

# Tuning Out Traditional News

*With More Coverage Available, Public Seems Interested in Less*

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By Howard Kurtz  
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LUTHERVILLE, Md.—Elizabeth Yarbrough, a school cafeteria worker here, hadn't heard that Republicans in Congress want to end the federal school lunch program and turn it over to the states.

She doesn't know the name of her congressman. And she's "not real familiar" with the "Contract With America," which Republicans made the centerpiece of the first 100 days they controlled the House. She watches some television news and listens to Howard Stern, but buys the Baltimore Sun only on Sundays, for the want ads.

"I unfortunately don't pay much attention," said Yarbrough, 35. "I haven't seen any improvement of anything in this country for so long. It doesn't really matter who's in power. The little guy is just squashed like a bug."

It seems, on the surface, like a paradox. At a time when there are more media outlets providing more news and information than ever

before, why is so little of it getting through to a sizable segment of the population?

The plain fact is that much of the American public has simply tuned out the news—that is, the kind of traditional news, heavily laden with politicians and official proceedings, routinely covered by the mainstream press. These people see journalists as messengers from a world that doesn't much interest them.

Some of the reasons for this disconnect emerged in a recent series of conversations here in the Baltimore suburbs. Some people say they are simply too busy with work and family to follow the news. Others are rather suspicious of the media. Still others see a depressing sameness to the drumbeat of headlines.

"If they'd put more happy stories in the news, I'd read it more," said Rhonda Burris, 28, a clerk for the Baltimore welfare department who also cleans offices at night. "It's usually someone got killed, someone's baby fell out the window. I don't want to hear it."

See MEDIA, A6, Col. 1

## MEDIA, From A1

Jean Langston, 44, an insurance claims examiner who often works a second job until midnight, is too busy to bother with newspapers. "I've bought papers and carried them around for three or four days and never gotten to it," she says.

Len Pross, 48, a letter carrier who likes talk radio, finds most news organizations slanted. "Too many news people want to be Rush Limbaughs," he says. "The news is chopped up into bits and pieces. You don't get a whole story."

Norman Brown, 51, a furniture salesman, says he is too busy for daily news reports—but he makes time for such programs as "The Oprah Winfrey Show" and "Geraldo!" "They have interesting topics, daughters running around with their mother's boyfriend. It's entertaining," he says.

Some of this lack of interest may stem from the way that media organizations define and package the news, news that many people find irrelevant to their daily lives. Some of it may involve a new generation of well-educated, well-compensated journalists who identify more with society's elite than with working-class Americans.

But much of it has to do with a

growing sense of alienation from the political system, and the belief that the major media are an integral part of that system. Some of those interviewed say they are not angry at the press, but disgusted with what the press, in their eyes, represents.

"A vicious circle may be at work: cynical coverage tailored to a cynical public, which makes the public more cynical and begets more cynical coverage," Paul Starobin of the National Journal wrote recently in *Columbia Journalism Review*.

All this has contributed to a striking degree of ignorance about national affairs. According to recent polls for various news organizations:

- Only half of those surveyed could name Newt Gingrich as the speaker of the House, although 64 percent knew that Judge Lance Ito is presiding over the O.J. Simpson trial.

- Just four in 10 are familiar with the Republicans' Contract With America, despite an avalanche of publicity since the 1994 campaign.

- Only half know that Congress approved the North American Free Trade Agreement, one of the biggest political battles of the Clinton presidency.

- Only 24 percent said Congress has cut the federal budget deficit by billions of dollars; nearly half said it had

not. Since Clinton took office the deficit has declined by nearly \$100 billion.

- Just one in three said Congress had raised taxes on the very rich; half said it had not. The Clinton economic package raised income taxes on the wealthiest 1 percent of taxpayers.

Political strategists, whose job is to break through the media static,

say news reports are competing for attention with the likes of "Roseanne," "Hard Copy" and "Cops," which apparently resonate more with some viewers than Dan Rather, Tom Brokaw and Peter Jennings, the main networks' nightly news anchors.

"The problem with the Contract With America is there's no visual," said Frank Luntz, the Republican pollster who helped shape the contract. "There's no blood, no guns going off, no policemen knocking down people's doors. There's nothing to make people look up and stamp it on their brain."

Many analysts say the media, with their emphasis on conflict, convey more heat than light about public issues. They say too many journalists cover public affairs as a sort of insid-



Elizabeth Yarbrough, at home with her husband, Norm, says she cannot identify her congressman. "I haven't seen any improvement of anything in this country for so long," she said. "It doesn't really matter who's in power."

BY MARY LOU FOY—THE WASHINGTON POST

er's game in which all politicians are assumed to be scheming and devious.

Others see the press as a willing conveyor belt for propaganda. "There's a lot of misinformation in political campaigns that gets quoted in the press without the press providing a refereeing function," said Kathleen Hall Jamieson, dean of the Annenberg School of Communications at the University of Pennsylvania. "The he-said-she-said style of journalism minimizes the likelihood the public will know whether he or she is telling the truth."

On issue after issue, news stories—such as those reporting that Clinton raised income taxes on the wealthy—seem to have little impact. A Wall Street Journal poll last year found that 43 percent expected to pay more in income taxes. Even among those making less than \$20,000—a group whose taxes were cut—26 percent expected to pay more.

"There was a largely knee-jerk response that whenever government does something, I'm going to end up

paying the bill," said Stanley Greenberg, Clinton's pollster.

When it comes to news, the country is split along demographic lines. Those who are vitally interested in the sort of news carried by the Baltimore Sun or other papers are older, more affluent and better educated.

According to a survey by the Uni-

versity of Chicago's National Opinion Research Center, only a third of those under 30 read a newspaper every day, compared to three-quarters of those over 65. Less than half of those without a high school diploma read a paper every day, compared to more than two-thirds of those who have attended graduate school. And regular readers include fewer than four in 10 of those earning \$15,000 to \$20,000 a year, but seven in 10 of those earning more than \$60,000.

Newer forms of media are filling the vacuum. Many people who don't bother with newspapers listen to talk radio or watch daytime talk shows or tabloid television. These programs deal in a more emotionally charged way than the mainstream press with such issues as sex, race, welfare and affirmative action.

The Washington Post recently asked a research firm to select a dozen Baltimore-area residents who do not read a newspaper every day and are interested in talk radio or daytime talk shows. These people, none of whom has a college degree, seemed distinctly uninterested in the Republican revolution on Capitol Hill. Although the Contract With America has received an avalanche of news coverage, most knew nothing about it.

Clarence Lowery, 65, a retired asbestos worker, could not name any provision in the contract but nonetheless dismissed it as "politician lies. They always say they're gonna do something and they can't."

Rhonda Burris, the city clerk, knew only that the Republicans are

"trying to cut this and cut that. . . . It doesn't seem like they can do anything for me. They just talk."

Melissa Sharrow, 32, a sales representative, thought the contract involved trading with other countries. "I don't pay much attention [to politics] because it upsets me," she said.

Clearly, the daily clamor of charges and countercharges between the White House and Congress is but a faint echo by the time it penetrates the lives of many Americans.

Over dinner one recent evening, four Baltimore County residents said they were unaware of the recent congressional battle over term limits, or that the House had voted on it the previous month. "That's one of the things Newt won't bring up now because he wants to keep his job," said Len Pross, the letter carrier.

Still, some news manages to permeate pop culture. All those at the dinner knew that Gingrich's mother had told CBS's Connie Chung that her son had called Hillary Rodham Clinton "a bitch." And all knew that Clinton had said on television that he wears briefs, not boxers.

Elizabeth Yarbrough recalled Gingrich saying on television that "women could not possibly go into battle because they'd get infections in the trenches," as she put it. But she could not identify any policy Gingrich advocates.

Many people trust news reports far less than their own experience, or what they have heard from acquaintances and relatives. "I have a

friend who works for the government and he says he hardly does anything and he gets a raise every year," said Norman Brown, the furniture salesman.

Yarbrough has two children, and her husband is unemployed after working 15 years for a bakery equipment company that moved to Florida. About stories she reads on an improving economy, Yarbrough said, "I don't believe that. I go to the gro-

cery store and see the price of everything going up. My husband calls these places, there's no contracts, no jobs."

Several people suggested that journalists and politicians do not understand the welfare issue. Jean Langston, the claims examiner, said her sister, a school secretary with four children, had to go on welfare temporarily after losing her job. "They don't know about these situations," Langston said.

Many people tend to remember colorful news reports that confirm what they already believe. Pross, a Christian activist who is educating his 11-year-old at home, said he heard on the conservative radio show "Focus on the Family" that Hillary Clinton is working on a U.N. treaty under which "children's rights could supersede the rights of parents."

Burris said she recalls reading that members of Congress receive free private school scholarships for their children. Yarbrough still talks about a pair of "PrimeTime Live" reports on government waste that are more than two years old.

"They were showing these people who do idiotic things like measure the flow rate of ketchup, making \$40,000 to \$50,000 a year," she said. "I never realized there were that many unnecessary jobs."

Yarbrough also recalls reading in a newspaper that "they were thinking of getting rid of this department where they sit around collecting \$80,000-a-year paychecks for doing absolutely nothing." Reminded that as a cafeteria worker she is also a government employee, she said: "I'm feeding kids. I'm doing something productive."

Many of these folks grew up reading the Baltimore Sun or Baltimore News American in their parents' homes. But somewhere along the way they lost the habit.

"A newspaper is not something I relish reading," Pross said. "It's

much easier to sit in front of the tube and have someone tell you something." Langston said it "just drives me crazy" when front-page stories jump to an inside page.

When she was growing up, Langston says, her father would chew over the news with the egg man and the bread man as they made deliveries to the house. Today, she and others say, they almost never discuss politics with friends or relatives.

Their lives revolve around work, children and church, not news cycles. Burris is always driving her children to sporting events and

dance recitals. For Langston, who cares for her daughter and niece, it's dance practice and choir rehearsal.

Brown is single and self-employed. "My job takes up all my time," he said. "I have a tremendous amount of paperwork. I listen to the news, but it goes in one ear and out the other. You hear the Republicans and the Democrats saying the same things."

They get their media fix on the run, in limited doses. Langston keeps an eye on "Good Morning America" or "Today" while getting ready for work, and reads Good Housekeeping on the supermarket checkout line. Pross listens to Rush Limbaugh while delivering the mail. Burris watches "Entertainment Tonight" and reads People because she likes to keep up with the movie stars. Brown reads Time—"I like the pictures"—and Money, and listens to Baltimore radio host Tom Marr.

They use words like "repetitive" and "monotonous" to describe the news. And they have pet peeves that seem to encapsulate their doubts about the media.

Pross says he finds ABC's Sam Donaldson "arrogant" and doesn't like the way he covers the White House, although Donaldson has been off that beat since 1989. Langston objects to the O.J. Simpson trial coverage. "The reporters give their opinions and it's as if he's already guilty," she said. "Because of the experience of black people and the problems we've had, we don't want to say he's guilty until we've seen all the facts."

Pross says he finds Limbaugh entertaining but that "I don't agree with him about everything. I don't like the way he puts down everyone just because they may be a liberal. Of course, that's what sells him. He's puffed up."

In this highly skeptical environment, few had kind words for the president. Burris said it seems like Hillary Clinton is running the White House. Yarbrough says she was excited by Bill Clinton during the 1992 campaign but that the last time he was on television, "I kind of wandered off and said, 'What else is on?'"

Like several of her neighbors, Yarbrough feels slightly guilty about being poorly informed. But, she said, "It's more trouble than it's worth to listen to the news and get your hopes up."