The debate about news coverage of election night, and in particular the early calls of Florida first for Gore, then for Bush, before throwing the state back into the undecided pile, have rumbled on within the industry for months. The controversy promises to generate reforms in how exit polls are used in the 2004 race, discussed in the previous editorial in Press/Politics. But beyond the obvious omelet of election night, how should the news media’s overall coverage of campaign 2000 be evaluated? The kerfuffle of Florida and its aftermath has obscured attention to more routine questions. Compared with the 1992 and 1996 elections, what was the size of the audience and who tuned into campaign news? What was the content of campaign coverage, and, in particular, how much of the news proved to be substantive and issue-based versus focused on the horse race and hoopla? And how did the American public grade the way that journalists covered the campaign? In short, do the news media deserve the usual brickbats and catcalls that so often follow a major story by the critical buzzard circling the remains, or a pat on the head? Instead of rushing to judgment, in assessing their performance, we need to draw a distinction between patterns in the evidence, which are relatively clear, and our interpretation of these trends, which are not.

The Audience for Election News

First, who turned in and who tuned out? The most striking pattern in campaign 2000 concerns the accelerated fragmentation of channels, sources and audiences, a trend evident for many decades. The profile of the news audience is evident in the post-election survey conducted November 10-11th among 1113 voters by The Pew Research Center for the People and the Press. The study confirms a further hemorrhage of the mass audience for network news
and the readership of newspapers, with people turning increasingly to alternative 24/7 breaking news sources, including cable TV news and the Internet.

Table 1 summarizes the trends and the size of the audience for different news outlets in the 1992 and 2000 elections, based on people’s recollection of where they got most of their news about the campaign. The results show that the proportion that reported relying mainly upon network TV news plummeted from over one half to about one fifth of all American voters within the space of just eight years. Local TV news also suffered a slight erosion of their audience, but in contrast, reliance on cable TV as a major source of campaign news increased to one third of all voters, including use of CNN, MSNBC and Fox News. The Pew survey shows that these trends cut across all demographic and social categories, although the preference for cable over network news channels was particularly marked among the under-30s generation and, interestingly, among strong partisans more than independent and leaners. The other winners from this process were a modest boost in the audience for radio news and a substantial increase in news access via the Internet. Overall only one in ten voters reported getting most of their news from the Internet, but almost one third (30%) got at least some news about the campaign online. The profile of Internet news users displayed the standard pattern by age, gender, race, and socioeconomic status evident in the digital divide.

But how do we evaluate these trends? In particular, is this shift towards digital technology as revolutionary as it appears? Not necessarily. Pew Internet and American Life surveys during October and November among 4186 online users show that many people usually surfed the mainstream news organizations, such as CNN.com (used at least once by 59% of online election news consumers), MSNBC (used by 52%), the websites for broadcast TV networks (used by 45%), and the websites of national newspapers (used by 33%), rather than more specialized alternative outlets like Salon or Slate (used by only 7%).


Similar patterns are evident when people online were asked where they went most often for news about the 2000 elections: almost half of election news consumers (47%) said they frequented the websites of major news organizations such as CNN or the New York Times, and in contrast few often visited candidate websites (7%) or issue-oriented websites (4%). The Internet thereby alters the mode and speed of transmission, and indeed patterns of revenue for the news industry, more than the use of trusted outlets. As with dot.com e-tailers, journalistic bricks-and-mortar sources with an established reputation and credible authority seem more likely to survive and thrive in the information age than multiple upstart independents.

Moreover the normative lessons from these developments are open to debate. It has become conventional to fret about the decline of the mass audience, to wring hands as early evening network TV news gently subsides into a world of hemorrhoid and incontinence ads, and many journalists and broadcasters lament the end of the familiar mass media. But it seems equally plausible to applaud the diversification of news audiences, and the way that Americans today have a wider choice of opportunities to learn about the campaign on cable channels and the Internet. The process of news dealignment represents a shift from a captive, habitual and loyal passive mass audience to one of segmented audiences with a greater choice of outlets and stories. This can be regarded as a positive development reflecting the process of partisan dealignment that occurred thirty years earlier in America. Changing lifestyles, leisure patterns, educational levels and cognitive skills, as well as technological trends, have probably all contributed towards this process. The attentive public has more opportunities today to find detailed, timely and in-depth information about the campaign stories that interest them, when they want it, at work or at home.

Pew surveys also reveal the main reason why Americans have turned increasingly towards the Internet as a major source of campaign news: convenience. This was particularly evident in the post-election period, when
breaking news often occurred throughout the day when many people were at work: those who went online for political news increased to 12% on election day, 18% the day after the election, and between 11-15% of Americans followed the story online on any given day the following week.

The figures from Nielsen Media Research show a similar surge in use of cable TV news in the post-election period, with the day-time audience (9am to 5pm) for CNN, Fox News and MSNBC rising from just under one million a day in the week prior to November 7th to 2.2 million on election day, and on average 3 million a day in the following week. In contrast the combined audience for the evening network news (ABC, CBS and NBC) was almost 7 million in the week before the election and this figure jumped to 11 million in the week after. Network news therefore certainly increased its audience during the dramatic post-election events in Florida, but nothing like the surge experienced on cable TV.

In interpreting these developments it is not clear why we should mourn the loss of the loyal mass audience for network evening news, with its overpaid aging male anchors, myopia to world affairs, and inconvenient time-slot, anymore than we should decry the loss of other phenomena that enjoyed their fashionable heyday in the 1960s and 1970s, such as bell-bottoms, tie-dyed t-shirts, and disco. One response could simply be a philosophical Gallic shrug and acceptance of change plus ca change. If the networks were genuinely concerned about the erosion of their news audience then they would learn from European television and all channels would not operate a virtual cartel by scheduling their evening news at the same time-slot, well before many Americans get home from work. The sheer stultifying conservatism of network TV news in the face of adversity, when the greatest innovation in thirty years seems to be whether the male anchor should stand up or sit down, is truly remarkable and indeed puzzling to anyone familiar with the forward-looking advances introduced elsewhere, from the inclusion of more socially-diverse newsreaders to more imaginative formats, presentational styles, and scheduling.
The Content of Campaign Coverage

If Americans did switch on network TV news during the campaign, what did they learn? The Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA) conducted a systematic content analysis of campaign coverage from NBC, CBS and ABC evening news from Labor Day until election day, in conjunction with Stephen Hess at the Brookings Institute, with comparable studies conducted by CMPA in the 1992 and 1996 races.

The shift in campaign news sources used by the public, as reported in Pew surveys, reflects to a large extent the availability of election news, and decisions about what to cover made within the networks themselves. CMPA data shows that during the nine-week campaign, the combined evening news on ABC, CBS and NBC devoted in total about thirteen-and-a-half hours of coverage to the election, representing 462 stories which each lasted on average about one-and-a-half minutes. This produced just over two stories per night per network. For comparison, CMPA found that during the same 63-day period the network evening news showed 589 stories in 1988, 728 stories in 1992, and 483 stories in 1996. The number of hours devoted to campaign 2000 (13.4) was slightly higher than 1996 (13.1 hours), but well down on 1992 (24.5 hours). To some extent this reflects changes within the networks, as even more election news (19 hours) was broadcast during the 2000 campaign by the longer breakfast shows, Good Morning America on ABC, The Early Show on CBS and Today on NBC. For an alternative comparison, if the 9-week campaign had generated as many stories as the week immediately following polling day, as journalists fell upon the feeding frenzy of the Florida fallout, there would have been 1647 stories during the campaign, not 462.

What did the evening TV news show about the election? The closeness of the race between Bush and Gore generated extensive focus on the horserace, especially during the final stretch of the campaign. Stories concerned who was ahead and who behind, or candidate election strategies, represented almost
three-quarters (71%) of all campaign stories on network TV news, compared with 55% in 1992, and 48% in 1996. Horse-race coverage also surged dramatically in the final two weeks of the campaign on all programs except on PBS The Newshour with Jim Lehrer, which resolutely stuck with the policy nitty-gritty of social security lock-boxes, prescription drug charges, tax cuts, educational standards, and the like. But nevertheless according to CMPA data, substantive stories, defined as those providing extensive discussion of policy issues or candidate background, were also up, representing 44% of all campaign stories on network news in 2000, compared with 35% in 1992, and 40% in 1996.

Moreover the tone of the campaign stories was evaluated by CMPA, based on explicitly negative and positive statements made by non-partisan sources. The analysis found that on average during the eight-week campaign Gore received 60% negative to 40% positive evaluations, while Bush received a similar ratio of 63% negative to 37% positive comments. The coverage was predominately negative yet at least it was fairly even-handed overall to both candidates, unlike in previous contests, where there was far more critical reporting about the candidate lagging in the polls, namely Bush (71% negative) in 1992 and Dole (67% negative) in 1996. The balance did shift throughout the nine-week campaign 2000, however, with Gore’s evaluations moving around far more erratically than Bush’s.

The Public’s Evaluation of Campaign 2000

So after it was all over, how was it for you? The Pew post-election survey on November 10-12th mentioned earlier asked Americans to give their reactions to the process. When asked about the choice of presidential candidates, two-thirds of all American voters (68%) proved ‘very’ or ‘fairly satisfied, significantly up from the three previous presidential campaigns. In addition, the overwhelming majority of voters (83%) thought that they had learnt enough about the candidates and the issues to make an informed choice in campaign 2000. The majority of voters (62%) also reported that they found the presidential debates
helpful in deciding whom to support, well up on 1996 and 1998, although lower than the lively three-way debates in 1992. Voters thought that there was more discussion of issues than in 1996, and that there was less mudslinging or negative campaigning in the campaign. When voters were asked to grade the campaign, only 29% awarded the press a top grade of A or B for their performance, while 39% graded the news media D or F, but this negative view was unchanged from elections since 1988. Overall, by most of these indicators Americans proved pretty satisfied with the overall process.

Alternative interpretations can be drawn from the indicators we have surveyed. For some, there are many factors which indict network news, irrespective of the final exit poll coup de grace, notably the further erosion of the networks as a major source of campaign news, the decline in the amount of news coverage from two elections ago, combined with the overwhelming focus on the horse-race and negative coverage of both major candidates during campaign 2000. Yet a less pessimistic scenario can also drawn from the same data, namely that the news industry has experienced greater diversification of sources, outlets and audiences, and the American public has moved to alternative sources of news which are more convenient for 24/7 news cycles and modern lifestyles. The habitual audience for early evening network news has been eroded but the segmented audience continues, by their own reports, to find more than enough information from multiple sources about stories that illuminate presidential election choices. Campaign 2000 had many flaws and we can all think of multiple criticisms. For me it was often exceedingly dull, unquestionably too prolonged, and ridiculously expensive, but for these faults we should perhaps look to the context of the post-Cold War times of peace and prosperity, the quality of the major candidates, and the structural rules of the game, as much as the coverage by the news media.
Table 1: The Size of the Audience for Campaign News

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>1992</th>
<th>2000</th>
<th>Change</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Network TV</td>
<td>55</td>
<td>22</td>
<td>-23</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Newspapers</td>
<td>57</td>
<td>39</td>
<td>-18</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Local TV</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>21</td>
<td>-7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Magazines</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>-5</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Cable TV</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>36</td>
<td>+7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Radio</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>+3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internet</td>
<td>N/a</td>
<td>11</td>
<td>+11</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Note: “How did you get most of your news about the presidential election campaign? From television, newspapers, radio, magazines or the Internet?” (Two answers accepted).


2 I am most grateful to Andy Kohut and the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press for access to the data. For details see www.people-press.org


4 For details see the Pew Research Center for the People & the Press ‘Youth Vote Influenced by Online Information.’ www.people-press.org/online00rpt.htm.

5 “More than half of those who went online for election news (56%) cited convenience as their main reason for doing so, up from 45% in 1996.” Ibid. p.2.

6 Ibid.

7 I am most grateful to Matt Tatham at Nielsen Media Research for providing the data. The figures represent the number of viewers estimated to be watching at any given minute for CNN, CNBC, Fox News and MSNBC.

8 The 2000 study of network evening news on ABC, CBS and NBC was conducted from 4 September to 6 November by the Center for Media and Public Affairs in conjunction with the Brookings Institute. I am most grateful to Robert Lichter and Stephen Hess for access to the data. For details see www.brookings.edu/GS/Projects/Hess Report

9 It should be noted that stories could be classified as both substantive and also horse race by the CMCP coding conventions, and hence the totals can sum to more than 100%.