



In the Tank?

Farhi, Paul. 1, June, 2008.

Volume 30; Issue 3

Allegations of media bias have been a sideshow, and sometimes the main event, of every presidential campaign of recent vintage. Critics shrieked that a line had been crossed in 1987 when the Miami Herald revealed Democratic frontrunner Gary Hart's relationship with Donna Rice. Five years later, George H. W. Bush complained that reporters exaggerated the extent of the recession during his term. Al Gore's aides thought the media gave him a hard time, and his opponent George W. Bush an easy ride, in 2000. And Howard Dean and John Kerry grumbled about cable TV's obsession with Dean's "scream" and Kerry's Swift Boat opponents in 2004.

-article cut-

Nevertheless, cries of bias grow louder with each election cycle. Polls have shown rising public skepticism about the news media for decades. According to research cited by media scholar S. Robert Lichter, two-thirds of the public agreed that the press was "fair" in a survey in 1937. By 1984, only 38 percent said newspapers were "usually fair" and only 29 percent said this of television reporting. We're fast approaching zero credibility. In a national survey conducted by Sacred Heart University in Fairfield, Connecticut, in January, only 19.6 percent of respondents said they believed "all or most" reporting. An even larger portion, 23.9 percent, said they believed "little" or none of it.

What's going on here? Are we really so biased, so incapable of checking our prejudices that even the most straightforward reporting deservedly engenders suspicion? Is all of the work of the news media deserving of skepticism?

-article cut-

It's true, certainly, that journalists themselves have contributed to this confusion. In an ever more complicated and economically challenged media environment, the lines between reporter and pundit have gradually disappeared. Print reporters now go on TV to opine, or write blogs containing "analysis" that is thinly disguised opinion. Lichter, president of George Mason University's **Center for Media and Public Affairs**, believes that some of the public's antipathy toward the press has been fueled over the past few decades by the rise of the "celebrity journalist," the reporter who covers the story, then gets on television to tell viewers what to think about it.

"I think there's a feeling that journalists have overstepped their boundaries," he says. "People don't look on [journalists] the way journalists like to view themselves - as the public's tribune, speaking truth to power, standing up for the little guy. They don't look like the little guy anymore. They're part of the celebrity culture." Increasingly, he says, "people like the news but hate the news media."

-article cut-