

PRESS & TELEVISION

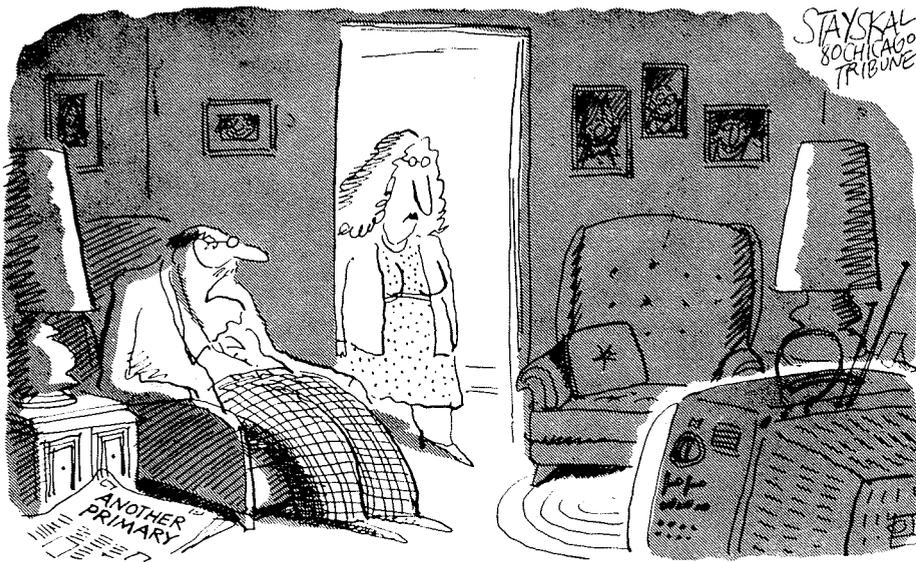
Why, then, the *mea culpas*? A hint of hubris, the authors speculate. The largely liberal Washington news corps believes that it is an important shaper of public opinion. If a conservative President remains popular in the polls, the newsmen assume, the media must not be getting the "truth" out to the public. They suspect they are too chummy with the President. And perhaps, the authors add, "the press is doing to the press what it does to all institutions—accentuating the negative."

*Building Fires
From Straw Polls*

"Is a Straw Poll Worth Reporting?" by Martin Linsky, in *The Hastings Center Report* (June 1983), 360 Broadway, Hastings-on-Hudson, N.Y. 10706.

The TV network news shows and top newspapers and magazines heavily influence the nation's political agenda, but newsmen are reluctant to acknowledge their power or to question how they use it.

Too often, says Linsky, a former *Boston Globe* editorial writer now at Harvard's Kennedy School of Government, they decide what is newsworthy "on the basis of crasser values such as time, convenience, and



Early in the 1980 presidential primary season, a cartoonist targeted the news media's zeal: "With two percent of the vote in, the CBS computer just projected the winners for tonight, next November, and 1984!"

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competition" rather than how best to inform the public.

A case in point is press coverage of the April 9 presidential straw poll conducted at the Massachusetts Democratic Party's "issues convention." Democratic officials cooked up the poll merely as a "diversion" from the "dull" or possibly divisive conference proceedings for both the media and the 4,100 delegates, Linsky says, and few politicians or journalists took it seriously—at first.

But then, presidential contenders Walter Mondale and Alan Cranston, recalling the media prominence Jimmy Carter won by his triumph in the Iowa caucuses that kicked off the 1976 campaign, began wooing the delegates in earnest. Other candidates, notably Gary Hart and John Glenn, followed suit. The major news media joined in, running daily stories on what had become a Massachusetts horse race.

By April 9, 400 reporters and back-up personnel were on hand in Springfield, Mass., including teams from the Big Three TV networks, *Time* and *Newsweek*, and every major daily in the country. To its credit, Linsky says, the *New York Times* buried the story in its middle pages; elsewhere, the poll results (Mondale won with 30 percent of the votes) were played as big news. Lost amid the straw poll hoopla was the original purpose of the meeting: discussion of state political issues.

The journalists themselves appeared troubled by the "hype," Linsky notes. Newspaper columnists constantly reminded their readers that the poll was meaningless—but covered it anyway. And as the real presidential campaign gets underway, working reporters and TV producers will have no time for reflecting on such contradictions. That is one reason, he argues, why news organizations' top management, more removed from the daily hubbub, should take a stronger hand in distinguishing between real news and hype.

A few have already made such efforts. During the 1980 presidential campaign, for example, ABC News emphasized comparisons of the candidates' positions on the issues, not campaign trivia. But more needs to be done, Linsky says, if election coverage is to be more than news about who's ahead on the merry-go-round.

RELIGION & PHILOSOPHY

The Quiet Nuns

"The Cloistered Life" by Julia Lieblich, in *The New York Times Magazine* (July 10, 1983), 229 West 43rd St., New York, N.Y. 10036.

To most Americans, the cloistered nun—silent, isolated, devoted solely to prayer—is a relic of the Middle Ages. But cloisters still exist, writes Lieblich, a freelance writer, and since the mid-1960s, they have opened their doors, if only a crack.