

Media Monitor

Center for Media and Public Affairs • P.O. Box 18374 • Washington, D.C. 20036

202-676-6392/3

Volume I, Number 1

March 1987

THE IRAN/CONTRA STORY

The biggest White House story since Watergate has sparked a major controversy over media coverage. President Reagan assails media "irresponsibility" while journalists decry a tendency to blame the messenger. To provide a sounder basis for evaluating the coverage, we scientifically analyzed the first month of nightly TV news broadcasts on the Iran/Contra affair. All weeknight broadcasts were examined, yielding 23 days of coverage from November 5 to December 5. After November 25 the story's original focus broadened to include the diversion of funds to the Nicaraguan contras. Our study extended through Senate investigating committee appearances by Robert McFarlane, John Poindexter, and Oliver North. By that time the story's framework had been firmly established as the "Iragua crisis."

THE BIG NEWS

It was big news on all three networks from the moment ABC broke the arms sale story on November 4. During the next month we logged 297 stories on some aspect of the Iran/Contra affair. Based on the 23 weekdays of viewing time, that works out to about 13 stories every day, or just over 4 per network. We clocked nine and one-half hours, or about 38% of the total news time available. The volume of coverage was matched by the story's prominence. It was the lead story on more than three out of four newscasts during this period.

These overall figures mask different levels of interest from the three networks. The leader in sheer volume was ABC, which ran 118 stories, averaging better than 5 a day. Next came NBC with 95 stories. Pulling up the rear was CBS's 84 stories, between 3 and 4 a day. ABC devoted three and three-fourths hours of airtime to the story, about an hour more than each of the other networks.

The Iran/Contra affair was really two stories divided by Attorney General Meese's November 25 press conference. At that point attention shifted from the Middle East to the contra connection, as the "Iran arms deal" became the "arms scandal" for millions of viewers. Before November 25, it was treated as a major policy story, but not yet the megastory it later became. In the first phase the networks together ran a total of about 8 stories a night, just under 3 apiece. After November 25 the coverage jumped to 20 stories per night, almost 7 per network. ABC alone ran 69 stories in the next nine days we coded, almost 8 per broadcast. "Iragua" became the lead story on every network every night, with the sole exception of one NBC broadcast.

WHAT'S THE STORY?

Among all major topics covered, three stood out above the rest: policy issues concerning the Iran arms sales, legal questions raised by the various disclosures, and problems of leadership within the Reagan administration. These three topics, which garnered about equal attention, together accounted for a solid majority (57%) of the coverage. So the story was framed in equal measure by questions of policy, legality, and leadership.

A second tier of topics included stories about the plight of the hostages in Lebanon, the diversion of funds to the contras (aside from its legality), and questions about how foreign policy is formulated and implemented. Each accounted for 7 to 8% of the coverage. Thus 80% of the networks' coverage was concentrated on six topics. Most of the remainder was divided among the Israeli connection, profiles of individual actors, reactions of our allies, and the role of the press.

This overall picture obscures some sharp changes produced by Meese's revelations on November 25. Earlier, arms sales policy questions accounted for almost one third of the coverage. Afterward they dropped to only one eighth. Hostage stories also dropped by half, from 10% to 5% of the coverage. In the "arms scandal" phase, questions of legality suddenly became paramount. Legal issues were addressed in 27% of all succeeding stories, double the proportion on any other topic. The where, why, and how of diverting funds became the second leading topic. After November 25 these two related topics took up 40% of the coverage.

Despite their different levels of coverage, the three networks tended to hang their stories on the same newspegs. On most topics, they were separated by at most a few percentage points. The largest differences come on the secondary topics. ABC was the most personality oriented, for example, accounting for nearly three quarters (74%) of all the profiles of individuals (including the naming of Oliver North as their "person of the week" on November 14). This is surprising in light of its aggressive pursuit of hostage stories from the Iranian embassy ("America held hostage") to the TWA Flight 847 hijacking in 1985. Nonetheless, ABC turned to the hostages' plight only about half as often as NBC.

On the big questions of policy, legality, and leadership, however, the networks moved in virtual lockstep.

A QUESTION OF BALANCE

A critical aspect of any news report is where the information originated. We examined three source-related questions: First, how balanced was the coverage of sources supporting and opposing the Reagan administration's policies? Second, who were the major sources of information? Third, how extensively did the networks rely on unidentified sources?

The networks devoted just over 69 minutes to information they attributed to sources either supporting or opposing administration positions. An example of supportive information was Robert McFarlane's statement that the Iran arms sales were necessary to create better relations and to prepare for the future. An example of criticism was New York Senator Moynihan's depiction of the affair as a "not so funny comedy of errors."

This part of the coverage was relatively balanced, with a slight edge to the critics. They received 37 minutes of airtime compared with 32 minutes for supporters, a margin of 54 to 46%.

ABC's coverage was the most balanced, coming within seconds of a 50-50 split. CBS was the most critical, giving critics 57% of their source coverage. At NBC, critics prevailed by 53 to 47%. We also discovered a surprising turnaround after the contra connection was revealed. Before November 25, critics predominated on all three networks, with an overall margin of 60 to 40%. After that date, supporters received a slight majority (52%) of the airtime.

PLAYERS

In their search for sources, the networks relied mainly on administrative spokesmen and a few key senators. Only a dozen individuals appeared or were cited by name at least 10 times. All were major players in the policy dispute. President Reagan topped the list with 60 mentions, equaling the combined total of White House Chief of Staff Regan and Attorney General Meese, who had 30 apiece. Senators Dole (R-KS) and Byrd (D-WV) were the only others to exceed 20 mentions. The remaining key sources, in descending order of appearance, were House Speaker Wright (D-TX), Senator Leahy (D-VT), Secretary of State Shultz, former NSC advisor McFarlane, Senators Nunn (D-GA) and Durenberger (R-MN), and Secretary of Defense Weinberger. Together this small group served as network sources 280 times in 23 days. Half are administration figures and only four are Democrats.

Where did they stand? President Reagan emerged as his own staunchest supporter, with 43 separate defenses of administration policy and no criticisms. Close behind came Regan and Meese, with a 97% support rate. (This breakdown excludes mixed and neutral statements.) After that, Republican unanimity disappeared. McFarlane split his statements evenly between support and criticism, and Shultz and Weinberger both emerged as moderate critics, by a combined 60-40 margin. On the other hand, Democrats all played the loyal opposition. Their combined comments summed to 88% criticism vs. 12% support. Leahy and Nunn alone combined for 25 critical mentions and no supportive statements. Close behind was their Republican colleague Durenberger, with 10 critical comments and only 1 statement of support. Thus, despite the prevalence of Republicans, support exceeded criticism by only 54 to 46%, among the most frequent sources.

PATTERNS

Beyond individual sources and viewpoints, we examined the sequence in which on-camera sources were presented. How often were administration supporters or critics allowed to make their case without being contradicted by another

source? How often was one viewpoint rebutted by another, or placed in a sequence of several contrasting statements? Such questions ask how TV news presents the respective cases for the defense and prosecution in a policy dispute.

About 40% of the stories, 122 in all, used multiple on-camera sources. A plurality of 30% presented only criticism of the administration, while another 20% presented only supportive statements. Another 24% first presented an administration position and then rebutted it with another source. Conversely, critics were rebutted by administration supporters in only 10% of these stories. Finally, 16% bounced back and forth among critics and supporters at least twice.

A majority of on-camera source statements were thus not rebutted. Among these, administration critics outnumbered supporters by a three-to-two margin. Another one third followed a point-counterpoint format, with the administration position usually presented first and then rebutted. Only one story in six provided on-camera give and take.

The tendency for critics to get more solo appearances than supporters was due mostly to CBS, where unrebutted criticism outweighed support by a three-to-one margin--32% to 11%. At NBC the critics' margin was only 32% to 24%. At ABC the solo supporters actually outweighed the critics by 31% to 28%.

Solo criticism predominated only before the contra connection was revealed on November 25. Before that date, unrebutted critics outnumbered supporters by two to one, or 35% to 18%. Thereafter the gap between the two sides almost disappeared. Once again, this shift reflects differences among the networks. Solo critics were more numerous on all networks before Meese's revelations, but thereafter both ABC and NBC gave a slight edge to supporters. On CBS, however, the critics maintained their three-to-one edge throughout the entire month.

Finally, the format varied somewhat according to the topic being reported. On the central issue of the Iran arms sale policy, 11 stories showed only critical sources, compared with 5 that featured only supporters--a two-to-one margin. An even greater disparity appeared in stories dealing with foreign policy formation (e.g., the respective roles of the National Security Council and State Department). On this topic 8 stories presented only on-camera criticism, but none presented only sources supporting the administration. Solo criticism and support were relatively balanced on all other major topics.

OFF CAMERA

Unnamed sources are a fixture of policy controversies, and viewers have lately received a regular regimen of phrases like, "informed sources say," "according to a White House official," and "ABC news has learned." To determine the extent of this practice, coders noted every story that attributed information to an unnamed source.

Overall, a majority (57%) of stories made use of unnamed sources. The proportion dropped somewhat after November 25, from 62 to 54%, but remained in the majority. There were sharp differences on this point among the networks. CBS made the most use of unnamed sources, citing them in 70% of its stories. NBC used them the least, 44% of the time. ABC was about equidistant from its two competitors, at 58%. These differences were most pronounced before the contra connection was revealed. Before November 25, CBS cited unnamed sources in five out of every six stories (83%), compared with 63% at ABC and only 44% at NBC. CBS was therefore citing unnamed sources almost twice as often as NBC in the story's first phase. After Meese's announcement, CBS's reliance on not-for-attribution material dropped to 64% of its stories, and ABC's fell to 54%, while NBC's remained at 44%.

These differences are important because they show that the use of unnamed sources is not determined solely by the story itself. It is also a matter of each news organization's own practices.

CONTRAGATE?

Some critics have argued that journalists are reliving their glory days of Watergate in covering this story. It is difficult to address such a shadowy question scientifically. A more straightforward question is, to what degree did reporters remind their audience of Watergate by using the term? This happened only once (on ABC) before the contra connection was announced. Thereafter, coders noted 25 references to Watergate, about 1 in every 7 stories. This included 10 references on CBS, 9 on NBC, and 6 on ABC. Viewers of CBS and NBC thus heard this term about once a day after November 25.

Watergate references ranged from Dan Rather's depiction of "a Watergate-style scandal in the making," to a John Chancellor commentary denying the parallel, to occasional full-fledged comparisons. For example, a report by ABC's Jim Wooten began, "In the remembrance of scandals past, some see a resemblance to scandals present...." He cited "passionately protective White House aides" and "clandestine operations." Gordon Liddy then condoned Oliver North's

shredding of papers and his refusal to talk with the comment, "I can relate to that." Wooten continued, "He certainly can! And reporters can relate to another round of attacks by another president."

THE SPIN FACTOR

The closer is a distinctive feature of television news reports. It refers to the reporter's summary or concluding statement at the end of a report. To add pungency or "bite" to their conclusions, reporters sometimes use interpretive or judgmental phrasings. The "spin" that these phrasings can impart to a story has made closers a source of contention.

To determine the degree to which closers introduced spin, we concentrated on the use of emotional, insinulative, or judgmental language. When such language was present, we noted whether the reporter made a positive, negative, or mixed judgment about the news being conveyed. An example of positive spin was Sam Donaldson's closer imparting the confidence of administration officials that "someday they will be able to clear all this up and will be seen to have acted honestly and properly." On the negative side was the conclusion of ABC's Brit Hume that "the administration has stepped into something that not even the Great Communicator can explain away."

By our measure, about one closer in four added some spin to the story. Of this group 8% were positive, 67% negative, and 25% mixed. Negative closers were therefore over eight times as frequent as their positive counterparts, a margin that held constant across networks and throughout the course of the study.

Typical instances of spin were Tom Brokaw's criticism of "a clumsy effort to win [the hostages] freedom," his colleague Marvin Kalb's depiction of "chaos in decision-making in the whole foreign policy structure," and ABC correspondent Bob Zelnick's sarcastic reference to the "inventive White House minds" who hatched the contra connection.

IN CLOSING ...

The Iran/Contra coverage, heavy from the start, became truly massive after November 25. At that time the emphasis shifted from issues of policy and leadership to questions of legality. The networks gave critics of the administration only slightly more airtime than its supporters. By a wider margin, however, stories containing only criticism outnumbered those citing only support. In both cases, the critics' advantage was limited to the story's pre-contra phase.

Unnamed sources played a major role; they were used in a majority of stories. Watergate was mentioned rarely before November 25 but fairly regularly thereafter. Relatively few closers introduced spin into the story, but those that did were usually critical of the administration.

ABC provided the heaviest coverage. CBS was most critical of the administration and used the most unnamed sources.

This study is not intended to decide the debate over media fairness. How scientific evidence is interpreted depends on the reader's own values. Our goal is more modest--to provide a sound basis for judgment and, perhaps, further debate. At the least, the results suggest that reality is often more complex than partisanship may admit.

MEDIA MONITOR (Copyright 1987) is a publication of the CENTER FOR MEDIA AND PUBLIC AFFAIRS, a nonpartisan and non-profit research organization. The Center's purpose is to analyze scientifically how news and entertainment media treat social and political issues. The primary research tool is content analysis, a systematic, reliable, and quantitative method of inquiry into information content. The Center's goal is to fill the gap between academic scholarship and journalism by presenting scientifically valid media analysis in readable form to both journalists and the general public.

Editors: Dr. S. Robert Lichter
Dr. Linda S. Lichter

Managing Editor: Jessica M. Fowler
