Tom Brokaw, like virtually everyone on television, went on the air Tuesday night expecting Hillary Clinton to get whipped in New Hampshire.

"I was buying into all the conventional wisdom as well," says the former NBC anchor, who was struck by how quickly his colleagues backed off their bombast about Barack Obama's imminent triumph.

"The pirouettes are amazing," says Brokaw, who was analyzing the campaign on MSNBC. "The utter confidence with which everyone had been wrong 20 minutes earlier, they have the same utter confidence about what produced this surprise. It's intellectually dishonest."

Clinton's come-from-behind moment came on the same evening that John McCain -- all but buried by the press last summer -- was winning New Hampshire's Republican primary. And it was five days after Mike Huckabee, all but ignored by the media for most of 2007, won in Iowa.

The series of blown calls amount to the shakiest campaign performance yet by a profession seemingly addicted to snap judgments and crystal-ball pronouncements. Not since the networks awarded Florida to Al Gore on Election Night 2000 has the collective media establishment so blatantly missed the boat.

The reasons are legion: News outlets are serving up more analysis and blogs to remain relevant in a wired world. Many cash-strapped organizations are spending less on field reporting, and television tries to winnow a crowded field for the sake of a better narrative. Cable shows and Web sites provide a gaping maw to be filled with fresh speculation. Tracking polls fuel a conventional wisdom that feeds on itself. The length of today's campaigns provides more twists and turns long before most voters tune in. And there is a natural journalistic tendency to try to peer around the next corner.

"Look at this cycle," says CBS correspondent Jeff Greenfield. "McCain front-runner, McCain dead, McCain is back. Hillary inevitable, Hillary toast, Hillary is back. There is no defense for this. It is built into our DNA."

Greenfield fell into the trap with a Slate piece Tuesday on how Clinton and other candidates could recover from early losses, leading to a hastily added postscript: "OK, Hillary won tonight. Oh, waiter, two orders of crow, please. This is what happens when you ignore your own advice to let the people vote first."

Once it was enough to cover and analyze a campaign. Now, in an age of endless blogging and blabbing, journalists rush to declare winners and losers in advance. They rely on a plethora of polls that sometimes miss late shifts in sentiment, driven by events such as the endless replays of Clinton choking up in a coffee shop Monday. Gina Glantz, Bill Bradley's 2000 campaign manager, says female voters resented the way mostly male pundits handled the incident.

"Women watched the media treat her in almost demeaning ways -- not for what kind of president she would be, but whether she looked angry or practiced tearing up," Glantz says. "It was really quite obnoxious."
In the post-Iowa euphoria over Obama, the narrative was set. Consider a front-page piece about the Clinton campaign in Tuesday's New York Times: "Key campaign officials may be replaced. She may start calling herself the underdog." Or Tuesday's Washington Post: "Obama has opened up a clear lead, and a second victory over Clinton would leave the New York senator's candidacy gasping for breath." Or Tuesday's Chicago Tribune: "With a cluster of new polls in New Hampshire showing Obama building a substantial lead . . . the state appeared poised to play its storied role in humbling perceived front-runners."

The New York Post went with one word over a Hillary picture: "PANIC."

The message was similar on Tuesday's newscasts. "Democrat Barack Obama may be heading for his second big victory in less than a week," said CBS's Katie Couric. "There is talk and evidence of an Obama wave moving through this state on the eve of its primary," ABC's Charlie Gibson said. His colleague George Stephanopoulos said the Clinton camp wanted to "squash any calls for her to get out of the race."

After MSNBC called the primary for Clinton at 10:31 p.m., the news business was left scrambling for explanations, such as whether some New Hampshire residents had misled pollsters about their intention to vote for a black candidate.

The comeback by McCain, who took a swipe at "the pundits" in his victory speech, was equally remarkable in light of the media's earlier verdict on his candidacy.

In recent days, the world was reminded that:


And who, exactly, had been burying, writing off and otherwise performing last rites on the Arizona senator? It was, of course, America's journalists.

"With his presidential campaign in a state of near-collapse," the Los Angeles Times reported in July, "Sen. John McCain accepted the resignations of two top advisers Tuesday, then quickly named a new campaign manager in a bid to put his candidacy for the Republican nomination back on course."

The Washington Post said then that "the campaign's mounting problems have raised doubts about whether McCain can survive in the crowded but still-wide-open Republican nomination contest."

Did journalists go too far? "There's this world of Georgetown chatter and fun-house mirrors, then the voters show up six weeks out and drive the reality, and the media's shocked and annoyed," says Mike Murphy, a former McCain strategist. "Two-thirds of the press are caught in the cliches of the moment and the groupthink of the echo chamber in Washington and New York."

CBS's Greenfield disagrees, saying: "His whole staff imploded and he was broke. The press was covering McCain in deep trouble because he was in deep trouble."

With 18 White House wannabes at the outset, news outlets had to rely on triage, based in part on who is raising big bucks. If McCain is viewed as faltering and Rudy Giuliani is leading the Republican polls -- despite media predictions that conservatives would reject him -- the former mayor gets more coverage. If Huckabee is deemed a hopeless long shot, most reporters spend their time chasing the anointed front-runners. John Edwards got a fraction of the coverage lavished on his celebrity rivals, Clinton and Obama, even though he wound up finishing second in Iowa.

Mark Feldstein, a George Washington University journalism professor, describes political reporters as "superficial
sportswriters. Covering the campaign is almost like joining a cult, with a cocoonlike bubble as you travel from event to event. There's a lemminglike quality."

The urge to forecast political outcomes is not unlike a gambling addiction, with a record that would bankrupt most Vegas high rollers. Bill Clinton's 1992 campaign compiled a video of all the pundits who had written him off. In the fall of 2000, Slate's William Saletan said candidate George W. Bush was "toast" (the preferred food item for predictions of political death). In late 2003, some columnists urged John Kerry to withdraw to spare himself a humiliating defeat by Howard Dean.

"When you have a campaign-in-disarray story, that is one of the juiciest stories in presidential politics," says Tad Devine, who was a senior strategist for Kerry and Gore. "Everyone is intoxicated by that. It's a tremendous distraction for a campaign, but voters could care less."

There is little sign that this behavior is going to change. No newspaper will run a correction saying, "The Daily Blab incorrectly reported in July that Sen. John McCain's campaign lacked a pulse, despite an absence of medical evidence." No anchor will read a statement saying, "We regret our unseemly rush to judgment about Hillary Clinton's chances." The news business corrects inaccurate titles and mangled quotes, but rarely overheated reporting.

After the 2000 election fiasco, the networks grew more careful about calling races based on exit polls. But such caution did not extend to pre-election speculation.

Marty Kaplan, a journalism professor at the University of Southern California, wrote on the Huffington Post that the mainstream media had been humiliated and that this "could be the MSM's Katrina. Political media, you've done a heckuva job."

Brokaw, who became NBC's anchor at the dawn of the cable era, says his colleagues must be wary of the demands of modern technology.

"This is the age-old curse of pack journalism," Brokaw says. "These conversations that used to be held in the bar late at night, about who's going to win or lose, now play out on the air because there's so much time to fill."
Do you think Hillary Clinton would be a good choice for US President?
www.PollingPoint.com

Who Can Defeat Hillary?
Governor Mike Huckabee. Conservatives Find Their Candidate.
www.mikehuckabee.com

Hillary Nutcracker
Love her? Hate her? Either way, it is the craziest political item ever.
www.stupid.com