* v. 40, n. 8 (1997).

<sup>6</sup> Kendall, *cit.*, page 1205.

<sup>7</sup> S.E. Clayman, “Defining Moments, Presidential Debates, and the Dynamics of Quotability.” *Journal of Communication*, vol. 45, issue 3, summer 1990.

(applause and booing), and deviation from the norms, such as Ross Perot's walking out of an interview on ABC in 1992; extractability rules out obscure, oblique, or highly context-dependent statements.

Research about the effect of television news coverage of debates mostly focuses on the relation between news verdicts of who won the debate and voters' preferences. The most compelling evidence of the importance of the news as an intervening variable between the debates and voters' preferences was found by Frederick T. Steeper in 1976<sup>8</sup>. Steeper found that exposure to news' strong criticism of an inaccurate statement on Eastern Europe made by President Ford during the second Presidential debate<sup>9</sup> had a powerful influence on voters' assessments of the candidates and voting intentions.

“Among the 101 voters interviewed Wednesday night immediately following the debate [when nobody had watched any newscast], Ford had a 54-to-36 percent lead in their stated voting intentions. During the next evening the 121 voters interviewed were “voting” for Carter by a 54-to-37 percent count. Thus, in only 25 hours, our raw data was showing an 18 percent majority lead for Ford turning completely around and giving a +17 percent lead for Carter... The largest spurts to the trend came immediately after the morning and evening news.”<sup>10</sup>

In the same time period there was a +51% turnaround for Carter in the voters' perception of who had done a better job in the debate. When voters were asked to recall the strong and weak points of the candidates' performance, no one mentioned Ford's gaffe on Eastern Europe immediately after the debate; the day after 20% of voters quoted it as Ford's worst mistake.

A similar turnaround in voters' preferences prompted by news verdicts was observed in the first debate of the 1992 campaign<sup>11</sup>. Immediately after the first debate, 28% of voters credited Clinton with the victory in the debate, 19% Bush, and 24% Perot. Twenty-four hours after the debate, Perot was believed to be the winner by 37% of voters (+13%), Clinton by

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<sup>8</sup> F.T. Steeper, “Public Response to Gerald Ford's Statements on Eastern Europe in the Second Debate,” in G.E. Bishop, R.G. Meadow, M. Jackson-Beack (eds.), *The Presidential Debates. Media, Electoral, and Policy Perspectives*. New York: Praeger, 1980. Similar findings are reported by Thomas E. Patterson, *The Mass Media Election: How Americans Choose Their President*. New York: Praeger, 1980, p.123.

<sup>9</sup> During the second debate, President Ford claimed: “I don't believe that the Yugoslavians consider themselves dominated by the Soviet Union, I don't believe that the Romanians consider themselves dominated by the Soviet Union, I don't believe that the Poles consider themselves dominated by the Soviet Union. Each of those countries is independent, autonomous, it has its own territorial integrity, and the United States does not concede that those countries are under the domination of the Soviet Union.” A transcript of the debate is published in Bishop, Meadow, Jackson-Beack (eds.), *cit.*, pages 238-260. The quote reported here is at pages 244-5. Notice that neither Carter nor the journalists that interviewed the candidates criticized Ford's statement during the debate. The news media, on the other hand, focused most of their stories on Ford's gaffe and made it the dominant theme of the campaign for several days.

<sup>10</sup> Steeper, *cit.*, pages 84-5.

<sup>11</sup> Jameson and Adasiewicz, *cit.*, pages 32-3.

24% (-4%), and Bush by 11% (-8%). Such a landslide is best explained by the news' unanimous verdict that Perot had won the debate and that Bush had done very poorly.

One might argue that the power of the news is enhanced by critical events such as fatal blunders or knockout punches, but, absent these unique events, news' influence on voters is not significant. However, proof of the influence of news verdicts on voters has been also found for the 1988 debates, which deluded most commentators for their lack of a defining moment. The research<sup>12</sup> found that the candidate evaluated most favorably during post-debate news commentary also showed in survey respondents' perceptions as the better performer in the debate. The candidate receiving the most favorable post-debate evaluation also experienced an improvement in his general image as a potential President. News verdicts also affected voting preferences, even though only for a short period of time.

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<sup>12</sup> Lemert, Elliott, Bernstein, Rosenberg, Nestvold, *cit.*, chapters 6-9, 12.

## **Research Methodology**

*Sources.* The research collected data from ABC, CBS, and NBC evening news transcripts from October 1 to October 20, 2000. Since the first debate was held on October 3 and the last on October 17, the dates selected allowed an examination of both pre- and post-debate coverage. The same networks' post-debate specials' transcripts were also included in the analysis. Overall, the research analyzed fifty-eight evening news broadcast transcripts and nine post-debate analysis transcripts.

*Variables analyzed.* The data were examined in a quantitative content analysis that inspected key variables in three main fields: amount of coverage, content of coverage, and performance analysis and verdict. The distribution of the data was compared among the networks analyzed.

Amount of coverage. These variables include the number of news stories about the campaign, the number of news stories about the debates, and whether these were lead or secondary stories.

Content of coverage. Debate coverage variables analyze the aspects of the debate that are covered by the news. The time that the news dedicated to the following content areas were measured<sup>13</sup>:

- a. The issues discussed in the debate.
- b. Evaluation of candidates' performance.
- c. Debate tactics adopted by the candidates.
- d. Candidates' competence to govern.
- e. "Horse race" (status of the campaign and debates' impact on it).
- f. Examination of the truth and correctness of candidates' statements.

Performance analysis and verdicts. These variables analyze the extent to which networks declared a winner of the debate and on what grounds. Such variables include the number of verdicts pronounced on the debate and the candidate declared as the winner. Also, the source of the verdict was coded. The categories for this variable include:

- a. Journalists.
- b. Polls.
- c. "Man in the street"/"Man in the living room" (viewers of the debate).
- d. Other politicians (running mates, other candidates, party leaders...).
- e. Political analysts.
- f. Campaign staff.

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<sup>13</sup> Since the research will rely on transcripts as the primary source of data, time dedicated to certain issues as well as length of reported speech will be measured by word count.

## Results

### *Amount of coverage*

All the three major networks devoted considerable attention to the Presidential debates and the campaign in general in the time of the data collection (from October 1 to October 20). Of fifty-eight evening newscasts analyzed, only eight did not feature any story about either the debates or the campaign in general. Overall among the three networks, seventy-two stories were broadcast, thirty-one of which about the debate and forty-one about the whole campaign. Few of such stories were lead stories, however. Only nine stories about the debate and two about the campaign led the newscast. Notably, seven of the nine opening stories about the debates were aired in the day of the first debate and the day following it. Our data show that the networks placed much more importance on the first debate than on the following ones. The networks' judgment resembles that of viewers, as is shown by the ten-million drop in viewers from the first to the second debate.

The fact that the networks covered the debates and the campaign intensely but rarely as lead story can be explained by the contemporary occurrence of dramatic events in Yugoslavia, Yemen, and the Middle East. Most newscasts examined opened with stories from these areas of the world and placed stories about the campaign and the debates in the slot after the first commercial break.

Table 1 shows the aggregate data for all the networks.

**Table 1 – Amount of coverage of the debates and the campaign by all networks**

Lead stories about the debate	<b>9</b>
Secondary stories about the debate	<b>22</b>
Lead stories about the campaign	<b>2</b>
Secondary stories about the campaign	<b>39</b>
Total stories about the debate	<b>31</b>
Total stories about the campaign	<b>41</b>
Total number of stories	<b>72</b>

Interesting results were obtained when these values were compared among the three networks. Rather than taking the similarity between network news as a given, this research



was based on the idea that stimulating differences could be discovered by treating each network separately in the data collection and analysis. The findings confirmed the validity of this insight for all the variables that were investigated.

With respect to the amount of coverage, Table 2 shows that CBS news devoted more stories to both the debate and the campaign than the other networks. ABC came second, followed by NBC. The difference between the thirty overall stories featured by CBS and the nineteen by NBC is significant given that the timeframe of the research was of twenty days.

***Table 2 – Amount of coverage by each network***

<b>Amount of coverage</b>	<b>ABC</b>	<b>CBS</b>	<b>NBC</b>
Lead stories about the debate	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>	<b>3</b>
Secondary stories about the debate	<b>6</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>6</b>
Lead stories about the campaign	<b>1</b>	<b>0</b>	<b>1</b>
Secondary stories about the campaign	<b>13</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>9</b>
Total stories about the debate	<b>9</b>	<b>13</b>	<b>9</b>
Total stories about the campaign	<b>14</b>	<b>17</b>	<b>10</b>
Total number of stories	<b>23</b>	<b>30</b>	<b>19</b>

The findings in this field are quite intriguing given the fact that, as the following section will show, CBS News turned out to provide the least substantive coverage of the debates, while ABC and NBC News covered the campaign in a more substantive way compared to CBS.

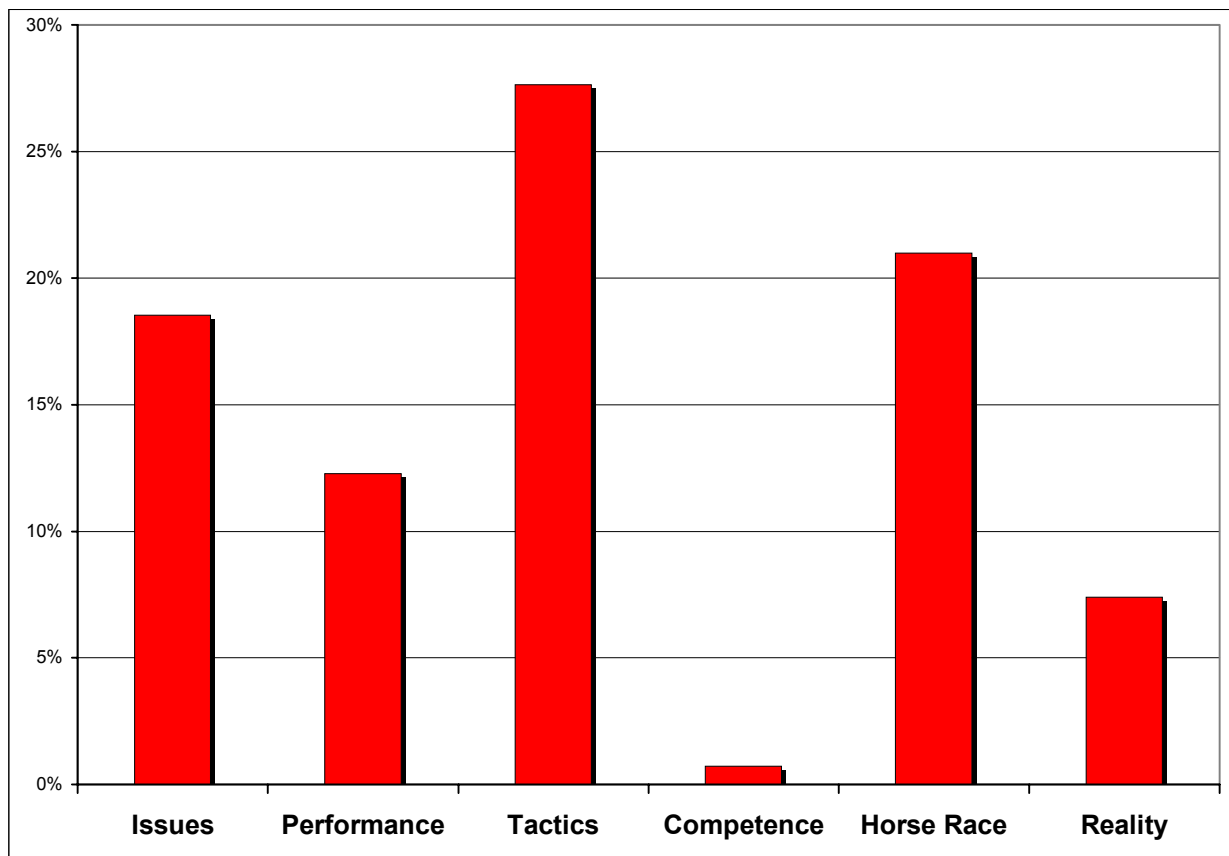
*Content of coverage*

Overall, the three networks confirmed the tendency, noted by scholars for the past elections, to cover the debates more as a race and a sport performance than as an occasion for the candidates to discuss issues and to highlight the policy differences between each other. This tendency manifested itself both in the evening news and in the post-debate coverage shows, with relatively slight differences overall. Table 3 shows the data for the networks’ evening news. The data are also presented graphically in Figure 1.

***Table 3 – Content of the network news coverage of the debates, all networks***

Issues discussed in the debate	<b>18.54%</b>
Candidates’ performance	<b>12.29%</b>
Debate tactics	<b>27.62%</b>
Candidates’ competence	<b>0.73%</b>
“Horse Race” (status of the campaign and debates’ impact on it)	<b>20.99%</b>
Examination of reality of candidates’ statements	<b>7.41%</b>

***Figure 1 – Content of the network news, all networks***



As the data show, the networks devoted less than one-fifth of all the time they spent on debates to the discussion of the policy issues presented by the candidates. The networks mostly focused on the candidates’ tactics and performance, or on the possible impact of the debate on the “horse race,” e.g., by showing polls or by interviewing undecided voters and asking them if they had changed their minds after the debate. Little time was also spent on examining the candidates’ truthfulness and logic. The only exception, which significantly

pushed up the aggregate data, was NBC’s *Truth Squad*, which regularly took care of scrutinizing the statements made in the debates.

A similar pattern can be found in the networks’ post-debate analysis specials. Table 4 and Figure 2 show the aggregate data for all the networks.

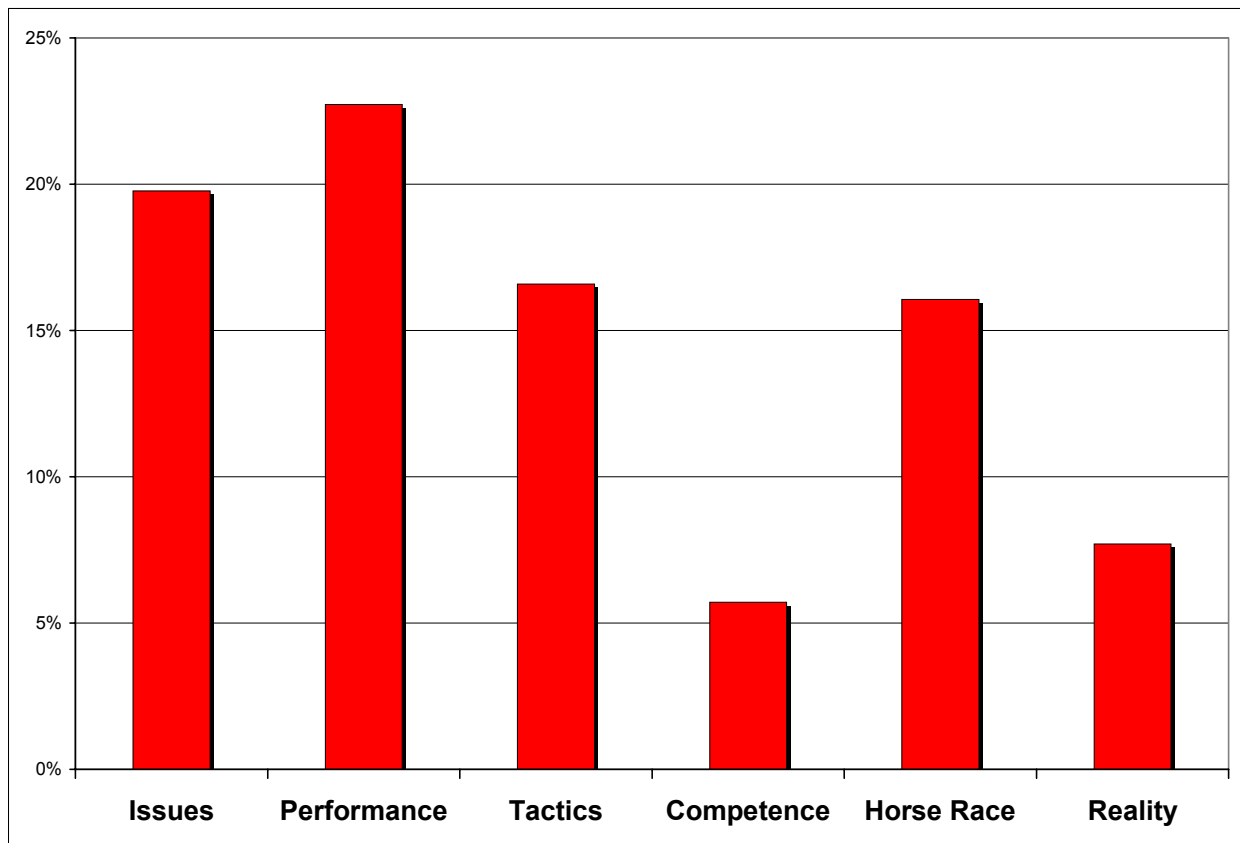
**Table 4 – Content of the network post-debate analysis specials, all networks**

Issues discussed in the debate	<b>19.77%</b>
Candidates’ performance	<b>22.73%</b>
Debate tactics	<b>16.59%</b>
Candidates’ competence	<b>5.71%</b>
“Horse Race” (status of the campaign and debates’ impact on it)	<b>16.06%</b>
Examination of reality of candidates’ statements	<b>7.71%</b>

The results show little difference between the evening news shows’ and the post-debate specials’ coverage of the debates. The post-debate analyses tend to focus more on the candidates’ performance (22.73% versus 12.29% for the evening news), slightly more on the issues, and slightly less on debate tactics and “horse race” themes. However, overall the two program formats produced a very similar coverage of the debates.

The similarity between evening newscasts and post-debate specials is striking considering the differences in the respective formats. Anchors and journalists occupy most of the post-debate specials with their comments and analyses, but the data suggest that they rarely see this as an occasion to discuss the policy issues highlighted in the debate. Judgments focus mostly on tactics, performances, and the possible impact of the debates on the campaign.

***Figure 2 – Content of the network post-debate analysis specials, all networks***



The 2000 post-debate specials shared many features across the networks. All networks set up “mock focus groups” of undecided voters who were interviewed at the end of the debate by a journalist. Because the race was very tight and these voters were selected as “undecideds,” most of the times the voters interviewed were evenly divided between the two candidates. The journalists interviewing these voters rarely let them focus on policy issues, and instead tried to frame their judgments in terms whether the debate had changed their voting decisions. For instance, on CBS’s October 17 special, Phil Jones interrupted a voter who was discussing budget and education issues to ask about his voting decision.

Mr. REUBEN KATZ: I still haven't made up my mind yet, because the--the programs they both are talking about, some of them are very tax-heavy. And where are they going to get the money for all these programs? They like the schools and the one-on-one teachers. This severe amount of taxes is gonna have to take care of that. And even though they're talking about teaching children better, I don't see them teaching--or talking about teaching children how to read, which is more important than teaching children on a one-on-one basis, I think. And the...

JONES: So you still don't know after--after...

Mr. KATZ: Well, I'm not really 100 percent yet.

Another characteristic shared by all post-debate analyses was the appearance of the candidates' running mates for a brief interview. Sometimes these interviews were quite substantive, given the running mates' ability to summarize and restate the candidate's positions. However, it was clear from the interviews that the running mates saw these post-debate television appearances as an occasion to "spin" the debate, to emphasize how good their running mates' had done, and to cast doubt about their rivals. Whether the interviews with the running mates turned out to be substantive largely depended on the anchor's questions and desire to maintain control of the interaction.

After discussing the aggregate results for all networks, we now turn to a comparison of the networks' coverage. In order to make this task easier, we grouped the six content variables that were used in the analysis in two macro-categories, "policy issues" and "campaign issues." **Policy issues** variables are the sum of the values of the variables referring to the issues discussed in the debate (*Issues* in the former tables and figures), discussion of the candidates' competence to govern (*Competence*), and examination of the truthfulness and logic of the candidates' statements (*Reality*). **Campaign issues** variables include all the remaining variables: discussion of the candidates' performance in the debate (*Performance*), analysis of debate tactics (*Tactics*), and reporting on the status of the campaign and the debates' impact on it (*Horse Race*). This grouping of the variables will allow a valuable distinction between "substantive" coverage, i.e., discussion of the issues and examination of the validity of the candidates' statements, and "hoopla" coverage, i.e., framing the campaign as a race and the debates as a game. To give the reader a sense of this way of framing the debates and the campaign, here is how Bob Schieffer "wrapped up" his story about the debate on CBS News on October 4:

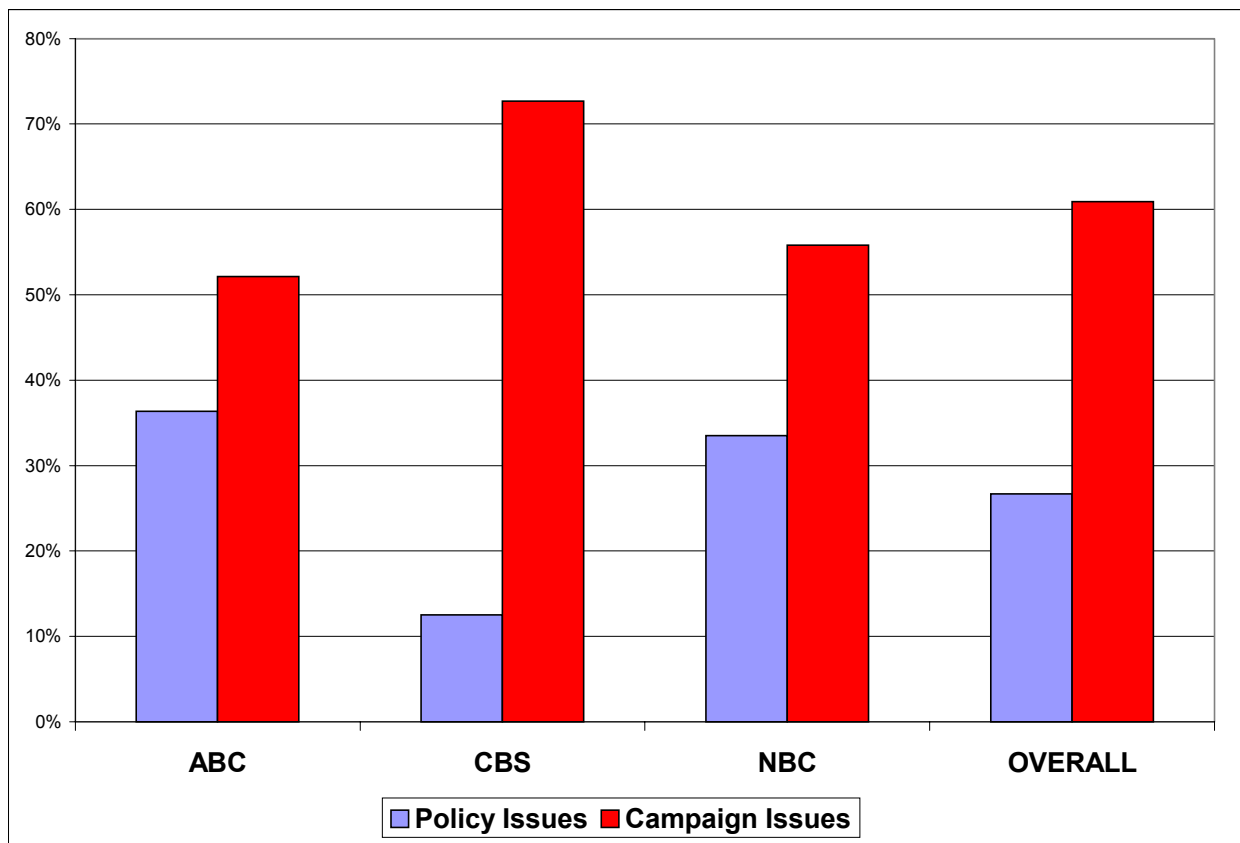
"In any case, had this been a baseball game, it would have been a low-scoring pitchers' duel; no home runs, in fact very few long balls, but no real errors either. Bottom line, Dan: Both survived to fight another day."

Having cleared the distinction between "policy issues" and "campaign issues," we now turn to the results. Table 5 and Figure 3 show the data for every network's evening news shows.

***Table 5 – Network news’ coverage of Policy issues and Campaign issues***

News	ABC	CBS	NBC	Overall
Policy issues	36.37%	12.52%	33.52%	26.68%
Campaign issues	52.13%	72.70%	55.83%	60.92%

***Figure 3 - Network news’ coverage of Policy issues and Campaign issues***



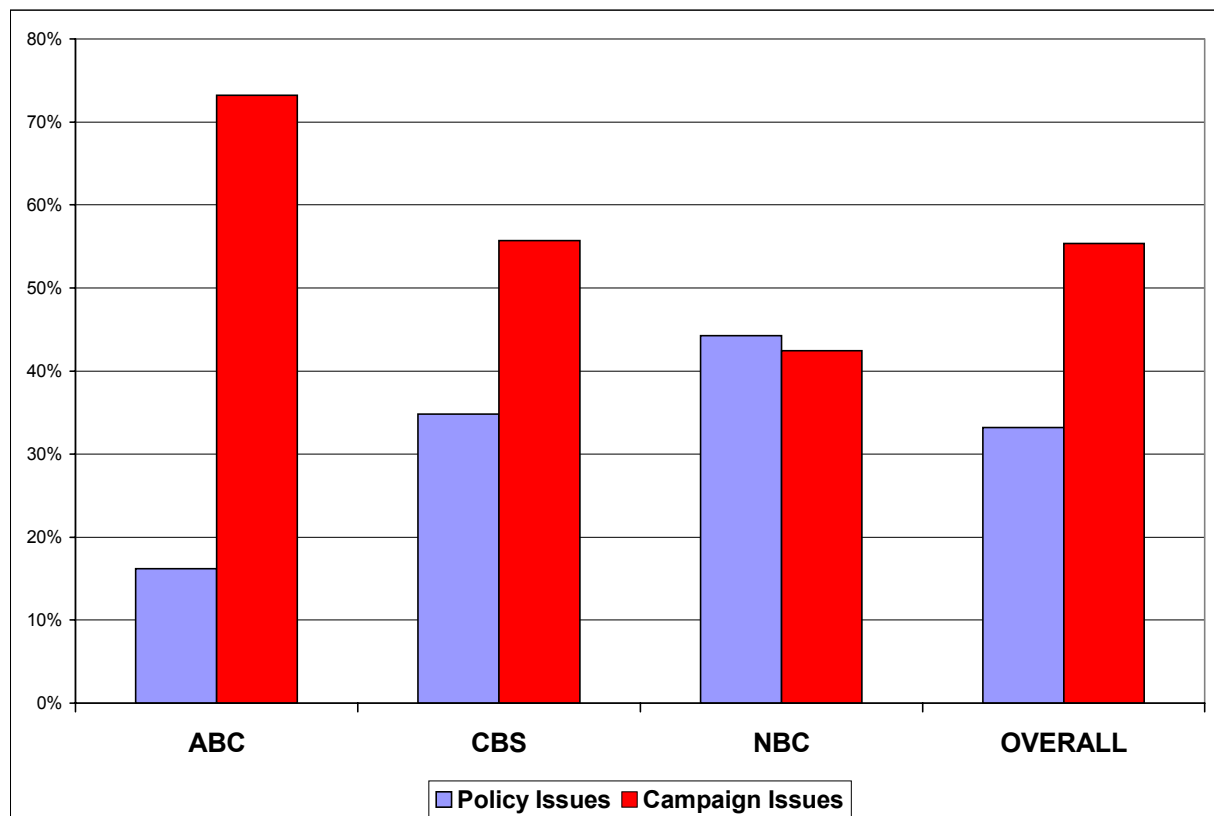
The data are not encouraging at best. No network devoted more time to substantive policy issues than to campaign issues. Overall, the three networks devoted more than twice the time to the latter. CBS News stands out as the least substantive newscast: only 12.72% of the time was dedicated to policy issues, while more than 70% was spent on campaign issues. ABC and NBC maintained a more substantive profile, but they still overemphasized performance, tactics, and “horse race” themes over substantive policy issues by sixteen and twenty-two percentage points respectively.

Significant differences were found between evening news and post-debate analysis specials for all the networks. It is to the latter that we now turn. Table 6 and Figure 4 show the results for all the networks' post-debate analysis specials broadcast after every debate.

***Table 6 – Post-debate specials' coverage of Policy issues and Campaign issues***

<b>Post-debate specials</b>	<b>ABC</b>	<b>CBS</b>	<b>NBC</b>	<b>Overall</b>
<b>Policy issues</b>	16.21 %	34.82%	44.29%	33.19%
<b>Campaign issues</b>	73.20%	55.69%	42.43%	55.37%

***Figure 4 – Post-debate specials' coverage of Policy issues and Campaign issues***



Overall, post-debate specials showed a disproportion between campaign issues and policy issues that resembles our findings for the evening news programs. On the other hand, significant differences were found between each network's evening news coverage and its post-debate specials. The most striking contrast can be observed in ABC's coverage. ABC's

post-debate specials covered campaign issues four and a half times more than policy issues (73.20% to 16.21%). This finding is surprising given that ABC News proved to be the most substantive news program in this respect. The data then show a stark difference between the editorial decisions on which the two ABC programs are based.

CBS’s and NBC’s post-debate specials, on the contrary, showed a significant increase in policy issues coverage in comparison with the networks’ newscasts. Whereas CBS News devoted only 12% of the time to policy issues, the network’s post-debate specials spent 34% of the time on them. NBC is the only network whose post-debate specials dedicated more time to policy issues than to campaign issues (44.29% to 42.43%). The main reason why NBC’s post-debate specials turned out to be more substantive is the network’s decision to dedicate a slot of the specials to its *Truth Squad* in the program, thus spending an average 14.5% of the time of the program discussing credibility and truth issues. Without this significant editorial decision, the content of NBC’s post-debate specials would probably have resembled that of the other networks.

Combining the data from evening news and post-debate specials, we now turn to a general evaluation of the networks’ coverage of the debates. Table 7 and Figure 5 show the total amount of time that the networks devoted to policy issues and campaign issues.

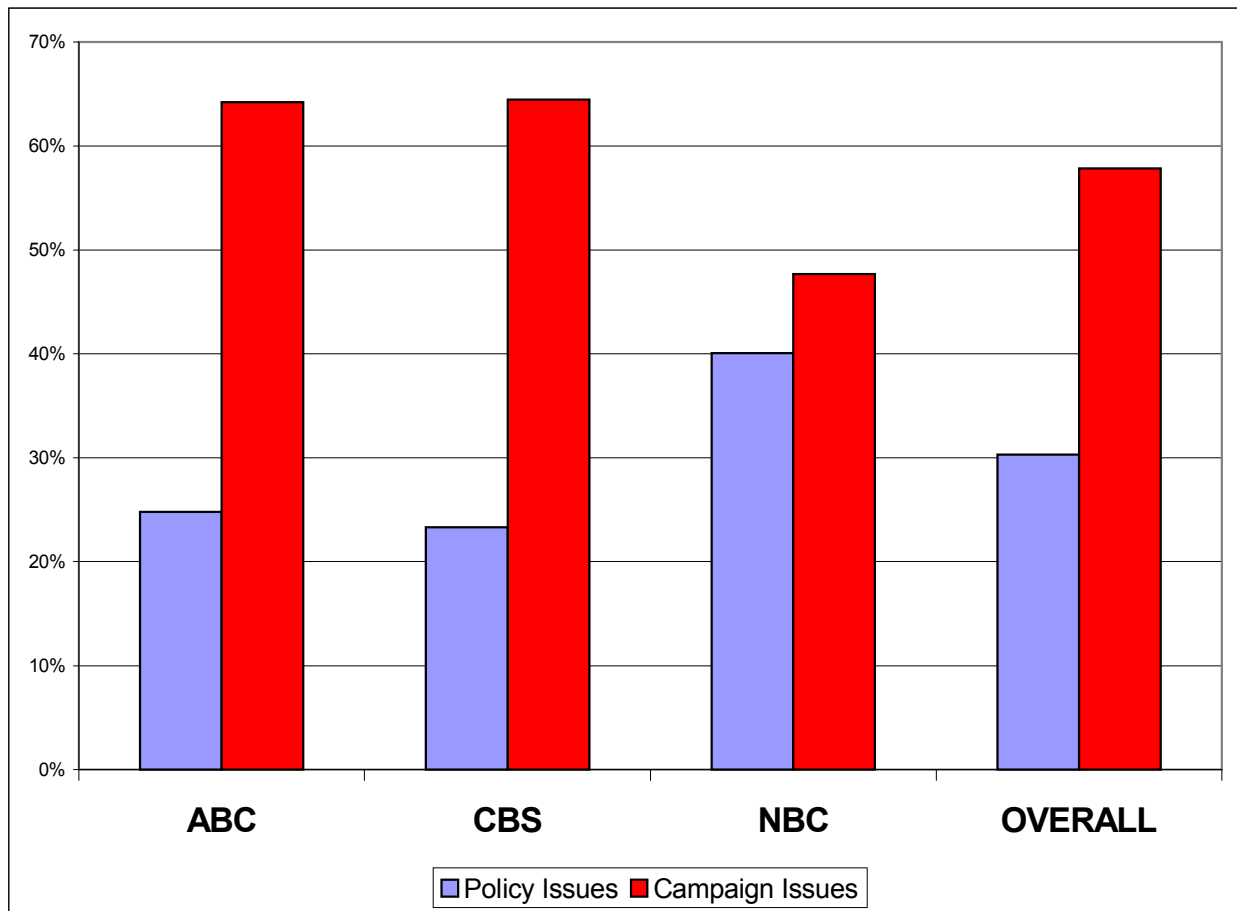
**Table 7 – Networks’ coverage of Policy issues and Campaign issues**

<b>News and specials</b>	<b>ABC</b>	<b>CBS</b>	<b>NBC</b>	<b>Overall</b>
<b>Policy issues</b>	24.80 %	23.32%	40.07%	30.32%
<b>Campaign issues</b>	64.22%	64.46%	47.67%	57.81%

Overall, coverage of campaign issues exceeded coverage of policy issues by a factor of little less than two to one. NBC turned out to be the network that covered the debates in the most substantive way and CBS, by a slight margin over ABC, provided the least substantive coverage. Significantly, however, NBC News devoted the fewest stories to the debates and the campaign, while CBS News devoted the most. A disappointing paradox can thus be observed: the network that focused the least on the debates is the one that covered them most substantively, while the network that devoted most time to them is also the one that provided the least substantive coverage.



***Figure 4 – Networks’ coverage of Policy issues and Campaign issues***



*Performance Analysis and Verdicts*

The last question this research addressed is to what extent the network news declared a winner in the debates and who was the candidate crowned. Given the overwhelming amount of time that the networks devoted to performance, tactics, and “horse race” themes, we expected to find a huge amount of comments that declared a winner in the debate. Moreover, the 2000 campaign was strongly affected by the debates and the perceptions of who won them. By most accounts, Al Gore’s stiffness and stubbornness and his repeated sighs while his opponent was talking cost the Vice-President the victory in the first debate. By contrast, so little expectations had been placed on George W. Bush that he only had to hold his own to be portrayed as a winner in that debate. After he had been accused of lying and appearing self-righteous and intolerant, Gore adopted a less tenacious posture in the second debate, thus making it easy for Bush to secure another victory. In the third debate, Gore was credited with a victory because he found a good mix of aggressiveness and kindness.

We expected to find clear definitions of winners and losers in the programs that we analyzed, but for the most part we had our hypothesis overturned. Even if the networks clearly framed the debates in terms of a sporting competition in which there are winners and losers and performance is the main subject of discussion, there were very few explicit declarations of a winner made by the networks’ anchormen and journalists. Since there were very small differences among the networks in this respect, we present the aggregate data for the performance analysis and verdict variables. Table 8 shows the number of verdicts that declared either candidate as the winner of every debate.

***Table 8 – Candidate declared as the winner of the debate, all networks, all programs***

<b>Debates</b>	<b>First</b>	<b>Second</b>	<b>Third</b>	<b>Total</b>
<b>Gore won</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>8</b>	<b>15</b>	<b>39</b>
<b>Bush won</b>	<b>16</b>	<b>11</b>	<b>10</b>	<b>37</b>

Overall, the networks did not clearly declare a winner for any of the debates. Most of the explicit winning verdicts that appeared during the programs analyzed were pronounced by ordinary people interviewed during the “mock focus groups” discussed above (42 total verdicts), members of the campaign staffs (13 total verdicts), other politicians, (9 total verdicts, 8 from the candidates’ running mates and one from Senator John McCain), and polls (7 total verdicts). Only five explicit winning verdicts were pronounced by journalists, none by the anchors. Therefore, the hypothesis that the networks’ journalists committed themselves to openly declaring a winner of the debates did not hold. With respect to the “who won?” questions, the differences that we found across the debates, with more favorable verdicts for Bush in the second debate and for Gore in the third debate, were not dependent on the journalists involved, but on the people interviewed in the focus groups, the length of the interviews with the running mates, and the polls. In the programs that we analyzed, journalists did not take any clear position about who won any of the debates.

There were, of course, many judgments expressed about the candidates’ performances during the programs analyzed. A total of 313 verdicts were identified in all the programs analyzed, 150 of which from anchors and reporters. Most of these judgments, however, were not intended to explicitly declare a winner. On the contrary, the journalists attempted to

balance positive and negative judgments of each candidate. This conduct can be interpreted as a result of the journalistic concern for fairness and impartiality, and also as a result of the closeness of the race and the consequent difficulty for the journalists to interpret it. Since neither candidate emerged as the front-runner during the campaign, journalists could not safely declare that candidate as the winner based on polls and first impressions. Moreover, the debates did not provide any “knockout punch” or fatal blunder by the candidates, which made it hard for journalists and analysts to frame the whole event around a “defining moment” (see Literature Review). Therefore, most non-partisan commentators judged the debate as a draw or abstained from explicitly declaring a winner.

Far from not influencing the race, judging the debates as a draw clearly played into George W. Bush’s strategy. As always happens during campaigns, the news media engaged in the well-known “expectation game,” by virtue of which candidates are not judged by their performance, but by the difference between their performance and the previous expectations about it. George W. Bush’s little experience as a debater and his poor performance in the debate against McCain during the primaries were used by the Governor’s campaign to lower expectations about his debating skills, thus turning his ability to “hold his own” against the more experienced Vice-President into a surprising positive sign. As William Daley, Gore’s campaign chairman, said on CBS’s October 17 post-debate analysis: “They did a very good job of lowering his expectations. He jumped over a bar that they had gotten so low that, you know, a toddler could have stepped over it.” On the same program, reporter Bill Withaker so described the Bush campaign strategy:

“It sort of reminded me of the old Muhammad Ali strategy, the old rope-a-dope strategy where he would lull his opponents and the spectators into thinking that he wasn’t up to the fight. Well, I think the Bush folks have done a very, very good job of raising expectations on the vice president, lowering expectations on Bush so that if Bush holds his own or does even better, which he has in these debates, they can declare a victory.”

For all the Gore campaign’s complaints about this attitude, the networks consistently maintained this line of judgment all through the campaign, eventually benefiting Gore as well. After the Vice-President’s poor performance in the second debate, the media emphasized his more vital and determined attitude in the last debate, while they stressed Bush’s worse-than-expected performance in that occasion. As Bill Withaker said on CBS’s October 17 special, still referring to the Muhammad Ali analogy, “They almost switched places a little tonight. Bush was low-key, more low-key; Al Gore was more pumped up...

Well, I think that Gore had expectations to meet tonight, and I--it seemed from here that he did get up off the ropes and fought back.”

To conclude, the networks did not openly declare, in the evening news and the post-debate specials, a clear winner of any of the debates. On the contrary, journalists generally expressed balanced judgments about the candidates’ performance and let other more partisan voices proclaim their winner. Because the two campaigns were given roughly equal time, however, the number of winning verdicts for either candidates was almost even.

The most probable reason for this journalistic attitude was the sheer absence of those knockout punches and fatal blunders that journalists need in order to support an unbalanced judgment such as proclaiming a winner of the debate. Another reason is the absence of a front-runner in the race, which kept reporters aware that neither candidate was favored by the public and that the debates were therefore likely to produce mixed and balanced reactions in the audience. Under these circumstances, explicitly declaring a winner of the debate might have upset a large part of the audience, and the journalists probably did not feel sure enough of their judgments to run such a risk.

## **Conclusions**

This research was designed to answer three basic questions:

1. How important did the networks consider the 2000 Presidential debates, and how much did they cover them?
2. To what extent did the networks cover the policy issues discussed in the debates, and to what extent did they focus on performance, tactics, and campaign issues instead?
3. Did the networks openly proclaim a winner in the debates?

The first question has the clearest answer: even with remarkable differences, the networks considered the 2000 debates as an important event in the campaign, and consequently devoted time and resources to cover them. However, most of the stories about the debates and the campaign in general were not leading stories. This reflects the networks’ awareness that fewer and fewer people were interested in the debates, as the drop in viewership after the first debate demonstrated. Accordingly, more stories were produced about the first debate than about the following two. CBS was the network that dedicated most stories to the debate and the campaign, while ABC and NBC provided a less extensive and continuous coverage.

The second question received interesting, and generally disappointing, answers from this research. Overall, the networks placed much more emphasis on the candidates' performance and debate tactics than on the issues discussed. As we have seen, coverage of "policy issues" overshadowed "campaign issues" coverage by a factor of about 2 to 1. NBC did provide a more substantive coverage, but mostly because of the presence of its *Truth Squad* whose issue-oriented remarks balanced the general attitude of the network, which proved to be much similar to that of its competitors in overemphasizing campaign issues.

With respect to the third question of this research design, the "no verdicts" answer that stems from the data must be balanced by a *caveat*. It is true that the network journalists did not openly engage in the "who won it?" game, but this does not mean that the judgments expressed during the analyzed programs did not convey any evaluation of the candidates' performance and did not imply any more subtle assessment. As the expectation game commands, the candidates were evaluated not only for their debate performances, but mostly for how well they had lived up to previously set expectations. Consequently, not declaring Al Gore as the winner when very high expectations had been placed on him before the first debate was almost equivalent to declaring Bush as the winner, since "holding his own" meant very close to a victory for the Governor in the eyes of the journalists. As the campaign unfolded, this mechanism came to benefit Al Gore too, as his performance in the third debate was regarded as a positive "comeback" from the Vice-President's highly criticized stiffness in the first debate and the dismissed demeanor of the second debate.

To summarize our findings, the networks' coverage of the 2000 Presidential debates confirmed the trends highlighted by the existing literature (see Literature Review). The networks introduce strong selectional biases in focusing most of the time on "campaign issues" instead of the "policy issues" that are discussed at length in the debates. Through the networks' filter, the debates lose their function of putting the candidate's policies in perspective and pitting ideas against one another and tend to turn into a face-to-face competition in which only character and performance are to be proved. Furthermore, the networks introduce presentation bias in their judgments of the candidates' performance. The expectations game, which is entirely set up by the mass media and exploited by the campaigns' spinning attempts, can turn a close victory into either a triumph or a disastrous defeat. In the case of the 2000 campaign, Bush's ability to hold his own and "draw" the game of the first debate was turned into an unexpected success for the Governor. The networks'

definition of the first debate lingered on to the other debates, since the networks' interpretations of the first debate were used to frame the second and the third debate.

The networks' editorial line that emerges from this analysis is one that treats the debates as a show, a sporting event, a staged performance where substance matters less than appearance and stage skills. Policy issues are left aside most of the time, and when they are discussed, they are generally mentioned as tools that the candidates can use to win some votes, as when NBC repeatedly stressed that Gore's insistence on Social Security was a strategic move to get out the senior vote. It could be said as a catch-all proposition that the schema<sup>14</sup> by which the networks treated the debates is much more similar to that employed by campaign managers than to the one employed by voters. The networks by and large examined the debates through the eyes of the campaign staffers, or in ways that closely resembled such attitude.

The blurring of the line that used to separate news from entertainment is another explanation for the observed trends. Journalists emphasize the competitive and strategic aspects of the debates because they think that by doing so they can produce good stories that attract large audiences. Drama and conflict are news values the journalists employ in determining what elements of an event become a story and what are left out. Drama and conflict also serve as the typical frames by which the story is organized. Framing the debates as battles satisfies the criteria that journalists and their editors adopt in evaluating the news.

Another sign of the trend toward entertainment-oriented news is the fact that popular comedians have often been involved in evaluating and re-interpreting the 2000 debates. After the first debate, the flaws in Al Gore's performance were ridiculed by Darrell Hammond's impersonation of the Vice-President in NBC's *Saturday Night Live*. The Gore campaign had the Vice-President watch a tape of the show in the hope that it would help correct Gore's mistakes<sup>15</sup>. Talk show hosts David Letterman and Jay Leno used the debates as a source for many jokes. CBS even aired a story on the eve of the third debate featuring the comedians' comments and suggestions for the candidates.

What are the implications for the public of the interpretive symbiosis between the networks and the campaigns, and the blurring of the line between news and entertainment? Viewers who did not watch the 2000 debates could get very little in terms of policy information if they turned to the network news and post-debate analyses. Even those who

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<sup>14</sup> For a description of the notion of schema in psychology, and its application to political journalism, see Thomas E. Patterson, *Out of Order*. New York: A. Knopf, 1993, chapter 2.

<sup>15</sup> *Newsweek*, special edition about the election, November 20, 2000.

watched the debate saw the networks frame them in terms of performance, tactics, and potential for moving votes. This attitude by the networks reinforces the idea that debates are a ring and not a place for the candidates to express their policy ideas and stress the differences between each other.

Whether the interpretive frame the networks employed in covering the debates can be justified by their desire to serve the voters' interests, to "give the people what they want," is an open question. On the one hand, Sidney Kraus points out that the way debates are covered resonates with some critic features of American society and politics.

"Some critics... fail to consider, or refuse to accept, three basic factors about televised presidential debates. First, debates are expected to 'gain an audience decision.' Second, they are part of a campaign that culminates in a winner and a loser. Third, televised presidential debates coverage is reflective of a society that largely enjoys a contest and wants to be entertained. One could argue, at least in light of these factors, that the media capture the quintessence of a presidential election by monitoring the race. This view of media coverage may be more symbolic of society's condition than exemplary of a democracy's goals. [...]

Americans are competitive and want to win. Winning and losing are ultimate measures of a variety of activities engaged in by Americans... We adulate the winners and disdain the losers. From early childhood on, many of us learn that recognition, acceptance, reward, and/or status can be achieved by doing something better than someone else, or better than we had done earlier.... Americans are *fans* who want to be *entertained*. Americans are socialized into *winning*. So are politicians and journalists."<sup>16</sup>

On the opposing side of the controversy, Thomas E. Patterson points out that, while the media professionals might consciously overestimate the impact of their editorial decisions on voters' perceptions, the way they frame political stories has a crucial impact on citizens' perceptions and political involvement.

"When voters encounter game-centered stories, they behave more like spectators than participants in the election, responding, if at all, to the status of the race, not to what the candidates represent. On the other hand, stories about the issues and the candidates' qualifications bring out the politics in voters, eliciting evaluations of the candidates' leadership and personal traits and of their records and policy positions. These stories also cultivate more involvement, which is evident in the voters' greater reaction to such stories."<sup>17</sup>

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<sup>16</sup> Sidney Kraus, *Televised Presidential Debates and Public Policy*. Mahwah, N.J.: Lawrence Erlbaum Associates, Publishers, 2000, page 150-1, original emphasis.

<sup>17</sup> Thomas E. Patterson, *Out of Order, cit.*, page 89.

There seems to be a hardly reconcilable fracture between these two factions of political scientists. While scholars such as Kraus argue that voters essentially get what they want, and should, from the media's interpretation of the debates, Patterson argues that the public would be eager to be enlightened by a more substantive coverage, if only the media were willing to provide it. This research has shown that hopes such as Patterson's, however desirable from the standpoint of democratic theory, have little or no chance to be fulfilled. For better or worse, the network news coverage of the 2000 debates showed the same bias toward "horse race" coverage that had been showed, and largely criticized, in the previous campaigns.



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