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On an average weeknight, *ABC World News Tonight*, *CBS Evening News*, and *NBC Nightly News* are tuned in by approximately one-quarter of television-viewing homes in the U.S.—about two-thirds of the U.S. public that claims to follow current events regularly. In 22 minutes the newscasts deliver snapshots of national and international news that not only frame current events for the public, but influence story selection at local affiliate stations, at radio outlets, and in print media. In addition to putting topics on the nation's agenda, the networks help set the range of debate on those issues by selecting sources who ostensibly represent the interests and opinions of the population.

In this role as agenda setters and debate arbiters, the networks' broadcasts profoundly affect the democratic process. While conservatives from Spiro Agnew to Bernard Goldberg have accused the news media of using this influence to promote liberal ideals, a comprehensive analysis of the sources used on the big three networks' evening news shows in 2001 suggests otherwise.

Instead of a liberal bias, the study found, source selection favored the elite interests that the corporate owners of these shows depend on for advertising revenue, regulatory support, and access to information. Network news demonstrated a clear tendency to showcase the opinions of the most powerful political and economic actors, while giving limited access to those voices that would be most likely to challenge them.

On the partisan level, the news programs provided a generous platform for sources from the Republican Party—the party in power in the White House for almost the entire year—while giving much less access to the opposition Democrats, and virtually no time to third party or independent politicians. Based on the criterion of who got to speak, the broadcast networks functioned much more as venues for the claims and opinions of the powerful than as democratic forums for public discussion or education.

Partisan Imbalance

This study was based on data compiled by Media Tenor Ltd., a nonpartisan, German-based media analysis firm with an office in New York City. During 2001, for each report on *ABC World News Tonight*, *NEC Nightly News*, and *CBS Evening News*, Media Tenor researchers coded the topic, time period, location, protagonists, and detailed source information (including partisan affiliation, gender, and race or nationality, when determinable). If special programming pre-empted the news shows' broadcast in New York City, transcripts were analyzed when available. For this study, data was analyzed for the time period between January 1 and December 31, 2001, which included 14,632 sources in 18,765 individual reports.

In 2001, the voices of Washington's elite politicians were the dominant sources of opinion on the network evening news, making up one in three Americans (and more than one in four of all sources)- who were quoted on all topics throughout the year. Of sources who had an identifiable partisan affiliation, 75 percent were Republican and only 24 percent Democrats. A mere 1 percent were third-party representatives or independents.

The three networks varied only slightly in their selection of partisan sources. CBS had the most Republicans and the fewest Democrats (76 percent vs. 23 percent); NEC (75 percent vs. 25 percent) and ABC (73 percent vs. 27 percent) were marginally less imbalanced. CBS had the most independents (1.2 percent), followed by ABC (0.7 percent) and NBC (an almost invisible 0.2 percent).

Small as they are, these latter figures may overstate the presence of independent politicians on the nightly news. Sen. James Jeffords, the centrist Vermont Republican who broke with his party in May (giving Democrats control of the Senate), made up 83 percent of the independent sources who were quoted throughout the year, suggesting that networks highlighted independent politicians mainly when they impacted the fates of the two major parties. The only avowedly anti-

establishment independent who appeared in 2001, Ralph Nader, made up 3 percent of independent or third-party sources—0.03 percent of all politicians quoted.

Although the attacks of September 11 exacerbated the tilt toward Republicans, the difference was pronounced beforehand as well. Prior to the attacks Republicans made up 68 percent, Democrats 31 percent and independents 1 percent of partisan sources. Afterward, Republican sources surged to 87 percent, with Democrats (13 percent) and independents (0.1 percent) falling even further behind.

Dispelling "Democratic Bias"

While these figures ought to dispel the persistent notion that network news has a liberal or pro-Democratic bias, they do not in themselves necessarily prove a conservative or Republican bias. Rather, they may reflect the networks' definition of news that prioritizes the actions and opinions of the executive branch. Members of the Bush administration (and Clinton administration, for the pre-inauguration period in January), including the president, vice president, cabinet members, and official spokespeople, made up 17 percent of all U.S. sources and 62 percent of all partisan sources. When these are set aside, the remaining partisan sources showed a rough parity between the two major parties, with 51 percent Republicans, 48 percent Democrats and 2 percent third-party members or independents appearing as sources.

This breakdown suggests that in 2001 there was a strong advantage on the nightly news for the party that held the White House; after the administration had its say, there was roughly one source from its own party to defend it for every representative from the opposition party that might criticize it. Unfortunately, complete data do not exist from 2000 or earlier to determine whether the same ratio held true during a Democratic administration.

The leading topics on which partisan sources were quoted, however, suggest that the disparities in sourcing could indicate a more substantial bias than mere reverence for the presidency. Partisan sources from both parties were most likely to appear in stories on domestic politicking, such as speeches or debates in Congress. After that area of coverage, however, their next most common appearances were qualitatively very different: Republicans appeared in reports on the widely supported war in Afghanistan, while 12 percent of the reports in which Democrats were quoted focused on corruption and scandals, with Democrats in most cases defending themselves or other party members. Republicans, by contrast, were presented in such reports in only 1 percent of their total appearances. By focusing so much on largely nonpolitical scandals (e.g., Chandra Levy, White House gifts) involving the party out of power, the networks bolstered the Republican image—not only by showcasing Democratic "character" questions, but by reserving the vast majority of Republican quotes for more dignified policy discussions, thereby disassociating the party from the "dirty politics" of scandal-mongering.

The top individual sources on the news reflect the emphasis given to the administration at the expense of the opposition. George W. Bush alone made up 9 percent of all sources and 33 percent of partisan sources, putting him far ahead of any other individual voice for the year. The next most common sources were Al Qaeda leader Osama bin Laden (2 percent), former President Bill Clinton, Secretary of State Colin Powell, Attorney General John Ashcroft, Defense Secretary Donald Rumsfeld, Palestinian Authority President Yassir Arafat, Vice President Dick Cheney, Senate Majority Leader Tom Daschle and New York mayor Rudolph Giuliani (with 1 percent each), Clinton faded from prominence shortly after the Bush inauguration (80 percent of his appearances occurred in the first four months of the year), leaving Daschle as the only other top 10 source from the domestic opposition party. The remaining top U.S. sources were all members of the Bush administration, with the exception of the Republican mayor of New York (89 percent of whose appearances occurred after September 11).

Women's Restricted Role

After U.S. politicians, "unclassified citizens"—a category that can be used as a proxy for ordinary Americans—were the most common individual type of source, providing 20 percent of all quotes. While it's valuable to hear the voices of ordinary citizens on the nightly news, the context in which most of their soundbites appeared makes it unlikely that their viewpoints did much to shape the nation's political debate: They were more often presented in human interest stories, crime reports and entertainment news than in all "hard" news topics combined, leaving discussion of most policy issues to "expert" political and economic elites.

While women made up only 15 percent of total sources, they represented more than double that share—40 percent—of the ordinary citizens in the news. This reflects a tendency to quote men as the vast majority of authoritative voices while presenting women as non-experts; women made up only 9 percent of the professional and political voices that were presented. More than half of the women (52 percent) who appeared on the news were presented as average citizens, whereas only 14 percent of male sources were.

The balance was roughly equal among networks. NEC, with 18 percent, had slightly more female sources (of whom 53 percent were non-authorities), while ABC and CBS both presented 14 percent (of whom 48 percent and 55 percent, respectively, were ordinary citizens).

Even in coverage of gender-related policies (which made up 0.2 percent of coverage), women made up only 43 percent of the sources. On such issues as equal opportunity, gender equality and discrimination, partisan sources made up 24 percent of the total; 71 percent of these were Republicans and 29 percent Democrats. All of these partisan sources were men. Women were presented as non-expert citizens 77 percent of the time in gender stories. Men, by contrast, spoke as experts in their fields 100 percent of the time in such stories.

Ordinary citizens (all women) made up 33 percent of sources on gender policies, followed by George W. Bush (17 percent), company representatives (10 percent, all men), Alan Greenspan (10 percent), soldiers (7 percent, all men), writers (7 percent, half men, half women), and other groups that each constituted 3 percent or less of the total. In keeping with other areas of coverage, white Americans clearly dominated the quoted sources, making up 89 percent of sources for whom race was determinable.

Two women from the Middle East represented the only non-U.S. women quoted on issues of gender policy. It's noteworthy that the Taliban's oppression of women did not become a topic for the evening news in 2001 until First Lady Laura Bush "introduced" the long-recognized problem during the U.S. bombing of Afghanistan in mid-November.

Racial Underrepresentation

The racial balance of all sources was firmly tilted toward the historically most powerful segment of society as well. Among U.S. sources for whom race was determinable, whites made up 92 percent of the total, blacks 7 percent, Latinos and Arab-Americans 0.6 percent each, and Asian-Americans 0.2 percent. (According to the 2000 census, the U.S. population is 69 percent non-Hispanic white, 13 percent Hispanic, 12 percent black and 4 percent Asian.) A single source who appeared on NEC (7/26/01) was the only Native American identified as appearing on the nightly news in 2001—0.008 percent of total sources.

Among all sources, white Americans constituted 67 percent of the total, followed by Middle Easterners (9 percent), black Americans (5 percent) and Northern Europeans (mostly British) at 3 percent. No other racial or regional group made up more than 2 percent of the total.

The networks presented a remarkably similar distribution of races among U.S. sources. On all three networks, 92 percent of racially categorized U.S. sources were white, while 7 percent were black. Latinos were the next most quoted sources on all networks (0.6 percent on NEC, 0.5 percent on ABC and 0.7 percent on CBS) followed by Arab-Americans (0.6 percent, 0.5 percent and 0.7 percent respectively) and Asian-Americans (0.2 percent, 0.3 percent and 0.3 percent respectively).

As with the network's presentation of women as non-experts, racial minorities were disproportionately presented as ordinary citizens rather than as authorities or experts. Non-white

U.S. sources made up 16 percent of average citizens and 11 percent of expert sources. When race, gender and nationality are considered together, white American men clearly dominated the evening news, making up 62 percent of all sources, far ahead of the next most commonly quoted sources: white American women (12 percent), Middle Eastern men (6 percent), black American men (4 percent) and Northern European men (2 percent).

Even on racial issues like affirmative action, racism and asylum policy (which made up 0.9 percent of overall coverage), the majority group was still afforded far greater opportunity to televise their opinions than the populations most directly affected by those issues. White Americans made up 68 percent of sources on such stories, followed by residents of Latin America (14 percent), African-Americans (7 percent), U.S. Latinos and people of the Middle East (3 percent each).

Among U.S. sources quoted on minority policies, whites made up 87 percent, far ahead of blacks (8 percent), Latinos (4 percent) and Asians (1 percent). Even in reports specifically on racism, 59 percent of quoted sources were white Americans, 29 percent were African-Americans, and 6 percent were Asian-Americans, with no Arab-Americans, Latinos, Native Americans or other minority groups quoted at all.

Of partisan sources quoted in racial stories, 84 percent were Republicans, a group so dominant that they made up more than one in four overall sources on these issues throughout the year. Democrats made up the remainder, with no independents or third party representatives quoted at all.

Who Are the Experts?

After ordinary citizens, the next largest categories of sources on the nightly news were various professional or expert voices of industry, science and government. The most common among these were corporate representatives, providing 7 percent of all sources, along with economists and academics, also at 7 percent; the visibility of these categories reflects the networks' heavy coverage of business and financial stories. The economists were unlikely to provide perspectives that challenged the corporate spokespersons, since they generally came from major investment banks such as Goldman Sachs and Morgan Stanley, from conservative think tanks such as the Heritage Foundation, or from elite business schools such as those at Princeton and Stanford.

Non-partisan government employees and officials—such as Environmental Protection Agency representatives, National Security Council spokes-persons and mail carriers (especially in the midst of the Anthrax attacks)—were the next most quoted sources (6 percent). Medical doctors provided 5 percent of soundbites, reflecting the nightly news' interest in health issues. No other professional or social group provided more than 4 percent of the total.

Representatives of non-governmental organizations, which might have provided an alternative perspective to the U.S. government, business community or establishment experts, made up only 3 percent of the sources. Not all of these were from organizations that were likely to challenge the status quo, however; groups represented ranged from the United Nations and Human Rights Watch to the Christian Coalition and the National Rifle Association.

Organized labor was granted even less access to the airwaves. Even as the country lost 2.4 million jobs in 2001, union representatives made up less than 0.2 percent of sources on the evening news, making company representatives 35 times more likely to be heard.

This lack of interest in labor was reflected not only in sourcing but in topic selection: The unemployment rate, layoffs, strikes, wage levels, workplace discrimination and all other labor issues combined were only 1 percent of total coverage. By contrast, other business and economic issues made up 14 percent of the total. Product reports alone were twice as likely to appear on the news as labor-related stories, making up 2 percent of overall coverage. Even on labor stories, union representatives were rarely heard, making up a mere 2 percent of quoted sources. This was far behind corporate and business association representatives (26 percent), economists (19 percent) and politicians from the major parties (15 percent). Of the partisan sources presented on labor issues, 89 percent were Republicans and 11 percent were Democrats.