

Eye on Washington by Myra Collirio

Media credit Gorby for Eastern Europe

Center of news shifts overseas as Bush's blizzard of words provides little content for reporters.

The Center for Media and Public Affairs in Washington D.C. publishes a monthly magazine based on monitoring the balance, or lack of balance, of coverage of issues that appears on the major television networks. The magazine *Media Monitor's* reports frequently count the number of jokes told by Johnny Carson, for example, about Republican versus Democratic political figures. (It comes as no surprise that Vice President Dan Quayle has repeatedly been reported as the subject of the highest number of jokes by Carson and other TV comics).

The Center characterizes itself as a non-partisan, non-profit organization that conducts scientific analysis of news and entertainment media. While the statistics provided by the Center provide a certain insight into the "slant" the media places on political events, its "bean counting" approach does not reflect the more subtle ways in which major network programming advances their pet causes. Issues such as environmentalism, animal rights, abortion, and euthanasia are so deeply interwoven into the fabric of almost all the most popular situation comedies, not to mention the "news magazine" and nightly news broadcasts, that they are hard to ferret out and clearly identify.

It is this kind of "ambience" of values which has the most insidious effect on shaping the values of the television-viewing public, especially of the young. Still, the *Media Monitor* approach does at least document, with hard numbers, some reflections of trends of bias in network coverage.

Its most recent study was on the ways in which the major networks

have explained the rapidly unfolding events in Eastern Europe. Most revealing, according to a *Media Monitor* press release, "TV news sources gave Gorbachov credit for the reforms in Eastern Europe five times as often as they credited the Reagan-Bush defense policies." The findings, based on an analysis of 1,068 stories on Eastern Europe broadcast on the ABC, CBS, and NBC nightly news during 1989 (total airtime 27 hours, 48 minutes), included:

- Events in Eastern Europe received more TV coverage than any other news topic in 1989. The 1,068 stories on the region made up 7% of all the news broadcast throughout the year on the network evening news shows.

- Gorbachov was praised 20 times for helping along the fall of Communism in Eastern Europe. Reagan-Bush defense policies were cited only four times as contributing to the changes.

- Coverage of German reunification was balanced (50% in favor, 50% opposed), but opinion varied greatly between networks: 78% in favor on CBS, only 43% on ABC and NBC. What confounds journalists in Washington is the fact that most of the important news being made now is coming from outside the U.S.

It is slowly beginning to dawn on the White House press corps that there is no real dividend in the unusual accessibility which President Bush has provided. While White House spokesman Marlin Fitzwater bragged that the President's March 13 press conference was his 43rd in less than 14 months in office, and the press confer-

ence, as usual, went on longer than most daily White House briefings, most reporters walked away from it shaking their heads. For all the verbiage, they were at a loss to figure out what, if any, substance, or news, had been provided.

Bush press opportunities are now regularly buried in the back pages of the major newspapers, and whatever news Bush might provide at his press briefings is increasingly being left to the reader to decide for himself from printed excerpts of the official transcript. Some reporters are already fondly recalling the days of President Reagan. "At least with Reagan, you could prod him to say something what would give a clue to what kind of gut reaction he had to an issue," one veteran said. "With Bush you get buried under a blizzard of words, and come away with almost nothing of real substance."

For all the legacy of Reagan the actor, as the master of media manipulation, especially when aided by Michael Deaver, the wizard of the ideal "photo opportunity," White House journalists are finding that Bush is proving a more skilled media manipulator than his predecessor. His first-name-basis style of dealing with reporters has disarmed the media from the sharp-edged approach well-paid White House reporters are supposedly famous for.

Bush's approach has had the effect of causing these reporters to worry more about whether they will continue to have the high degree of access they've enjoyed to date, and so they've become veritable kittens. Bush periodically threatens to cut off accessibility if coverage does not improve. Most journalists react predictably to such ploys, although it is slowly occurring to some that they wouldn't be much worse off for news if Bush went completely silent.