Media Disgrace Essay, Research Paper

More coverage than O.J. More coverage than Diana. More than Oklahoma City, and more coverage than even Monica Lewinsky. You guessed it, Election 2000, and the media loved every minute of it. Savoring the proverbial field-day, U.S. journalists greatly assisted in dividing the country, destroying the people?s respect for the American legal system, embarrassing the world?s superpower, and simply annoying the crap out of everyone. To put it simply, the media didn?t do it?s job, especially when it came to the really focal points of the recent election: pre-election coverage, election-night coverage, and post-election coverage including the Florida recount.

In order to obtain more ground to cover, the media started off by telling the people just how different the two major candidates were (always relishing partisanship), when in truth, they aren?t that polarized. Of course, they have vaguely different views on how to accomplish certain goals, but for the most part, those goals are the same. It?s the usual, strengthen our economy, preserve social security, improve education, yada yada yada; the candidates just occasionally differ on how to do so — leading to an enduring joke about the American people not really wanting either candidate.

The candidate?s are also similar in that they both exaggerated and skirted around lying in pre-election campaigning. The media compounded these problems by not being able to decide whether to be responsible enough to analyze these campaign claims and when they half-heartedly made any attempts they were often off the mark. Unfortunately, we a tendency to remember the few hits and forget the innumerable misses. For example, the media showed a keen interest in Gore’s recounting the story of a Sarasota, Florida student who was forced to stand in her science class due to overcrowding. While many reports chalked it up as another Gore embellishment, few journalists acknowledged that the story was essentially accurate, and could have been easily confirmed through a local newspaper. In contrast, the media seem less interested in Gore’s distortions when they are directly connected to public policy issues. During the second debate, Gore claimed that “for 24 years I have never been afraid to take on the big drug companies.” In fact, one of the first major issues of the campaign involved Gore’s efforts on behalf of drug companies to get South Africa to stop manufacturing affordable versions of patented AIDS drugs– a life-saving move that is allowed under international trade laws, but would have threatened pharmaceutical industry profits. In contrast, media seemed uninterested in Bush’s distortions across the board, whether the issue was Bush’s personal record or important policy matters. In the second debate, Bush claimed that “We spend $4.7 billion a year on the uninsured in the state of Texas.” But “we” turns out not to mean his state government– it means anyone within the boundaries of Texas, including federal government officials. The state of Texas actually spends less than $1 billion on the uninsured, with the rest of Bush’s figure coming from private, local and federal spending. Also not caught by the media, the discrepancy of Bush touting his support for a patients’ bill of rights in the third debate. Bush said: “As a matter of fact, I brought Republicans and Democrats together to do just that in the state of Texas, to get a patients’ bill of rights through.” In fact, Governor Bush vetoed the Patients’ Bill of Rights the Texas State Legislature passed in 1995. When it was passed again in 1997, the bill’s support was strong enough to withstand his threatened veto.

Moreover, of course, neither Gore or Bush is trustworthy– in the sense that their statements should not be taken on trust, but the media failed to take note of that when reporting campaign claims. Nor should reporters accept what candidates say without doing the essential journalistic task of checking the facts. But all too often, media behave as though applying skepticism to a politician’s words is something that one does only in unusual circumstances. This pre-election irresponsibility threw everything off-kilter and, simply, it got even worse.

In a performance that will live in journalistic infamy, television?s most famous news personalities subjected the nation to an emotional, unnecessary, and irresponsible roller coaster ride election day. The farce that unfolded on television on election night revealed that, as much as the networks may try to pitch themselves as experienced and professional news organizations, they are anything but. Early Tuesday evening, Dan Rather invited viewers to “join CBS News for what the record shows over the years has been the most accurate presidential election night coverage.” Later, in primetime, Rather assured his audience, “if we say somebody?s carried the state, you can take that to the bank.” Instead, did the national media help put us in Palm Beach Punch-Card Hell with their irresistible urge to call the state for Gore ten minutes before the polls even closed on the Panhandle? Did the media’s biased bad manners discourage last-minute Bush votes? And why did the networks lunge to call victorious states for Gore at the top of the hour, while eventual Bush states sat colorless for hours on end? These questions can be answered only with speculation about media?s political bias and Gore-prioritized agenda setting. Yale professor John Lott estimated that 10,000 voters in the Florida panhandle could have been discouraged from voting by the networks’ premature Goregasm in Florida. The moderate Republican Leadership Council reported it found 2,380 voters, in those ten Panhandle counties, who were discouraged by the network calls. David Eisenhower of the University of Pennsylvania’s Annenberg Center found a curious pattern of networks calling Gore states quickly, but Bush states slowly. Take the Florida call and compare it to Alabama, which Bush won by 15 points, yet took almost a half an hour to color in for Bush, and the people noticed these discrepancies. Asked in a CNN/Time poll not long after the election, “Did the media act responsibly on election night?”, 79 percent said ?no? , 17 percent replied ?yes? — CBS News anchor Dan Rather claimed: “I would rather walk through a furnace in a gasoline suit than be inaccurate about anything.” Rather must have a lot of burned skin, but he and other important media figures continued to add fuel to the fire during the post-election or Florida recount coverage.

Bordering on pop culture, the phrase ?The Florida Recount? has been branded into the minds of almost every American. We still hear the now old catch-phrase ?I?d like a recount?. Well, we can levy a sizeable portion of the blame on the media for all those bad jokes, because rather than allow their mistakes to temper the feeding frenzy, they continued to add fuel to the fire. Bold post-election headlines, including ?The Florida Circus: Election by Lawsuit?, ?Gore?s Last Stand?, and ?537?, enthralled American readers to the point where it snowballed and the inevitable occurred: we stopped caring. We became so agitated and impatient that we stopped caring whom the most powerful man in the world would be. It is amazing to hear people exclaim ?I don?t care who the next president is, I just wish they?d pick someone?. Of course you care! Or at least you should. But, not surprisingly, the media exerted its particular talent to sow antipathy amongst the American people, and embarrassing scorn around the world. That issue, upon which the fate of the election hung, was too important to be reported in terms of partisan charges and counter-charges. Yet this is how the issue has been covered in the media, particularly on the network newscasts. Despite pledges to “cut through all the smoke and spin” television coverage did not do so. There was very little discussion of the core issue of the recount– whether hand counts or machine counts are the most accurate method of gauging the will of the electorate. Coverage that relied on language like “score one for the Democrats” did a disservice to viewers, not only in reference to the recount by the election as a whole. The media failed to satisfactorily perform their duties this election, if anything they compounded upon the chaos.

Now, solutions to these problems aren?t as straightforward as the media is. However, a positive outcome of this election might be the wonders of hindsight, in both the media and the public. On a whole, Americans are more aware now of the power of the media and it?s ability in shaping the opinions of millions of Americans. That power needs to be handled with more respect and more responsibility because independent, aggressive and critical media are essential to an informed democracy. Maybe the ignominy won?t have been forgotten by the time we realize the error of our ways, and, hopefully, put a stop to this perpetuation of journalistic malpractice, otherwise, that elections only come every four years is the only thing we?ll have to be thankful for.