

Shorenstein Report: Election News Coverage Failed the Voters



Trump image/Shorenstein Center Press release

Analyzing news coverage of the recent general election, a [new report](#) from Harvard Kennedy School's Shorenstein Center on Media, Politics and Public Policy concludes that both Hillary Clinton and Donald Trump received coverage that was overwhelmingly negative in tone and extremely light on policy. In my view, it also implies that the structure of news organizations and the definition of "news" allowed Trump to hornswoggle reporters and editors as they tried to make sense of him and his candidacy.

The report entitled "News Coverage of the 2016 General Election: How the Press Failed the Voters," was released today. It suggests that negativity is part of a pattern in place since the 1980s and is not limited to election coverage. "A healthy dose of negativity is unquestionably a good thing," according Thomas Patterson, the study's author, in a press release. "Yet an incessant stream of criticism has a corrosive effect. It needlessly erodes trust in political leaders and institutions and undermines confidence in government and policy," resulting in a media environment full of false equivalencies that can mislead voters about the choices they face.

The study found that, on topics relating to the candidates' fitness for office, Clinton and Trump's coverage was virtually identical in terms of its negative tone. "Were the allegations surrounding Clinton of the same order of magnitude as those surrounding Trump?" asks Patterson. "It's a question that political reporters made no serious effort to answer during the 2016 campaign."

Trump has accused the media of bias against him and his opponents charge that he received an inordinate amount of coverage. According the report, When asked to explain their focus on

Trump, journalists said that he made himself readily available to the press.^[13] But "availability has never been the standard of candidate coverage. If that were so, third-party candidates and also-rans would dominate coverage. They hunger for news exposure."

Rather, according to the report, "Trump's dominant presence in the news stemmed from the fact that his words and actions were ideally suited to journalists' story needs" That is, "news" is generally defined as information that is different or unusual, impacts a lot of people— "better yet when laced with conflict and outrage." .Trump delivered that type of material by the cart load. Both nominees tweeted heavily during the campaign but journalists monitored his tweets more closely. Both nominees delivered speech after speech on the campaign trail but journalists followed his speeches more intently. Trump met journalists' story needs as no other presidential nominee in modern times."

This is the final report of [a multi-part research series](#) analyzing news coverage of candidates and issues during the 2016 presidential election. The study tracks news coverage from the second week of August 2016 to the day before Election Day.

This Shorenstein Center study is based on an analysis of news reports by ABC, CBS, CNN, Fox, the *Los Angeles Times*, NBC, *The New York Times*, *USA Today*, *The Wall Street Journal*, and *The Washington Post*. The study's data were provided by Media Tenor, a firm that specializes in the content analysis of news coverage. The research was partially funded by the John S. and James L. Knight Foundation.

[Read the full report.](#)

—Anita M. Harris

Anita M. Harris is an author, journalist and communications consultant based in Cambridge, MA

New Cambridge Observer is a publication of the [Harris Communications Group](#), an award-winning PR and digital media firm in Kendall Square, Cambridge.