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Study: Big 3 networks still fixated on 'first love' Obama

Jennifer Harper , Tuesday, October 14, 2008

The "big three" broadcast networks - NBC, ABC and CBS - remain captivated with Sen. Barack Obama, according to a study of campaign coverage released Tuesday by the **Center for Media and Public Affairs at George Mason University**.

Numbers tell all: 61 percent of the stories that appeared on the networks between Aug. 23 and Sept. 30 were positive toward the Democratic Party. In contrast, just 39 percent of the stories covering Republicans were favorable.

"After a brief flirtation with Sarah Palin, the broadcast networks have returned to their first love: Barack Obama," said Robert Lichter, the center's president.

"John McCain has not been so lucky. He's gotten bad coverage from the beginning. It has never varied from that," Mr. Lichter added.

Fox News Channel, which was included in the study to provide parity, cut the Republicans some slack. Overall, 44 percent of the Republican coverage included in the half-hour news portion of the nightly "Special Report with Brit Hume" was positive, compared with 25 percent favorable coverage for the Democrats. Mr. Obama was favored in only 28 percent of the stories. Sen. Joseph R. Biden Jr. garnered 18 percent positive coverage. Thirty-eight percent of the stories about Mr. McCain were positive.

And Mrs. Palin, the Alaska governor and Republican vice-presidential nominee? Comparatively speaking, she was a Fox favorite, with half the stories about her positive.

The study revealed a rare and potentially laudable trend at NBC, ABC and CBS, which could benefit voters as Election Day looms. Stories on all three networks were more attuned to real "substance" and issues, rather than the political horse race, tactics and strategy.

Thirty-six percent of the coverage was substantive, compared with 31 percent that focused on the horse race.

"In the past six elections, this is the only second time that 'substance' has outpaced the horse race among broadcasters," Mr. Lichter said.

"Reporters and correspondents are systematically monitoring campaign ads - which are based around very specific issues. The press ends up vetting the ads, and consequently vetting the issues. We're no longer getting surface portrayals of 'Mr. Change' and 'Mr. Maverick' ," he added.

Fox News, with 260 election stories, provided the most campaign coverage, followed by CBS (141 stories), NBC (95) and ABC (89). Things were not quite so solemn at Fox News, perhaps. The study found that 31 percent of the network's coverage was substantive, compared with 44 percent that dealt with the horse race.

The public, meanwhile, has its own perceptions.

Overall, 38 percent of Americans say the media has been "too tough" on Mrs. Palin, according to a survey released Thursday by the Pew Research Center. In contrast, only 5 percent said Mr. Biden has been roughed up by news organizations, while 9 percent said the same of Mr. Obama. Less than a quarter said Mr. McCain had received tough treatment in the press.

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