

Media bias largely unseen in US presidential race

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By Steve Gorman - Analysis

LOS ANGELES (Reuters) - At times during this year's U.S. presidential race, it seemed that supporters of Republican [John McCain](#) bashed journalists covering his campaign almost as hard as they did his Democratic rival, [Barack Obama](#).

McCain's running mate, Alaska Gov. [Sarah Palin](#), famously stoked anti-media catcalls and boos by Republican delegates at the party's national convention.

And as recently as this past weekend, a crowd of McCain backers at a rally in Virginia turned to the press stand and chanted: "Tell the truth! Tell the Truth!"

McCain partisans were roused to anger by a perception that mainstream news organizations routinely gave Obama preferential treatment en route to his election as the first black U.S. president.

But media scholars, including a former top aide to McCain, disagree. They said campaign coverage often did lean in Obama's favor, though not -- as many conservatives have suggested -- because of a hidden liberal agenda on the part of the media.

Instead, academic experts said, Obama benefited largely from the dynamics of the campaign itself and the media's tendency to focus on the "horse race," emphasizing ups and downs in the polls and political tactics.

As Obama's poll numbers rose in response to events, so did favorable press coverage for him, not the other way round.

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Some scholars acknowledge that Obama also generated good press by virtue of his charisma, and his place in history as the first black presidential candidate of a major political party.

"He was fresh-faced, his candidacy was historic and he had a campaign that seemed to transcend politics," said Robert Lichter, head of the Center for Media and Public Affairs at George Mason University. "Reporters are suckers for candidates who don't seem like ordinary politicians."

But Kelly McBride, who teaches at the Poynter Institute for Media Studies, said journalists should not be labeled as star-struck for reporting on the "mania" surrounding Obama.

"When you have a very attractive candidate, and you have people swooning for him, the reporters then report on the fact that people are swooning," she said.

The Pew study, which examined over 2,400 campaign stories from 48 news outlets, found negative McCain stories outnumbered positive ones, 57 percent to 14 percent, in the six weeks from the end of the conventions to the last presidential debate on October 7. Press treatment of Obama was more positive than negative -- 36 percent favorable to 29 percent unfavorable.

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