

Media Tenor:

Congratulation on a decade of spectacular development

It is remarkable how long it took for social science to catch up with the public debate over media content. In the United States bitter partisan battles over alleged media bias began in the 1960's and accelerated throughout the years of Vietnam and Watergate controversies. Yet throughout the 1970s, most academics still treated concerns about media power as overblown, and not worthy of serious study. The idea of using content analysis to affect the public debate never entered their minds -- the first major content analysis of a presidential campaign didn't appear in print until 1983, three years after the election that it analyzed.

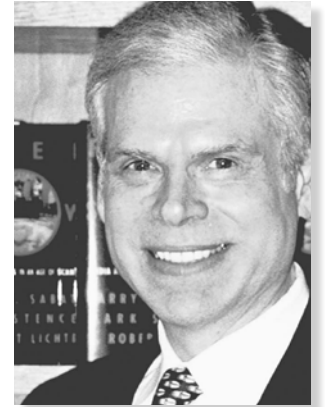
All that began to change in 1984 with the formation of the Center for Media and Public Affairs (CMPA), a nonprofit media research organization whose mission was to bring rigorous scholarly analysis to the anecdotal and partisan debate over the media that had become a regular feature of the American political landscape.

As content analyses of the news increasingly began showing up in academic journals, CMPA began applying content analysis to current news topics, in order to affect the debate over media coverage of events that were still playing out. Instead of letting the media set the public agenda, CMPA's mission was to put the media itself on the agenda for public debate.

After initial resistance from journalists accustomed to being the final arbiters on their product, CMPA's rapid-response studies, aimed at general audiences, began to be used by newsmakers angry with their coverage and by journalists themselves who needed hard information in covering controversies involving the media, which had itself become an accepted news beat.

By the 1992 elections CMPA was issuing weekly updates on coverage of the candidates and issues. President Bush repeatedly cited our findings that his coverage was more negative than his opponent Bill Clinton's, and our finding that candidates' sound bites had dropped below ten seconds in length led CBS to mandate longer soundbite lengths on its evening news show. Content analysis was here to stay as a staple of public discourse.

Today CMPA has been joined in its public rapid-response studies by academic institutions like



S. Robert Lichter
President
Center for Media and
Public Affairs
Washington DC, USA

Harvard's Kennedy School and media-based organizations like the Project for Excellence in Journalism. Their topics range from elections to political scandals to public health scares to business and economic trends; their findings are regularly cited, first in the media and later by scholars, and they are treated as the equivalent in media analysis to scientific polling in opinion analysis.

But the influence of these American efforts has been eclipsed in the larger world by the growth of Media Tenor, which was founded only ten years ago, and has since taken the principles of continuous media content analysis to an international audience, with operations far beyond the scale of any other media analysis organization.

We at CMPA were proud to participate in Media Tenor's formation of the International Media Monitor Association in 1995, and to contribute to its early development by sharing the methodology and technical procedures we had developed. Rarely have seedlings produced such an orchard, as MT's operations now spread across three continents. So it is our pleasure to share in the fruits of our early collaboration by once again joining forces, this time to analyze news coverage of the 2004 presidential election, with weekly reports that we fully expect to be widely reported and discussed. Even more exciting is the prospect of carrying out comparative studies across national borders, at a time when the public's information about the world beyond its own national borders is more important than ever before.

We congratulate Media Tenor on a decade of spectacular development and look forward to being a part of an equally successful future for international media analysis.

S. Robert Lichter