

# Michigan Law Review

---

Volume 82 | Issue 4

---

1984

## Over the Wire and On TV: CBS and UPI in Campaign '80

Michigan Law Review

Follow this and additional works at: <https://repository.law.umich.edu/mlr>



Part of the [Communications Law Commons](#), [Election Law Commons](#), and the [Law and Society Commons](#)

---

### Recommended Citation

Michigan Law Review, *Over the Wire and On TV: CBS and UPI in Campaign '80*, 82 MICH. L. REV. 1041 (1984).

Available at: <https://repository.law.umich.edu/mlr/vol82/iss4/50>

This Review is brought to you for free and open access by the Michigan Law Review at University of Michigan Law School Scholarship Repository. It has been accepted for inclusion in Michigan Law Review by an authorized editor of University of Michigan Law School Scholarship Repository. For more information, please contact [mlaw.repository@umich.edu](mailto:mlaw.repository@umich.edu).

OVER THE WIRE AND ON TV: CBS AND UPI IN CAMPAIGN '80. By *Michael J. Robinson* and *Margaret A. Sheehan*. New York: Russell Sage Foundation. 1983. Pp. vii, 332. \$24.95.

Michael Robinson and Margaret Sheehan<sup>1</sup> admit that their study of television news and traditional print news compares apples to oranges (p. 8). And, although they present some evidence that the public's shift from newspapers to television news has transformed attitudes (pp. 262-73), they confess that they cannot be sure of their conclusions (p. 9). Nevertheless, Robinson and Sheehan rightly assert that information about network and wire service news should interest every news consumer (p. 9).

To compare the content of televised and printed news,<sup>2</sup> *Over the*

---

1. Michael J. Robinson is Associate Professor of Politics at Catholic University and Director of the Media Analysis Project at George Washington University. Margaret A. Sheehan is Research Analyst for a law firm in Washington, D.C.

2. Robinson and Sheehan study the content of the news itself. Their focus distinguishes

*Wire and On TV* examines the press coverage of the 1980 political campaigns. As in many empirical studies, methodology is a problem. Robinson and Sheehan could not study every campaign news story, so instead they use stories from only two news sources (p. 23). They select the CBS Evening News to represent television, and UPI's "day wire" to represent traditional print.<sup>3</sup> Although these choices can be justified,<sup>4</sup> they seriously limit the study's breadth. For example, the authors exclude news stories appearing on other television networks, in news magazines, and in national newspapers such as the *Wall Street Journal*. If the study had used a variety of news sources, rather than concentrating on only two (p. 25), its conclusions would carry more weight. Robinson and Sheehan also limit the scope of their study by analyzing only the text of "Evening News," omitting any consideration of visual or inflectional cues (pp. 26-27). They concede that inattention to visual cues has been the most popular criticism of content research (p. 26),<sup>5</sup> but defend their omission by asserting that a comparison of the common denominators of television and print news — stories and sentences — produces cleaner and simpler results (p. 27).

*Over the Wire and On TV* describes important and sometimes surprising similarities between the campaign news stories of CBS and UPI. Robinson and Sheehan find that both sources strive, usually successfully, to make their stories objective, at least with respect to what is said within a story (pp. 33-65).<sup>6</sup> They also conclude that the supposed liberal orientation of the Eastern press establishment does not produce biased reporting. Republicans and Democrats re-

---

them from other media researchers, who have examined the effect of news'on audiences. See Lowry, *An Evaluation of Empirical Studies Reported in Seven Journals in the '70s*, 56 JOURNALISM Q. 262 (1979) (finding that nearly two-thirds of the studies on media behavior conducted in the 1970's dealt with individuals and only 12% examined program content). For examples of media studies focusing on the audience, see, e.g., E. DIAMOND, GOOD NEWS, BAD NEWS (1978); T. PATTERSON, THE MASS MEDIA ELECTION: HOW AMERICANS CHOOSE THEIR PRESIDENT (1980); T. PATTERSON & R. MCCLURE, THE UNSEEING EYE: THE MYTH OF TELEVISION POWER IN NATIONAL ELECTIONS (1976). Robinson and Sheehan contend that audience-based research generally has understated the influence of media on public opinion. P. 12.

Aside from Robinson and Sheehan, only one researcher has studied the media itself during Campaign '80. See J. GREENFIELD, THE REAL CAMPAIGN (1982).

3. Each wire service offers several variants of its product. The authors used UPI's national, most complete "A" wire, which comes in a "day" cycle and a "night" cycle. The two cycles do not materially differ in content; Robinson and Sheehan chose the day wire based on greater ease of access. P. 20 n.1.

4. Robinson and Sheehan chose the CBS Evening News because it outranks ABC and NBC in prestige and audience size. Pp. 17-18. They first chose the Associated Press (AP) over United Press International (UPI) for similar reasons. When AP refused to cooperate with them, they turned to UPI. Pp. 18-19.

5. See, e.g., Adams, *Visual Analysis of Newscasts: Issues in Social Science Research*, in TELEVISION NETWORK NEWS: ISSUES IN CONTENT RESEARCH 155 (1978).

6. For a contrary view, see Efron, *Do the Networks Know What They Are Doing?* in THE NEWS TWISTERS 173 (1971). Robinson and Sheehan do not claim that the sources possess the same objectivity with respect to what is actually covered. Pp. 57-59.

ceived remarkably equal access to both media (pp. 70-73), and Democrats actually received more "bad press" than Republicans (p. 99). Further, "Evening News" and the day wire both treated the competition between the candidates as a "horse race": political maneuvers, campaign appearances, and verbal miscues all received extensive coverage (pp. 147-48). Surprisingly, although CBS was more interested than UPI in candidate blunders (p. 157), the network proved at least as "issue-oriented" as the wire. Issue coverage, as measured line-by-line, occupied twenty-five percent of the news time on "Evening News," but only twenty percent on the wire (p. 146). These figures show, however, that both CBS and UPI relegate issue coverage to relative obscurity. Robinson and Sheehan explain the prominence of campaign news over issue news as a function of the media's need to cover "events": while campaigns happen, issues merely exist (p. 148).

Both media receive low scores on the comprehensiveness of their coverage. CBS and, to a lesser extent, UPI concentrated almost exclusively on the presidential campaign. They virtually ignored vice-presidential candidates once the presidential candidates had chosen their running mates (pp. 168-72). Although the Senate received more coverage than did the House of Representatives, both houses were relegated to comparative obscurity (p. 173). State races received almost no attention from either the network or the wire (pp. 172-73). The authors conclude that the attention of the national media is firmly fixed on Washington, D.C., and that the focus is strictly presidential (pp. 180-81).<sup>7</sup>

Robinson and Sheehan's most interesting findings explore the differences between the Campaign '80 news stories of CBS and UPI. They conclude that CBS was decidedly more interpretive and analytical in its approach than UPI (p. 21). As the authors put it, "the wires usually transcribe; the networks usually translate" (p. 210). CBS campaign assessments were more negative than those of UPI. While both media gave serious challengers the most favorable coverage, CBS was much more critical than UPI of frontrunners and incumbents (pp. 100-16). Finally, network news provided a significantly more "political" perspective than did wire copy. For example, CBS was relatively more likely to refer to "Candidate Carter" than "President Carter" (pp. 196-203).

The authors concentrate on two explanations for the differences between television and print news. First, they emphasize how wire services and networks define their own purpose in reporting news.

---

7. The skewed focus of media campaign news is quite important. Media decisions on which subjects to cover help to determine the way people think about a campaign. See D. WEAVER, D. GRABER, M. MCCOMBS & C. EYAL, *MEDIA AGENDA SETTING IN A PRESIDENTIAL ELECTION* (1981).

While the wire services view their mission as writing for the record, the networks feel they must go beyond the record to analyze a candidate's underlying intentions and motivations (pp. 230-33). Second, and most important in the opinion of the authors, is the effect of ratings on network news content. No one can reasonably dispute Robinson and Sheehan's conclusion that ratings are vital to network news (pp. 219-23). However, the authors fail to explain how the networks' quest for ratings produces differences between the content of television news and traditional print. After all, the wire services also must respond to commercial pressures. A comparison of the effect of ratings on the content of CBS and UPI news would greatly strengthen this discussion.

Robinson and Sheehan believe that Americans have come to view politics with increasing cynicism. They trace this trend to our increasing dependence on the more critical and political lens of network television. In terms of news, they argue, we are what we eat. Despite its empirical limitations, their study provides valuable insight into the content of our new diet.