

"Media and the Campaign"
Andy Bowers Interview with Brian Lamb

All Things Considered, 5-26-92

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JUST: In particular there was concern about how to handle political advertising in the campaign to try to increase issue coverage and to make the news more substantive, uh, not just a series of campaign stops and that, I think that effort was a serious one and everyone was able to do a fairly decent job as long as nothing happened.

BOWERS: But of course something did happen!

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TERRENZIO: I think that personal issues like this, reflect on a candidates ability to, uh, prove what judgement he or she may have as they go through life that may be reflected in their role as a candidate.

BOWERS: But George Stephanopolus, Communications Director of the Clinton campaign, says the influence of sensational journalism is disturbing.

STEPHANOPOLUS: I think everybody came into this campaign with the best of intentions, unfortunately, um, I think one, one lesson we learned this year is that the media is only as strong as its weakest link. When tabloids start to drive the coverage of the responsible press, you know you're in trouble.

BOWERS: Many in the so-called responsible press have expressed similar feelings. But according to Ed Diamond, media critic for New York Magazine, politicians need to accept that many Americans get their information from these news sources, even if the more established media don't like it.

DIAMOND: Lyndon Johnson said ya gotta go hunting where the ducks are. I mean not only should Donohue, and Oprah and Geraldo in their low brow, no brow, trash view way, I put quotes around trash, pursue these, uh, some of these themes, but the candidate should appear in these venues.

BOWERS: And, in fact, both Bill Clinton and rival Jerry Brown have gone on radio talk shows and both made several appearances on the Phil Donohue show in April, including what turned out to be one of the least rancorous debates of the many held by the Democrats this year. Donohue allowed the two to engage each other with no interruption and instead of slinging mud, they slung substance.

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JUST: Many people admit that if the news story about scandal is put in front of them, they'll read it. They have curiosity, they know that they can't resist it. But they also don't think that they really want it. They're going to hear it like it or not and, uh, they don't like it. They, think that the campaign should be conducted on a more serious level.

BOWERS: And some analysts worry that voter dissatisfaction , and the many news stories about voter dissatisfaction this year, are feeding off each other, alienating the public from the democratic process. Polls and commentaries about how voters don't like any of the candidates have appeared regularly in print and broadcast stories. Robert Lichter, who scrutinizes network news broadcasts at the Center for Media and Public Affairs, says overall, coverage this year has a far more negative tone than in past elections.

LICHTER: Clearly, this is a part of the reality, but I think the media produce an echo chamber affect. There is dissatisfaction . The media give extensive voice to it and it proves contagious.

BOWERS: But any discussion of campaign coverage really boils down to one fundamental question, are the news media giving voters the information they need and want to make an informed choice on election day. By many measures the public has access to more information than ever before. Cable and satellite television now bring services like CNN, with several daily political programs into most American homes. And for those who want their politics raw, the cable service C-SPAN is running more than 1200 hours of stump speeches, debates, conventions and candidate interactions with voters, such as this trip to New Hampshire by Republican Patrick Buchanan.

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BUCHANAN: We won't be sitting on our duff or flying around the world.

VOTER: Will you be in negotiating with the Democratic Congress?

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BUCHANAN: Great state up here.

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