

The Clinton Crisis and the Press

A Second Look

Project for Excellence in Journalism

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Overall Summary

As a rule, the press has tended to describe anonymous sources in the vaguest terms in covering the Clinton-Lewinsky saga, according to the results of a new study of what and how the press has reported.

Only occasionally has the press offered audiences a glimpse of what the biases or allegiances are that might be influencing what an anonymous source is revealing.

The study, a follow up to an earlier one in February, raises basic questions about whether the press has become too lax about offering readers as much information as possible, and whether journalists have allowed sources to dictate terms too easily.

At the same time, there are signs the coverage over time has moved more toward factual reporting and named sources and away from commentary.

The study, conducted by the Committee of the Concerned Journalists, involved an examination of 2,051 statements and allegations contained in the reporting by major television programs, newspapers, magazines and the Associated Press over four days in January and March. For comparison, the study included a list of tabloid publications and television programs. The goal for this, the second part of a study conducted by the Committee in February, was to find out how sources were described, how the mainstream press compared to the tabloids, and how the coverage may have changed by the seventh week.

Among the findings:

- Six in ten statements from anonymous sources in the mainstream media (59% of all anonymously sourced reporting) were characterized in the vaguest terms, "sources said," "sources told our news organization" or "sources familiar" with the event.
- Less than two in ten statements (17% of the anonymously sourced reporting) offered even the slightest hint of the source's allegiances.
- Print was more forthcoming about the nature of its anonymous sourcing than was broadcast.

- The mainstream press' use of anonymous sources was not that different than those of the tabloid press, such as Inside Edition or the National Enquirer, though the tone of the two different kinds of media, which is not quantified by the study, varied considerably.

Characterizing Anonymous Sources

In the first study it became clear that a key question was how much news organizations were helping audiences understand about anonymous sources--not simply whether the press was relying on such sources.

Characterization of Anonymous Sources, January 23, March 5 & 6		
	<i>News</i>	<i>Tabloids</i>
Rumors	4%	7%
Sources said	23	30
Outlet has learned	20	3
Sources familiar with	16	9
Job characterized	13	17
Bias characterized	17	30
Other	8	4
Total	100	100

"Almost everybody we are talking to (on this story) has an agenda, and I don't think we've been very straightforward with viewers and readers on where that information is coming from and how it might be tainted as a result," Dotty Lynch, political editor of CBS News, said at a conference discussing the first study.

So for the second half of the study, we decided to look at how anonymous sources were characterized--including to what extent audiences were given information to judge for themselves if a source might have an ax to grind.

We looked at one day in January and two in March and one week's editions of Time and Newsweek. We then broke down the characterization of anonymous sourcing into five categories:

- How much was attributed to rumors.
- How much was a blind attribution, 'sources said,' or 'the news organization has learned,' without any further identification of the source.
- How much offered even minimal information about how the source would know what he or she was revealing ("a source familiar with the investigation"), but did not signal what if any bias or allegiance the source might have.
- How much described in some manner the source's official affiliation (a Justice Department official, a Capitol Hill source)

- Finally, how much described what side of the dispute the source was aligned with, such as a friend or supporter of the President, a Republican source, or a lawyer for Linda Tripp.

The overwhelming plurality of the anonymous reporting in the mainstream press (43%) was essentially blind. It said simply sources said, or our news organization has learned, offering no effective characterization of the source.

Another 16% of the time, the sources were characterized as simply being knowledgeable in a fairly vague way, such as sources "familiar with the situation" or "close to the investigation."

Taken together, that means that 59% of the time the sourcing was quite vague, offering no sense of where the source or sources worked or what slant there might be to the information.

Only 17% of the time did the press characterize anonymous sources in a way that offered at least some guidance as to the sources' allegiances, describing the source as "a supporter" of the President, "a Democratic" or "a Republican source," "a friend" of someone, or someone "close to" someone else.

And 13% of the time, anonymous sources were described in a way that offered a glimpse of where the source worked, such as "a Capitol Hill source," or "a Justice Department source" but did not necessarily offer much guidance as to the source's bias or allegiance.

At least explicitly, the press did not engage much in passing along rumors and innuendo in the days studied. Only 4% of the cases were "rumors" or "it is believed" or similar attribution cited as the source.

Vague characterization of sourcing may be one of the reasons that the public registers irritation with press coverage of this story. Certainly, some anecdotal evidence would suggest that. Washington Post ombudsman Geneva Overholser offered voice to some of these complaints in one of her columns. "Sources said, sources said...what sources?" Overholser quoted one reader as complaining. "Just who are these informed sources?" asked another.

The leak of the Clinton deposition may have lowered the amount of blind sourcing captured in the study because so much of the reporting by other media was attributed to the Washington Post rather than an anonymous source.

Different Types of Media

Print was much more specific about characterizing sources than television.

Newspapers, the Associated Press and the news weeklies used the vaguest characterization of anonymous sourcing--sources said or the news organization has learned--26% of the time. Television used this blind characterization 68% percent of the time.

The two media were much closer when it came to describing the potential allegiance or bias of an anonymous sources (18% in print, 15% on TV).

Print was five times more likely to characterize a source's job affiliation, (25% of the time for print, 5% for broadcast).

One explanation is that in the compressed time frame of television, journalists often forgo identifying sources, since many of those names might not mean much to viewers anyway. The question is whether that standard applies as well to an investigative story, where such details may help viewers judge the story.

Although the universe is not large enough generally to break out individual news outlets, one statistic may be worth mentioning. The Associated Press on the days studied did not characterize the bias of any anonymous sources.

Interestingly, the tabloid press, which in the study included Star, the New York Post, the National Enquirer, Inside Edition and Geraldo, were sometimes more specific in characterizing sources on the three days studied.

Only 33% of the time did they rely simply on "sources say" or "the news organization has learned," more than newspapers but less than the networks.

Nearly a third of the time, (30%) the tabloids offered insight into the source's bias. This is no endorsement of the tabloid genre, but rather an indication of where the mainstream press can do better. Often those who skate closest to the edge of sensation know that, for legal reasons, they have to be careful about attribution.

The tabloid press attributed anonymous reports to "rumors" seven percent of the time, roughly twice that of the mainstream press.

How Coverage has Changed Over Time

Sources and Attribution for Mainstream News		
	<i>January</i>	<i>March</i>
2 or more named sources	1%	4%
1 named source	24	24
2 or more anonymous sources	15	8
1 anonymous source	9	4
Attributed to other media or leaked Clinton deposition	14	33
Journalist analysis	24	18
Journalist punditry	13	8
Total	100	100

*For the sake of comparison, this chart does not include Sunday talk shows, tabloids, the AP, the News Hour or Larry King Live.

This second snapshot of the Lewinsky story captured three days in March that may or may not have been typical, but they were dramatic. They were the day that the Clinton deposition in the Paula Jones case was leaked to the Washington Post, the day following, and that week's subsequent news magazines.

If you compare the same outlets in January versus March on this story, (eliminating the Sunday shows and Larry King Live from our earlier January universe because they are not included in March), the news media seemed to be moving more toward the use of named sources and away from punditry, especially at certain news organizations.

In January, more than one in three of all statements by journalists (37%) were either reporter analysis or punditry. In the three days studied in March, the level of analysis and punditry had declined noticeably to one in four remarks (26%).

And this came at a moment, during the release of the Clinton deposition, when the news might reasonably be expected to have called for a fair amount of analysis, or certainly invited a significant amount of punditry.

The shift suggests that at least incrementally the press did react to complaints by the public and critics that the media were getting ahead of the facts.

When it came to what was reported, perhaps not surprisingly, the most commonly reported topics concerned either elements from Clinton's deposition or Vernon Jordan's simultaneous appearance before the grand jury. The three most commonly reported statements involved the leaked Clinton deposition, who asked Vernon Jordan to help Monica Lewinsky and questions about whether Clinton was dissembling.

What We Looked At

For this second part, the study measured a snapshot of media in the first week of March, (six weeks later than its initial snapshot). On March 5 and 6, it looked at the three commercial broadcast nightly newscasts, CNN's The World Tonight, prime time magazines, any relevant segments of Charlie Rose, Nightline, the morning news shows, the front section coverage of the New York Times, Los Angeles Times, St. Louis Post Dispatch, the Washington Post and the Washington Times. Included also were the following Monday's Time and Newsweek. The study this time also added the News Hour with Jim Lehrer and the coverage of the Associated Press on March 5, 6 and January 23.

Based on ratings, influence and the degree to which their work found their way into other reports, the goal was to represent a fair picture of how Americans learned about the story.

For the tabloids, the study looked at the edition or broadcast on March 5 and 6 or the corresponding weekly edition of the supermarket Star, National Enquirer, New York Post, Geraldo and Inside Edition. As a basis of comparison, we also looked at the tabloid universe for the week of January 23.

In order to more thoroughly and accurately record press performance, the study did not just measure stories, since most contained more than one key point. It measured instead the key assertions inside stories. Thus in a piece stating that Monica Lewinsky alleged having sexual relations with the president and that Clinton denied that allegation, these two statements were measured separately.

The goal of this second snapshot was to answer three questions: How specifically was the press characterizing anonymous sourcing? Had the coverage changed from the first week of the story over the next few weeks? At a time when people talk about "tabloidization" of the news media, how different was the tabloid press on these questions?

In writing this report, we have excluded one category of news outlets, the Sunday talk shows, that were part of the original January sample so that March and January comparisons can be made. The Sunday talk shows were not monitored in the March sample. As a result, there are some cases where numbers for January vary slightly from those cited in the earlier report.

The study was designed by the Committee of Concerned Journalists and executed by Lee Ann Brady of Princeton Survey Research Associates.

(We have excluded one program from the comparison here, because the level of punditry by journalists on the show was so extreme that it skewed the numbers of the entire study. To make the comparisons meaningful, we

have set it aside as a special case. On the days studied in March, 69% of what appeared on Larry King Live was punditry, amounting to two thirds of all the punditry encountered in the study.)

Anonymous Sources

There were other shifts in coverage, some of which may reflect the Clinton deposition.

The use of anonymous sources at least during the moment of the leaked deposition had dropped, from 24% to 12%. More specifically, the reliance on a single anonymous source declined from 9% of all reportage in the first week to 4% in the three days studied in March.

Not surprisingly, the reliance on other media jumped from 14% to 33%, clearly because people were citing the Washington Post.

Types of News Outlets

Tabloids

The breakdown of coverage in the tabloid press differed from the more serious press only slightly. Whereas the serious press in March relied on named sources 28% percent of the time, the tabloid press did so in four out of ten statements (41%).

The serious press relied on anonymous sourcing 12% of the time in March, and the tabloid press did so 21% of the time.

The serious press and the tabloid press had the same amount of analytical reporting in March (18%).

When it came to punditry, the tabloid and the serious press were also not far apart, (8% serious and 11% tabloid).

What these comparisons do not capture is broad differences in tone. Because such judgments are often subjective, we chose not to make those sorts of comparisons in this study.

Sources and Attribution by News Genre, March 5 & 6							
	Named Sources	Multiple Unnamed	Single Unnamed	Other Media*	Journalist Analysis	Journalist Punditry	Total
	%	%	%	%	%	%	%
Newspapers	32	8	3	36	19	2	100
Morning News	23	6	1	42	17	11	100
Evening News	31	18	9	16	16	11	100
Print Magazines	19	6	10	21	21	23	100
AP Wire	34	8	3	44	10	0	100
The News Hour	29	0	0	43	21	7	100
Tabloids	41	12	9	9	18	11	100

* "other media" included the leaked Clinton deposition

Newspapers

While most types of news outlets were moving away from analysis and punditry (punditry is defined as opinion, speculation and judgment by reporters not attributed or supported by any reporting) only newspapers seemed to buck the trend, perhaps because understanding the Clinton deposition invited or even required some analysis.

The level of analysis, that is interpretation attributed to some reporting so that readers could judge for themselves how to evaluate it, rose noticeably in every paper studied, from 12% in January to 19% in the days studied in March.

Some news outlets appeared to change how they were covering the story more than others. The Washington Post, which stood out for its aggressive use of unnamed sources in the first week of the story, moved away from that approach somewhat, even while it was breaking the Clinton deposition from an unnamed source.

Its reliance on named sources rose from one in seven statements in January (16%) to more than one in four in March (28%).

In contrast, in January, six in ten statements (64%) in the Washington Post came from anonymous sources.

In March, even if you add the leaked Clinton deposition and anonymous source reporting into one category for the Washington Post (since the Post broke the deposition based on anonymous source), anonymous sourcing dropped by a third in the Post to four in ten statements (43%). Moreover,

the leaked deposition accounted for three quarters of that.

The other newspapers studied relied somewhat less on named sources in March than in January, though again this was likely because they were reacting to the leaked deposition story.

Associated Press, Level of Sourcing			
	<i>January</i>	<i>March</i>	<i>Combined</i>
Named sources	61%	34%	51%
Multiple unnamed sources	7	8	8
Single unnamed source	11	3	8
Other media/Deposition	7	44	21
Journalist analysis	12	10	11
Journalist punditry	2	0	1
Total	100	100	100

The Associated Press was added to the second round of the study because of the degree to which its coverage appeared in radio, TV and newspaper accounts around the country.

In March, the AP relied on named sources about the same as newspapers, (34% versus 32% for newspapers), and on anonymous sources the same amount as newspapers (both 11%). But it engaged in less analysis than newspapers (10% versus 19%) and, at least on the two days studied, in no punditry.

Overall, combining the AP coverage studied in both January and March, versus newspapers in January and March, the AP relied more on named sources and less on anonymous sources than newspapers and engaged in slightly less analysis.

Both engaged in only a negligible amount of punditry.

The News Hour

The News Hour was added to the study because it has some of the most strict rules about the use of anonymous sources and journalists engaging in commentary.

The News Hour did not use any anonymous sourcing on the days in the study.

When it came to named sources, reporting based on such sourcing accounted for about as much of the coverage as it did on the other evening newscasts

(29% versus 31% for the others).

Actually, the PBS program engaged in more analysis among reporters, though this occurred in roundtable sessions rather than taped reports (21% versus 16% for other evening newscasts).

The News Hour did engage in punditry on the nights studied, though less than other evening newscasts (7% versus 11%).

Morning Shows

In the first study, we discovered that morning news programs (Today, GMA and CBS This Morning) have markedly different standards for approaching hard news. They relied less on reporting and more on commentary than the evening news.

That had changed somewhat by March. The level of commentary on the morning shows on this story declined from 40% in January to 28% in March.

More specifically, analysis dropped from 22% to 17%. Punditry dropped from 18% of the reportage to 11%.

Prime Time Magazines

The prime time magazines, which leaped on the story in January, had lost much of their interest by March. Even during the extraordinary moment of the leaked Clinton deposition, the three network prime time magazines that aired those nights did not cover the story.

Network Evening News

The nightly newscasts also shifted in the way they covered the story. In January, 44% of all the coverage was commentary, either reporter analysis attributed to some reporting or outright punditry. In March, even in the wake of the Clinton deposition that might have invited analysis (and did in print), the level of commentary on the evening network newscasts dropped by more than a third to just 27%.

Specifically, the level of analysis on the network nightly newscasts declined from 32% of all reporting in January to 16% in the days studied in March. The level of punditry remained roughly the same, 12% in January, 11% in March.

Comparisons between individual newscasts are unwise here because the coverage had subsided to the point that the numbers of statements studied per newscast are relatively small.

Print News Magazines

Time and Newsweek also showed some shift in their coverage, at least in the way they covered this story in their March 16 issues from the way they covered it on Feb. 10.

The level of analysis in January was 41%, the highest by far of any type of news outlet. That subsided to 21%. But the level of un-attributed punditry rose in Time and Newsweek over the earlier time frame, from 17% in January to 23% in March. While that increase may not seem large, it is interesting that it is the only type of news outlet to see an increase in punditry.

Does Specificity Equal Quality?

Having a more detailed characterization of sources is no guarantee that a story is accurate. Some stories that have held up well have barely characterized the sources. The Washington Post's publication of the details of Clinton's deposition in the Paula Jones litigation effectively offered no guidance at all about the source--even as to whether it was a person, a document or whether the reporter had watched a video of the interrogation. Yet the level of detail and texture in the story raised little doubt that the reporter had an extraordinarily comprehensive account of the event to work from, and no one has substantially challenged the accuracy of the story.

Stories like the Clinton deposition, however, are fairly unique. Most journalism of this sort comes in drips and drabs, and journalists acknowledge they often rely on the vagaries of instinct and experience to decide whether a source is on the level.

The *Los Angeles Times* had numerous sources outlining Monica Lewinsky's affair with her high school drama teacher days before that story broke, but decided not to publish because "the allegation required a high level of confirmation"--preferably the teacher or Lewinsky themselves--and the paper did not have either, according to the paper's Washington Bureau Chief, Doyle McManus. What's more, there was the question of "relevance," whether Lewinsky's sexual history had anything to do with her potential credibility. The story eventually broke when the teacher went public.

The paper similarly held off running another story that other news organizations eventually went with: the allegation that Lewinsky had a blue dress that contained DNA evidence of an affair with the President. "It was left out because of insufficient evidence," a taped conversation that the paper's reporters hadn't themselves heard, and which may or may not reflect the truth, McManus said.

New York Times Washington Bureau Chief Michael Oreskes recalled a moment when the paper was ready to go with an explosive story about Lewinsky and the President that "several sources swore was true." On deadline, one of his reporters came into his office with a sinking feeling about it. Something about the way the sources were talking made him uncomfortable. Based largely on that reporter's gut instinct, Oreskes said, the paper held off.

The story proved problematic when published elsewhere, and Oreskes credits his reporter for persuading the paper not to publish.

"We've exercised restraint and we're not sorry about it," agreed Baltimore Sun bureau chief Paul West, who cited still others cases at his paper.

These examples demonstrate also that the press may have often demonstrated more restraint than is obvious from what the audiences see. Yet public perceptions of press coverage of events may be more heavily shaped by the worst cases than by the best.

How a source might know information and what if any bias the source may also take on added significance when the source is characterizing an event like a conversation or a relationship where the tone and context become critically important.

Consider the *New York Times* story that implied that the President might have tried to influence his secretary Betty Currie's grand jury testimony.

Part of that story hung on the characterization that the President might have tried to influence how Currie viewed his relationship with Monica Lewinsky by summoning Currie to the White House and "leading her through an account" of his relationship by asking Currie "a series of leading questions" about it.

The White House version is that Clinton was simply trying to judge whether his own testimony had been accurate, so he was checking his recollection with Currie--not trying to manipulate her.

To weigh these different versions, it makes a significant difference whether the sources for the Times story, described as "lawyers familiar with (Currie's) account," are working for Currie, Kenneth Starr and Paula Jones or someone else.

The journalist's instinct for full disclosure alone might suggest news organizations should try to offer the most specific characterization of a source possible so that readers have the most information to judge the accuracy of the news.

The fact that news organizations have not done so might suggest that reporters have ceded too much power to sources in negotiating ground rules.

It might also suggest that in an increasingly competitive atmosphere, news organizations are willing to bargain more freely to get stories.

But if being more specific about a source would make readers or viewers more skeptical about the story, perhaps because the source might appear biased, that may also be a signal to the news organization that the story hasn't been adequately sourced.

Methodology

Selection of Broadcasts and Publications

Newspapers, magazines, news broadcasts and tabloids were selected on an ad hoc basis to provide a snapshot of nationally influential media, keeping in mind the importance of audience, ownership and editorial diversity. The dates studied in March were selected at random in advance.

Newspaper, magazine and print tabloid stories were either downloaded in their entirety from the NEXIS database or were clipped from the publication in which they originally appeared. (Note: when the NEXIS database produced similar stories from the same newspapers, but different editions, the longer of the two stories was coded.)

Broadcast stories were coded from one of the three sources: transcripts acquired via network websites; professional transcript services; or videotapes of broadcasts.

Coding

Coders analyzed each news story in its entirety, identifying the initial appearance of any individual statement or allegation within that story: these each became a case. (A news story was likely to contain multiple statements and therefore, multiple cases.) Coders next analyzed all references to the particular case within said story, and the sourcing attributed in each instance. When a statement or allegation had multiple appearances within one story, it was considered only one case. Coders then identified all attribution cited by the journalist, and coded the case on the basis of the highest level of sourcing that appeared.

Source Characterization

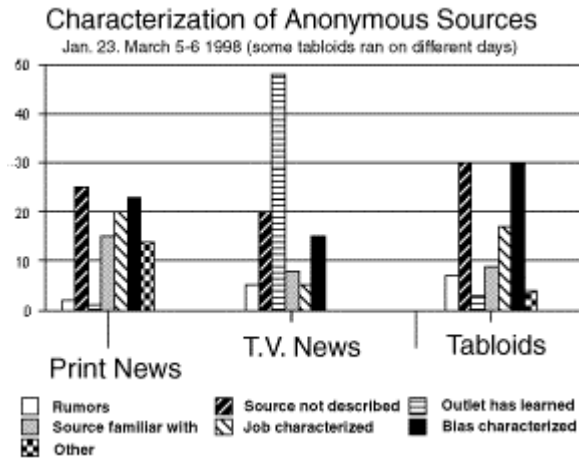
Each time a statement or allegation had an anonymous source as its strongest level of sourcing, it was then coded to see how the sourcing was characterized.

Intercoder Reliability

Intercoder reliability measures the rate at which two coders, operating independently of one another, code the same material in the same way. This monitoring occurred throughout the coding process, and no significant systematic errors were found.

The report was written by Tom Rosenstiel, John Mashek and Amy Mitchell of the Committee of Concerned Journalists. Numbers in the charts may not add to 100 due to rounding.

Table about Characterization of Anonymous Sources



	Print	T.V.	Total Tabloids
Rumors	2%	5%	7%
Source not described	25	20	30
Outlet has learned	1	48	3
Source familiar w/ x	15	8	9
Job Characterized	20	5	17
Bias Characterized	23	15	30
Other	14	0	4
Total	100	100	100

Number and percent of statements anonymous statements by media type:

Print News 88---20% of all statements

T.V. News 61---25% of all statements

Total Tabloids 76---30% of all statements

To study the characterization of anonymous sources, we created a list of ways the sources were described by the major news outlets. The complete list follows, broken down within the broad categories we write about in the text.

List of Characterizations of Anonymous Sources

Rumors	It's rumored It's believed
Sources Said	A source said Unidentified source Source qualified--? Various sources
Outlet has learned	We (news organization) understand We have learned/been told by a source/sources I (reporter) understand I have learned/been told I have learned/been told by a source/sources
Source familiar with X	Source close to the investigation Source familiar with Lewinsky tapes Source who knows Lewinsky Someone who knows Tripp
Job Characterized	Arkansas State Trooper Justice Dept. source/official Pentagon official/source White House Source White House staff Capitol Hill source
Bias Characterized	Source Close to Starr Republican source

	Democratic source Supporter/friend of the President Supporter/friend of Hillary Clinton Friend of Monica Lewinsky Supporter/friend of Linda Tripp Supporter/friend of Vernon Jordon Clinton's lawyer(s) Lewinsky's lawyer Tripp's lawyer Jordon's lawyer Jones' lawyer(s)
Other	This a default category for characterizations that did not fit into any of the categories listed above. Any characterization that appeared five times or more was added to the list.

Table about Newspapers' Level of Sourcing

<i>LA Times</i>	<i>NY Times</i>	<i>Wash Post</i>	<i>Wash Times</i>	<i>St. Louis Post</i>	<i>AP Wire</i>
Named Sources 29%	41%	28%	39%	19%	34%
Mltple anonymous sources 5	24	7	6	0	8
Single anonymous source* 7	0	36	0	0	3
Other media cited 34	21	7	27	75	44
Analysis w/ sourcing 19	14	19	27	6	10
Punditry--no sourcing 5	0	3	0	0	0
Total 100	100	100	100	100	100

* for all media except the *Washington Post*, statements attributed to the leaked deposition were included in 'other media cited' because they were attributed to the *Washington Post*. For the *Washington Post*, the leaked deposition was a single anonymous source.

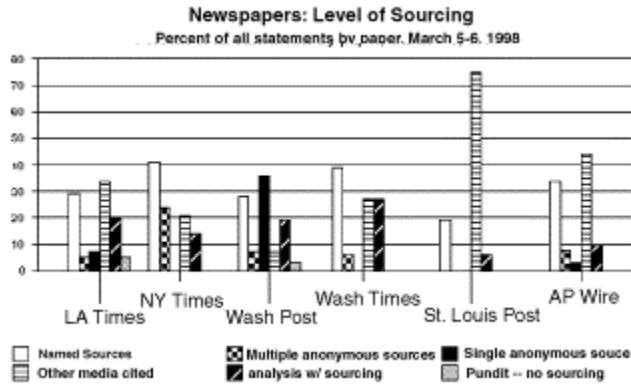


Table about Total Number of Statements or Allegations by News Outlet

	Late January	Early March
Network Evening News		
ABC World News Tonight	78	19
CBS Evening News	72	8
NBC Nightly News	70	10
CNN The World Today	48	8
PBS Lehrer News Hour	3	14
Network Morning Shows		
Good Morning America	116	13
CBS This Morning	54	25
Today	136	52
Network/Late Night		
Nightline	60	12
Charlie Rose	40	0
Network/Prime Time Mags		
Prime Time Live	15	no broadcast
Public Eye w/ B. Gumbel	11	no broadcast
20/20	18	0
48 Hours	38	0
Dateline	24	0
Daily Newspapers		
LA Times	68	41
New York Times	51	29
St. Louis Post	44	16

Washington Times	89	33
Washington Post	69	58
Print Newsmagazines		
Time	84	36
Newsweek	88	16
AP Wire	95	59
Tabloid News Outlets		
National Enquirer	28	12
Star Magazine	28	5
New York Post	47	34
Geraldo	37	10
Inside Edition	30	0
Total	1541	510
		= 2051

In phase II of the study we went back and looked at Jan. 23 again to see how anonymous sources were characterized. We added the *Associated*, the *News Hour* and selected tabloids to the universe. Then we looked at the all of these outlets for March 5 and 6, plus that week's *Time* and *Newsweek*.