

Political coverage by media ignores issues, study says

PHILADELPHIA—If readers and viewers who follow media coverage of political candidates have a nagging sense that somehow, meaningful discussion of the issues gets lost in the process, they're not far wrong, according to a study of media campaign coverage published in the spring, 1976, issue of the *Journal of Communication*.

John Carey, who studied closely the national media coverage during the four weeks preceding the 1974 congressional elections, wrote that the campaign was covered like "a professional football contest."

Mr. Carey, a doctoral candidate at the University of Pennsylvania's Annenberg School of Communications (publisher of the *Journal*), noted that media unanimously seemed to assign the highest news value to assessments of campaign progress, and secondly to analyses of campaign strategies. Major issues ranked poorly. Inflation, according to Mr. Carey's quantitative review, ranked 14th among campaign coverage topics; candidates' views on foreign affairs were reported so infrequently they didn't even make the list.

■ The press emphasis on political tactics, Mr. Carey continued, suggested that to political journalists, "to get at the *real* meaning of what a candidate said or did, the viewer should interpret its strategic significance in the campaign." His article, titled "How Media Shape the Campaign," noted that reports of political speeches typically were prefaced in news reports by pointing to the strategic importance of the message.

Third party candidates were likely to be identified as "not serious contenders," Mr. Carey observed, noting how the press typically wrote that a candidate once accused of wrong-doing was still trying to overcome the effects of

the accusation long after the charges were dropped.

With campaign strategies receiving more than three times the press attention received by political philosophies, the media, in effect, emphasized that "It's a game, and good players make good public officials," Mr. Carey concluded.

■ Mr. Carey, who also is a research associate at New York-based Environmental Media Consultants, did not examine this year's Presidential primary season coverage. His findings were based Environmental Media Con-networks, three newsmagazines and the *Los Angeles Times*, *New York Times* and *Washington Post*, on which he based his analysis. #