
PRESS & TELEVISION

Covering Campaign '84

"The Press Makes Small but Subtle Changes in Covering 1984 Campaign" by Dom Bonafede, in *National Journal* (Dec. 3, 1983), 1730 M St. N.W., Washington, D.C. 20036.

Covering the long, arduous contest for the White House is one of the supreme tests of the national news media. Senior editors long ago made their plans for 1984, hoping to improve upon their Campaign '80 performance.

No big changes are in store. The top print and television news executives interviewed by Bonafede, a *National Journal* correspondent, generally throw up their hands at most of the major complaints lodged against campaign coverage.

Charges by academics that the press focuses too much attention on front-runners and incumbent presidents, says the *Washington Post's* Peter Silberman, ignore "the way of American politics." Portraying the campaign as a "horse race," many editors believe, is the only way to keep readers and viewers interested as the weeks wear on. Similarly, news executives tend to doubt that public interest in "the issues" (as opposed to personalities and the intricacies of campaign tactics) is more than skin deep. Ronald Cohen, Washington bureau manager for United Press International, notes that few local newspaper editors print the issues-related stories that his wire service sends them.

What *has* changed? This time, campaign coverage began earlier. Reporters are paying more attention to labor unions, women's groups, and such voting blocs as blacks and Hispanics. In part because of the large field of Democratic candidates (eight in early 1984), more reporters have taken to the campaign trail. The *Washington Post* deployed 12 full-time newsmen on the story by late 1983; papers the size of the *Boston Globe* or the *Christian Science Monitor* assigned three to six. In a major departure from tradition, most reporters are being rotated, covering first one candidate, then another, to provide fresh perspectives. Public opinion surveys will be even more widely published than in the past.

The high cost of covering the 1984 campaign—about double what it was in 1976—has also influenced editors' plans. The respected *Baltimore Sun* will probably pay out about \$750,000 during the campaign, not counting reporter salaries, and bigger papers such as the *New York Times* will spend twice as much. Combined campaign-related outlays by the three major TV networks will probably exceed 1980's \$100-\$150 million level. One result: Rather than pay the exorbitant airfares exacted by money-hungry campaign managers, more editors will keep their political reporters in Washington, covering campaign headquarters instead of the candidate himself.