

# The credibility gap

**By Danny Schechter**

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**T**here are two debates going on in American politics. The first is between and about the candidates. Who is ahead? Who is behind? The horse race metaphor frames the mainstream narrative as in years past.

Alongside it, another debate rages about the role of the media itself. Is it being fair? Is it covering what it should? Is it biased – not just toward individual politicians but also against the democratic process itself?

With the credibility of leading news organizations in question – with a coterie of partisan bloggers digging up media controversy at every political twist and turn – there seems to be a growing popular rejection of the traditional news machine.

The much-discussed rise of satirical news formats, such as “The Daily Show” and The Onion newspaper, is as much about the public’s negative reaction to mainstream media as it is about a desire to poke fun at prominent people and events in American culture.

For the first time, citizens who used to just focus on politics are obsessed with the media, too. The media issue has gone from being a casual complaint to a looming threat to a healthy democracy.

MediaChannel.org’s Media for Democracy functions like a MoveOn.org on the media. More than 60,000 citizens have joined our grassroots effort in the last seven months, each seeking a stronger hand in improving an election media system that continues to stumble down the campaign trail. Media for Democracy members come together each week to demand better coverage from journalists and news executives, and to lobby the FCC and Big Media owners to ensure that news outlets better serve the public interest with more fair and comprehensive election and civic affairs coverage.

Last week, Media for Democracy members sent more than 7,000 questions to debate moderators Jim Lehrer, Charles Gibson and Bob Schieffer, asking that they pose them to the candidates during the debates. This week and next, thousands more joined our citizens panel to act as media watchdogs of the debates, ensuring that the media monitors and candidates address issues that matter to Americans most.

During last Thursday’s debate 4,900 “citizen monitors” watched and then rated the quality and format of the debate. Was the right amount of time devoted to the most important national security and foreign policy issues? Were various personal attributes of

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the two candidates properly addressed? Did moderator Jim Lehrer of PBS do a good job? MediaChannel.org tabulated the citizen monitors' in real-time, via the Web, and fed them back to the media as a voter-driven guide to the issues that resonate most with Americans.

Within hours of completion of the debate many complimented PBS anchor Jim Lehrer for a job well done with democrats more effusive in their praise. Perhaps that's why conservative groups later challenged Lehrer with charges of bias.

Later when his colleague Gwen Ifill moderated the Cheney-Edwards debate, Bush supporters gave her higher marks than Kerry supporters.

Media analyst Andrew Tyndall summarized the results of MediaChannel's citizen monitoring of Ifill's performance: "A majority of Bush backers endorsed her question choices on a range of foreign policy and economic issues; Kerry supporters demanded more depth, especially on trade, poverty, social security and the environment."

Others have been less charitable in their rating of the political coverage. New York Press media critic Matt Taibbi is planning to give out a prize for the worst campaign coverage in 2004. He has moved from criticizing press coverage by individuals to condemning the work of most of the industry itself.

"It's time to blame the press corps that daily brings us this unrelenting symphony of horseshit and never comes within 1,000 miles of an apology for any of it," Taibbi wrote. "And it's time to blame the press not only as a class of people, but as individuals. We must brand anyone who puts his name or his face on credulous campaign coverage an eternal Enemy of the State. Hopefully, over time, this will have a deterrent effect."

As the blogger-in-chief at MediaChannel, I am bombarded daily with gripes and snipes at reporters for acts of sloppiness and worse. Other websites like MediaMatters patrols the press from the left side of the fence, seeking to strike down right-wing influence in the media system. Others like NewsMax and the Media Research Council perform the same rapid response against their perceived liberal bias in the press.

The language is often harsh and reflects the extreme political polarization that has divided the electorate down the middle.

Behind all of this is a call for more accountability, truthfulness and public service on the part of our media. In an age of scandal and crisis, the media have become the battleground.