

Newspaper Adwatch Stories: Coming Back Strong

Results of an analysis of newspaper adwatch stories

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Released: Nov. 9, 2007

An analysis of 34 of the largest U.S. newspapers from 1992 through mid-2007 found that ad-watching is rebounding strongly, after hitting a low point in the 2000 presidential election.

Among the findings:

- **Ad-watching reached a new high in 2005/2006.** The most recent election cycle produced the most adwatch stories of any we analyzed. We found 336 news stories in the period that focused on expressing judgments about the factual accuracy of political ads.
- **Ad-watching hit a dramatic low during the 2000 presidential election.** We found only 94 adwatch stories during the 1999/2000 election cycle.
- **Most large newspapers now run adwatches, and the number is growing.** In 1992, 19 of our 34 papers ran at least one adwatch story. By the 2005/2006 midterm election cycle, the number had grown to 28 papers.
- **The most recent adwatchers are the most prolific.** *The Denver Post*, *Tampa Tribune* and *Sacramento Bee* ran no adwatch stories in 1992, but in 2006 combined to account for 72 adwatches.
- **Midterm election years attract more adwatch coverage than presidential elections.** Over the entire period we analyzed, midterm election cycles produced an average of 19 percent more adwatch stories than in presidential cycles.
- **Newspapers focus more attention on non-federal elections.** State, local and ballot elections accounted for 56 percent of all adwatch stories since 1992, compared with 41 percent for presidential and U.S. House and Senate races. The remaining 3 percent focused on ads for political issues such as U.S. Supreme Court confirmation fights.
- **And the 2006 winner is:** *The Columbus Dispatch*, which ran more adwatch stories in 2006 than any other newspaper in our study, producing a total of 69 adwatches during the election cycle.
- **The overall winner is:** *The Miami Herald*, which produced the most adwatches during the entire period, with 126.

What This Report Covers:

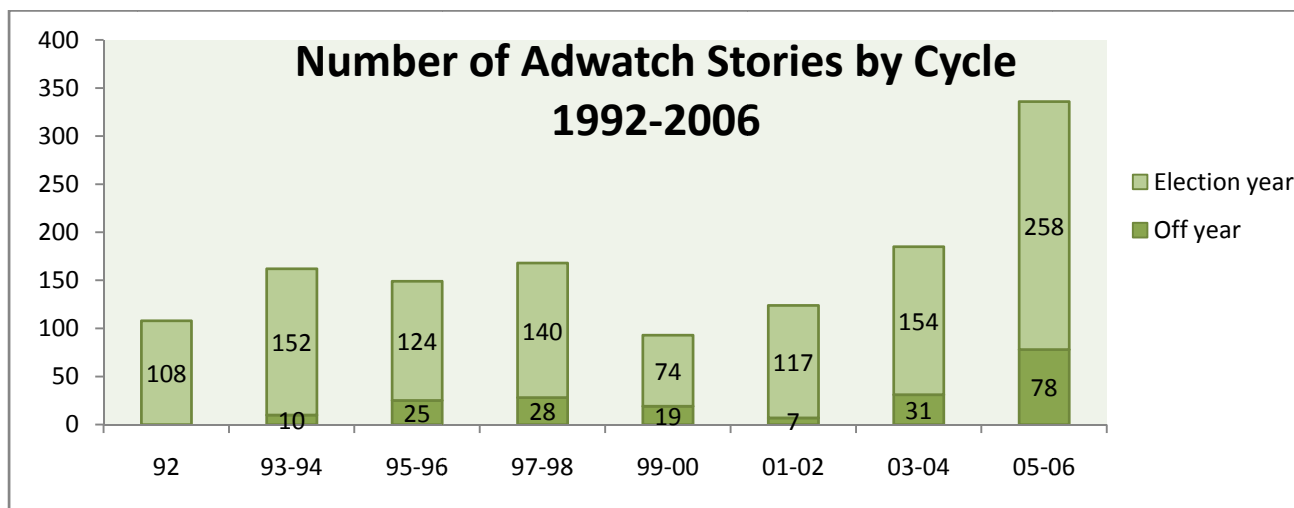
We counted the number of adwatch stories in 34 of the largest U.S. newspapers starting Jan. 1, 1992. These represent the largest newspapers whose full text is available in a searchable format for all years after 1991. Of the 44 newspapers with the largest current circulation, 10 were not included in this survey because searchable text is not available for the entire time period.

Using word searches, we pulled from these 34 newspapers all stories containing key words that are typical of those contained in adwatch stories. We then read each story and discarded those that did not fit our definition of an adwatch. We defined adwatch as a news story or editorial that expressed judgment about the factual accuracy of a claim made in a campaign advertisement or other political ad, including pure “issue” ads seeking to influence public opinion about a matter before Congress or the president.

For a full discussion of how this study was conducted see the “methodology” section.

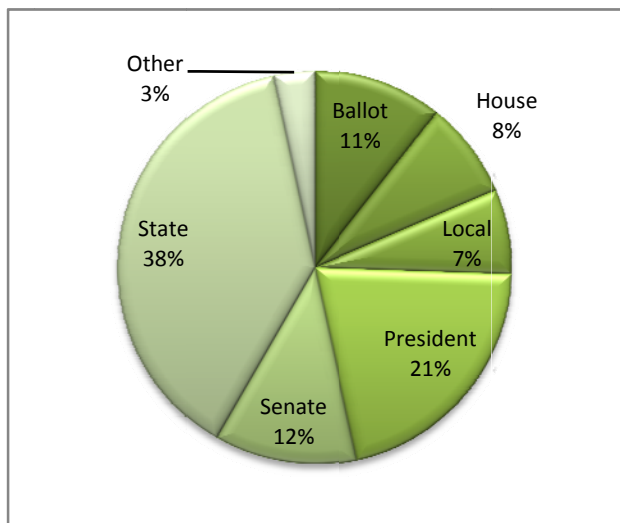
Detailed Findings

The number of newspaper adwatch articles has more than doubled since 1992, when the genre first became widespread. From 108 adwatch stories in that presidential election year, the total reached 258 in the midterm election year of 2006. But that simple comparison hardly tells the whole story.



(Note: Calendar year 1991 is not covered. Reaching back that far would have required us to drop five newspapers from the study because their text-searchable databases reach back only to 1992.)

A look at the accompanying chart reveals an uneven pattern, with the numbers of adwatch stories reaching a rough plateau through the midterm elections of 1993-1994, the presidential election cycle of 1995-1996 and the midterm election cycle of 1997-1998. Interest in adwatch stories then dropped off sharply, reaching a low in the presidential election cycle of 1999-2000. But the number of adwatch stories has since rebounded dramatically, particularly in the most recent midterm elections.



Non-federal Races Attract Most Adwatches

Our group of 34 large newspapers tended to focus more attention on state and local campaigns and issues than on federal campaigns.

They devoted **38 percent of all adwatch coverage to state election races, 11 percent to state ballot measures and an additional 7 percent to local elections**, for a total of 56 percent. This is not terribly surprising. Most newspapers serve cities, their suburbs and exurbs. A race for governor or mayor may attract as much if not more attention locally than a contest for the White House or a U.S. House or Senate seat.

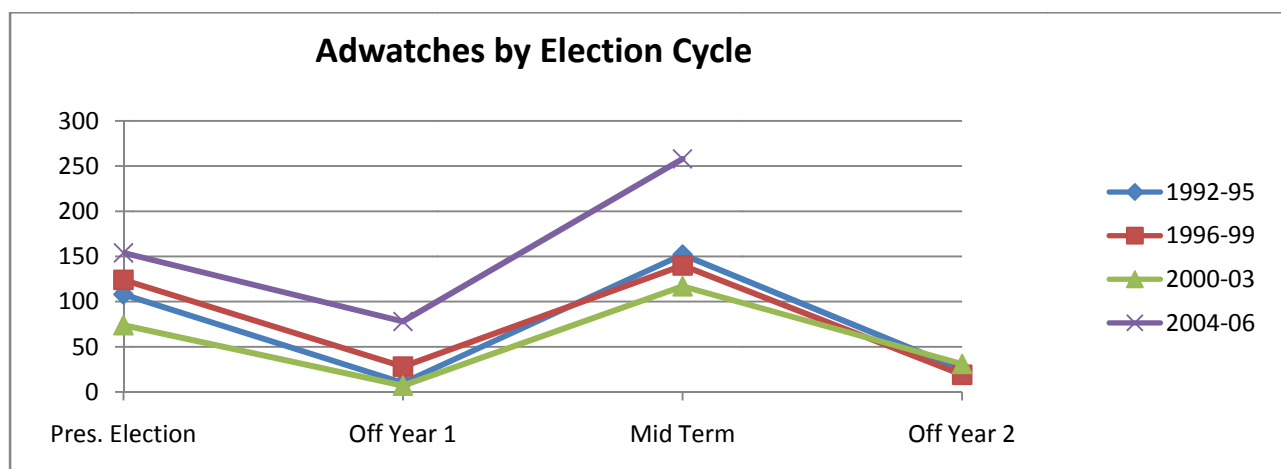
Of all adwatch stories we counted, **21 percent focused on presidential races, making that the second most common race type.** In addition, 12 percent were devoted to U.S. Senate races and only 8 percent to U.S. House elections, for a total of 41 percent for all elections at the federal level.

The final category of “other” is chiefly made up of critiques of ads aimed at influencing public opinion about a general political issue, such as a Supreme Court confirmation fight.

Midterm Elections Get More Coverage

Not surprising, in light of the strong focus on non-federal elections, is that midterm election cycles tend to attract more adwatch coverage than presidential election cycles. That is because 72 percent of states schedule their gubernatorial election contests in non-presidential years.

Even taking this pattern into account, a look at the accompanying chart shows that the current four-year cycle is remarkable for the number of adwatches in each year so far: 2004 saw the highest number for any presidential election year studied, 2005 the most for any off year following a presidential election, and 2006 the most for any midterm election.

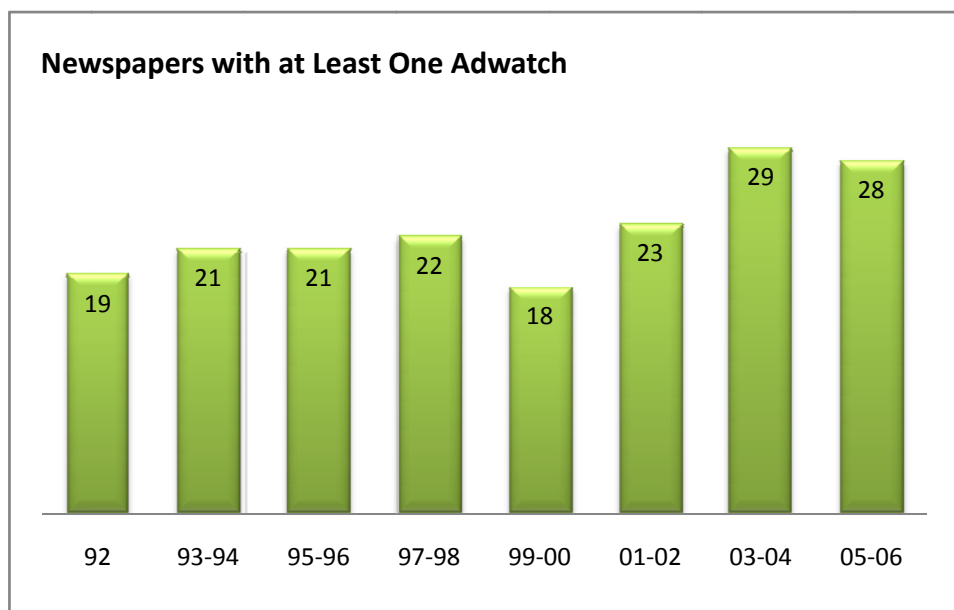


Of course, 2007 isn't over yet, and our results only cover the first half of the year. But it can be seen that the current trend is well above that of any previous period since 1992. The peak number in 2006 was no anomaly.

Industry Leaders

The number of papers running adwatches has grown: In 1992, 19 of 34 papers ran at least one adwatch story. By 2005/2006 the number was 28 papers.

And some of the newcomers to ad-watching are proving to be among the most prolific. In fact, three of the five most productive papers in the last election cycle didn't produce a



single adwatch back in 1992. But in 2006, those papers, the *Denver Post*, *Tampa Tribune* and *Sacramento Bee*, produced a total of 72 adwatches.

Top Adwatchers in 1992		Top Adwatchers in 2006	
Boston Globe	35	Columbus Dispatch	69
Miami Herald	12	Miami Herald	39
Orlando Sentinel	12	Sacramento Bee	26
Dallas Morning News	12	Tampa Tribune	25
Detroit Free Press	8	Denver Post	21
Rocky Mountain News	5	Orlando Sentinel	15

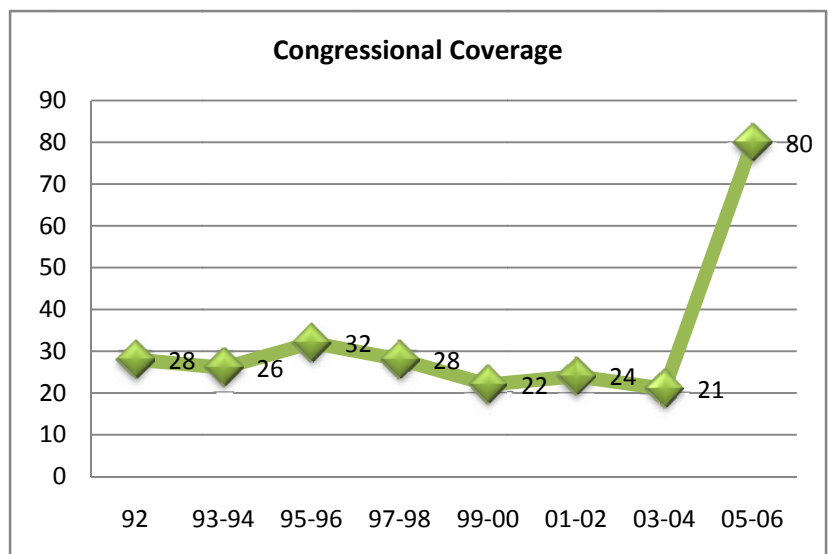
Regional papers have been the most aggressive adwatchers. Although we included the *New York Times*, *Wall Street Journal* and *Washington Post* among the 34 newspapers we studied, these national newspapers were not among the leaders in numbers of adwatch stories. The *Journal* produced only three such stories for the entire period, and the *Times* produced 11 that met our definition. The *Post* produced 63, placing it within the top third of our group, but its interest has waxed and waned. Prior to establishing its new feature “The Fact Checker” in September 2007, it had produced only five adwatch stories since 2003.

The most productive newspapers are more regional ones such as the *Miami Herald*, with 126 adwatch stories over the entire period of our study, the most of any newspaper. The *Herald* also produced 39 in 2006 alone, the second-highest total for that year. Also, the *Columbus Dispatch* stands out for running 69 adwatch stories last year, by far the highest number that year of any newspaper we studied. And even though it ran only one adwatch prior to 1999, the *Dispatch* now has a total of 106 for the entire period of the study, putting it in second place overall. The *Orlando Sentinel* ranked third overall for the entire period, with 102 adwatch stories.

Top Overall Producing Newspapers	Totals 1992-2007
Miami Herald	126
Columbus Dispatch	106
Orlando Sentinel	102
Sacramento Bee	96
Boston Globe	87

More Attention to House and Senate

Driving the surge in total adwatches during the 2005/2006 election cycle was an increased interest in House and Senate races. Stories about these congressional races showed the most dramatic growth, accounting for 80 adwatches. Adwatches of U.S. House and Senate races nearly quadrupled in the last cycle after holding fairly constant for the previous seven.



What We Counted

We used a conservative definition of “adwatch” for this study. We counted as “adwatches” only those in which the newspaper expressed a judgment about the accuracy of facts presented in a political ad.

We did *not* count as an “adwatch” stories that merely reported claims by a rival candidate that an ad was false or misleading, or other such “he said, she said” reporting. We also omitted many stories that the newspaper labeled as “Ad Watch” or “Spot Check” or something similar, but which did not actually express a judgment about factual accuracy. Some of this coverage follows a formula in which the reporter gives information about what the ad contains, about the political strategy behind it, or about the amount of money being spent on it. Unless such an article also expressed the author’s judgment about the factual accuracy of the ad with words such as “false,” “misleading,” “out of context,” or even “true,” we did not count it as an “adwatch” even if it was labeled as such. In very few cases, about 28, we found editorials that fit our definition of an adwatch, and we counted them. But the vast majority of adwatches appeared in the news columns of the papers we studied.

Methodology:

This study examined 34 of the 44 largest newspapers in the U.S. by circulation. These 34 papers were chosen because their full archives covering the period between January 1, 1992 and June 1 2007 were available through one of several newspaper databases: NewsBank, Lexis Nexis, or Factiva.

Article screening and coding took place over a period from June through August 2007. Three researchers were trained by the author, and their selections were reviewed and confirmed by the author.

We first designed a strategy for using keyword searches to identify all possible stories that might fit our definition of “adwatch.” This was done by reviewing all news stories published during the month of October, 2006 by the *Columbus Dispatch* and noting words that appeared in these stories consistently. Ultimately we settled on six words and phrases for our initial screening: “Ad watch,” “Fact check,” “Factcheck,” “Campaign ad,” “Political ad,” “Election ad.”

These six terms constituted a very wide net, as they brought up any story that mentioned a “political ad” or a “campaign ad” in any context. Among the 34 newspapers in our study, we found 7,693 articles that contained one or more of these terms. We then read each of these stories and found 1,336 that fit our definition of an “adwatch.”

We coded all 1,336 articles that met our criteria for word count, date, race season (primary/general), type of race (presidential, state, ballot, house, senate, local), page placement, among other metrics.

As a check on the reliability of our coding, we conducted a spot check. Three coders independently reviewed all 89 stories brought up by our initial keyword search for the San Francisco Chronicle for the years 2000 through 2006. Our primary coder, Allison Berkson, and the author of this study, Justin Bank, produced identical results, each judging the same 37 stories as meeting our definition of “adwatch.” A third coder, Stephen Simas, came up with only 34 that he judged to fit the definition, all of which also had been judged to be adwatches by the other two coders. This gives us confidence that a team of three coders, acting independently and resolving any disagreements on a “best of three” rule, would have produced nearly or exactly the same count of “adwatches” as a single coder.

The papers analyzed were: Oregonian, San Diego Union-Tribune, Denver Post, Rocky Mountain News, Sacramento Bee, Miami Herald, Orange County Register, Kansas City Star, San Jose Mercury News, New Orleans Times Picayune, South Florida Sun-Sentinel, Orlando Sentinel, Boston Herald, Pittsburgh Post-Gazette, Washington Post, Chicago Tribune, Boston Globe, Houston Chronicle, Philadelphia Inquirer, Chicago Sun-Times, Dallas Morning Star, Cleveland Plain Dealer, Detroit Free Press, Atlanta

Journal-Constitution, Minnesota Star Tribune, St. Petersburg Times, Columbus Dispatch, Milwaukee Journal Sentinel, San Antonio Express, St. Louis Post Dispatch, Tampa Tribune, New York Times, Wall Street Journal, USA Today.

All of the above newspapers were searched using the NewsBank database except for the following:

- The Wall Street Journal, New York Times, and USA Today were searched using Factiva.
- The Columbus Dispatch was searched using LexisNexis Academic.

We encountered an anomaly regarding the Miami Herald: the NewsBank database returned 48 entries titled “Ad Watch” but without any actual story content. We were unable to access the content of these missing articles through other means and we omitted them from our study. These results covered a period from Oct. 31, 1992 through November 5, 1994. There are another 13 stories from this time period that did have full text and were coded as adatches.

Special Thanks

Special thanks are due to Allison Berkson, the principal research assistant for this study, who spent the summer of 2007 at the FactCheck.org offices in Washington DC combing through newspaper databases with tireless dedication. We also thank Carolyn Auwaerter and Andrew Reich for assistance in coding articles. Stephen Simas was especially helpful in constructing the study and in its early implementation. D’Angelo Gore assisted in formatting files and proofreading data in the final stages.