



Campaign 2008

Media Reality Check

Expert Documentation of the Latest Liberal Media Bias  Thursday, October 23, 2008

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MRC Study: ABC, CBS and NBC Spend Most Time Condemning McCain's Ads, Little Scrutiny of Obama

As Campaign Cops, Media Tilt Against GOP

Barack Obama was so pleased with the findings of a CBS News/*New York Times* poll that he gave it a plug at the October 15 presidential debate: "Two-thirds of the American people think that Senator McCain is running a negative campaign, versus one-third of mine."

That's what the poll showed, but do people believe this because McCain's ads really are more negative, or because the media have spent more time complaining about them? MRC intern Lyndsi Thomas went over all 213 broadcast morning and evening news stories that discussed the candidates' ads from the end of the primaries (June 4) through October 21. The results show the networks aired nearly three times as many stories criticizing McCain's ads (84) as hitting Obama's (32). TV reporters challenged both their accuracy and tone:

■ **Accuracy:** The networks challenged McCain's ads as false or distorted three times more often than they disputed Obama's commercials. A total of 18 stories suggested inaccuracies with one or more campaign commercials, with reporters challenging a total of 18 McCain ads as false, compared to just six Obama ads.

CBS aired five of the six segments suggesting Obama's ads were misleading voters, almost always pairing a complaint about Obama with a gripe about McCain's ads. NBC aired one story doubting an Obama ad, while ABC had zero (although the network ran "fact checks" scrutinizing claims made by both candidates in speeches and debates).

McCain's ads drew far more ire from network reporters. In September, NBC ran a total of four stories — two on *Today* and two on *Nightly News* — condemning as false McCain's ad saying that Sarah Palin "stopped the bridge to nowhere." ABC's *Good Morning America* complained when a McCain ad labeled disgraced ex-Fannie Mae CEO Franklin Raines "an advisor" to Obama, citing Raines and Obama's claim that they were not close. And the *CBS Evening News*

challenged as not factual McCain's ad saying Obama pushed "legislation to teach comprehensive sex education to kindergartners."

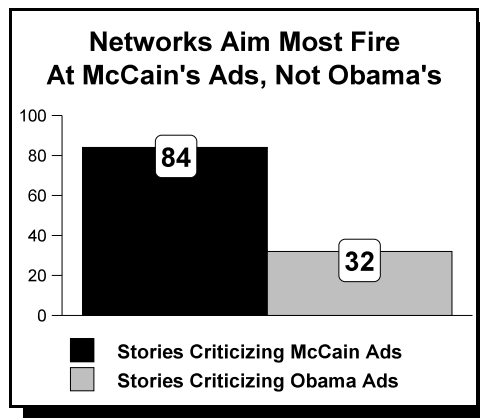
For his part, Obama was criticized by CBS for falsely claiming that McCain wanted to slash "Social Security by half," but neither ABC nor NBC were stirred to reject that claim. Back in June, CBS was also the only network to debunk an Obama bio spot touting laws he'd helped pass: "Obama had a small hand in both measures...and didn't even vote on one he cited." But FactCheck.org, a campaign watchdog, has questioned the truthfulness of 16 separate Obama ads since June — meaning that the networks have skipped more Obama falsehoods than they've exposed.

■ **Tone:** Apart from complaints about the accuracy of campaign ads, network reporters often disdained the negative tone of ads. Again, McCain was on the receiving end of nearly three times as many stories scolding his supposed negativity (66) as Obama

(26). But according to the Wisconsin Advertising Project's review of ads from June 4 to October 4, and taking into account ads that include both positive and negative messages, "the tone of the McCain and Obama campaigns has been absolutely identical."

CBS aired six times more stories complaining about the tone of McCain's ads (19 stories, compared to three about Obama's), while ABC and NBC both spent about twice as much time scolding McCain. Network journalists described McCain's ads as "ridiculous," "nasty," and "infamous," and had McCain described as "attacking," "blasting" and "belittling" his opponent. Three stories suggested McCain's ad equating Obama's celebrity status with that of Britney Spears and Paris Hilton might be racist.

Network reporters may pose as the impartial referees of presidential campaigns, but the one-sidedness of their approach reveals their true bias. — Rich Noyes



To schedule an interview with an MRC spokesman, please contact Colleen O'Boyle at (703) 683-5004