



SPECIAL REPORT

AN IN-DEPTH STUDY, ANALYSIS OR REVIEW EXPLORING THE MEDIA

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The Iraq War on Cable TV

CNN and MSNBC vs. The Fox News Channel

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Journalists who act offended by even the mildest suggestions that the media elite have a liberal bias have in recent years become vocal media critics themselves, accusing the Fox News Channel (FNC) of skewing its news in a conservative direction. While all three cable networks feature prime time personalities who are rarely shy about making their opinions known, how does FNC really compare with CNN and MSNBC when it comes to hard news reporting of a major story like the Iraq war?

MRC analysts reviewed all three cable news networks' reporting on Iraq during a crucial ten weeks this year, from May 15 through July 21, a period that included heavy news coverage of allegations of U.S. military misconduct at Haditha as well as the successful air strike that eliminated al-Qaeda terrorist leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. Analysts looked at weekday coverage during the 10am EDT and 2pm EDT hours, a time of day when FNC, CNN and MSNBC all emphasize traditional news reporting from field correspondents, not opinionated talk show-style debate.

The results show clear editorial differences between the three cable networks. CNN and MSNBC resemble the big broadcast networks, emphasizing a bad news agenda of U.S. misdeeds and mistakes, while FNC was better able to balance the bad news with news of U.S. achievements in Iraq. Key findings:

- FNC was the most balanced network. All three cable news networks ran more stories reflecting bad news about the situation in Iraq than stories about coalition achievements. But FNC was the most balanced, with 20 percent of stories emphasizing optimism, compared with 30 percent that stressed pessimism.

- CNN was the most pessimistic network. Fully three-fifths (60%) of all CNN stories on the war emphasized setbacks, misdeeds or pessimism about progress in Iraq, compared to just 10 percent that reported on achievements or victories. MSNBC's tilt was closer to CNN, with four times more bad news stories (48%) than reports stressing good news (12%).
- CNN and MSNBC sensationalized charges of U.S. wrongdoing. While FNC provided significant coverage to unproven claims of U.S. military misconduct in Iraq (12 stories), the other networks took a much more sensational approach to the story. MSNBC aired three times as much coverage of alleged misconduct as FNC (36 stories), while CNN aired a whopping 59 stories – nearly five times the coverage of FNC.
- Fox News Channel aired more stories about coalition success in Iraq. FNC aired a total of 81 stories announcing coalition victories in Iraq, nearly as many as MSNBC (47 stories) and CNN (41 stories) combined. During the ten weeks of our study, most coverage of Iraq's political process reflected optimism about the democratically-elected government, a topic that FNC also showcased more than either MSNBC or CNN (63 stories vs. 34 and 38 respectively).
- Even on the best day, CNN and MSNBC found negative themes to promote. While all three networks presented news of Zarqawi's death as a victory for the U.S. coalition, CNN chose that day to interview a Middle East journalist who complained, "There's no good news in Iraq. There's no corner that's been turned, there's no milestone....I just feel very depressed and hopeless." Over on MSNBC, the network took time away from covering the breaking news of Zarqawi's death to feature positive profiles of United States military deserters.

In 2005, MRC documented how ABC, CBS and NBC's evening news coverage of Iraq had consistently emphasized bad news topics – car bombings, kidnappings, U.S. military casualties, etc. – while providing relatively little coverage to positive developments, such as steps to rebuild the country's infrastructure and the landmark democratic elections held that year.

While the actual events that transpired during the 2006 study period are not the same as those in 2005, CNN's and MSNBC's pessimistic coverage is a familiar echo of the approach taken by their broadcasting brethren. FNC, in contrast, offered decidedly more balanced coverage – disclosing the bad news, to be sure, but also making sure viewers learned of U.S. and coalition achievements in Iraq. Such an approach certainly sets the Fox News Channel apart from its broadcast and cable competitors, whose more balanced approach may be preferable to lopsidedly negative coverage that seems designed more to influence the course of events than to merely report on them.

The Iraq War on Cable TV

CNN and MSNBC vs. The Fox News Channel

BY MEGAN McCORMACK, SCOTT WHITLOCK AND RICH NOYES
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Generally, journalists hate it when anyone, especially a non-journalist, accuses the media elite of tilting towards liberals and against conservatives. CBS's Mike Wallace has called claims of liberal bias "damned foolishness," while his former colleague Dan Rather has sounded downright conspiratorial on the subject: "Those people are trying to create such a perception because they're trying to force you to report the news the way they want you to report it....I am not going to be cowed by anybody's special political agenda — inside, outside, upside, downside."

But many journalists have become quite comfortable alleging bias at one news outlet, the 10-year old Fox News Channel. MSNBC prime time anchor Keith Olbermann routinely lambastes his higher-rated competition, slamming FNC as "a propaganda company so blatant that Tokyo Rose would've quit." CNN commentator Jack Cafferty drips with similar disdain for what he calls "the F-word network."

And the same Dan Rather who argues that discussions of liberal bias are dastardly attempts at intimidation has no problem suggesting the journalists at FNC have a conservative bias. Just last month, Rather declared on HBO's *Real Time*: "Fox News operates in at least a different way than every other news organization I know. They have their talking points....We know they get their talking points from the White House....I think it's pretty clear that they had wished the [2006 congressional] election had gone another way."

A survey conducted by the Pew Research Center for The People & The Press in May 2004 quantified national journalists' attitudes about liberal and conservative media bias. The survey found that while a large majority of national journalists (62%) could not or would not name

any national news organization they thought “especially liberal” in its coverage, most of that same group (82%) had no misgivings about designating an “especially conservative” news outlet, with 69 percent singling out the Fox News Channel (followed distantly by the *Wall Street Journal* and the *Washington Times*, named by eight and nine percent of journalists, respectively).

“The single news outlet that strikes most journalists as taking a particular ideological stance – either liberal or conservative – is Fox News Channel,” Pew reported. Very few journalists suggested a bias at the other networks, according to Pew. Only two percent of reporters suggested CNN, ABC, CBS, or NPR were liberal; just one percent named NBC.

So how does the Fox News Channel compare to its cable news competitors? Or do liberal journalists’ complaints reveal more about their ideological preferences than the professionalism of FNC’s correspondents?

As even casual viewers of cable news know, all three networks feature personality-driven prime time programs where the hosts rarely conceal their opinions. But while most viewers would expect to be confronted with opinions in such a talk show format, they would presumably expect more neutrality and objectivity when it comes to the kind of traditional news reporting that is a staple of cable’s daytime programming.

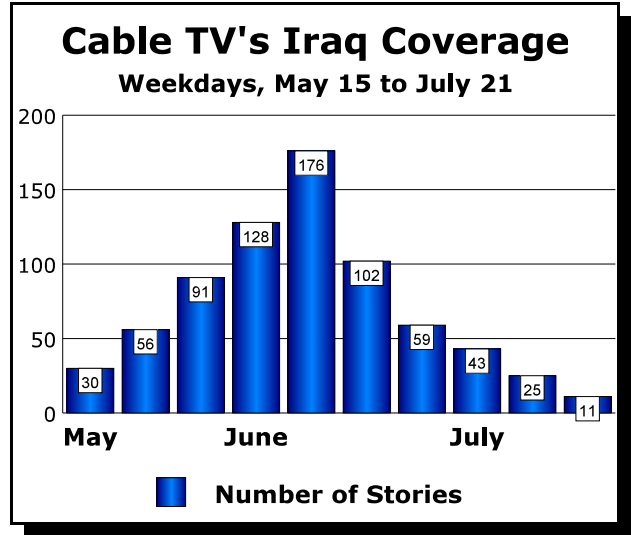
For this study, a team of MRC analysts examined FNC, CNN, and MSNBC’s daytime news coverage of the war in Iraq during a crucial period in the late spring and early summer of 2006. Without question, the fighting in Iraq has been one of the biggest news stories of the past several years. An MRC study of broadcast evening news coverage in 2005 found that ABC, CBS and NBC stressed negative and pessimistic themes in their coverage of Iraq, a dour drumbeat that has undoubtedly been a factor in declining public support for the war.

This study was designed to compare the news coverage of the three cable networks, and our researchers did find significant differences in the tone and agenda of the Iraq news each of the cable news networks produced during this period. CNN and MSNBC resembled the big broadcast networks, emphasizing a bad news agenda of U.S. misdeeds and mistakes. Contrary to what some critics might have expected, FNC also emphasized downbeat news from Iraq, but was better able to balance the bad news with more optimistic news of U.S. achievements in Iraq.

CNN & MSNBC’s Bad News Agenda

Our study of cable news coverage looked at all Iraq stories aired during a ten-week period, from May 15 through July 21, a period that included both “bad news” developments for the U.S. mission in Iraq (notably heavy coverage of accusations of military misconduct surrounding the November 2005 killing of a number of Iraqi civilians in Haditha) and “good news” as well, such as the June 8 announcement of the successful airstrike that killed the leader of al-Qaeda in Iraq, Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

For each network, our analysts examined both the 10am and 2pm EDT hours of live weekday news coverage, or 100 hours of news coverage for each network. It is during these daytime hours that all three cable networks offer similar programming that most closely resembles a traditional newscast, heavy on ostensibly neutral field reports with little overt commentary from the anchors. FNC's *Fox News Live* aired at both 10am and 2pm, as did *MSNBC Live*. CNN's morning news program was called *CNN Live Today*, while their afternoon show was called *Live From...* (Since the end of our study period, both shows have been replaced by a live news program called *CNN Newsroom*.)



Our analysts found a total of 721 items on Iraq, including field reports, interviews, breaking news events and brief items read by the news anchors. All three networks aired approximately the same number of stories: CNN showed 246 Iraq stories totaling 10 hours, 42 minutes of coverage, followed closely by FNC (244 stories; 10 hours, 32 minutes) and MSNBC (231 stories; 9 hours, 19 minutes).

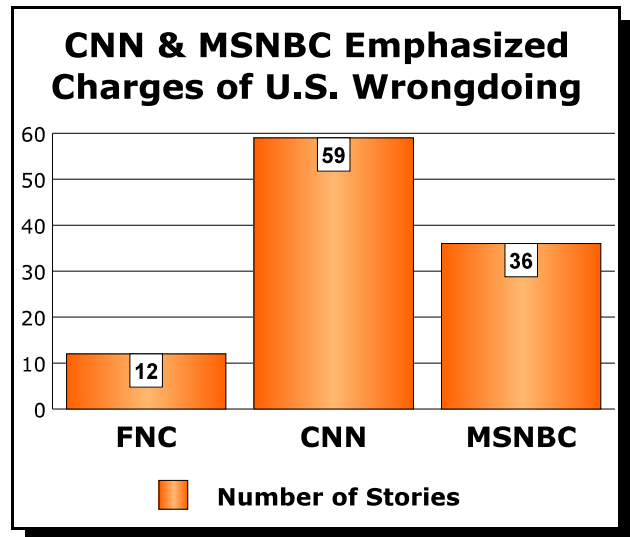
Interestingly, all three networks ran significantly more Iraq war news during their 10am hour (a total of 19 hours, 37 minutes) than during the 2pm hours (10 hours, 55 minutes), when all three cable networks featured heavier coverage of domestic news.

The amount of coverage given to the Iraq war depended on the ebb and flow of events in Iraq itself as well as the need to cover any major developments in the rest of the world. Media attention on the conflict increased in late May as the networks focused on a *Time* magazine report accusing a group of U.S. Marines of killing Iraqi civilians in Haditha; the May 29 wounding of CBS News reporter Kimberly Dozier and the death of her crew also garnered heavy coverage. Coverage of the war peaked in early June, following the successful strike against terrorist leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi and President Bush's surprise June 13 trip to Baghdad to meet with the newly-established elected government. In mid-June, the kidnapping and killing of two U.S. soldiers also drew relatively heavy coverage.

As other world events competed for attention, however, cable news producers pushed the Iraq war to the sidelines. From late June through the end of the study period, the Israeli-Palestinian conflict drew heavy cable news coverage, particularly after the Iranian-backed terrorist group Hezbollah kidnapped two Israeli soldiers on July 12. The first week of July also saw heavy cable news attention to another threat to peace, North Korea's testing of several missiles in defiance of the international community.

All three networks emphasized insurgent attacks against U.S. soldiers and Iraqi civilians, a topic that accounted for fully 35 percent of all Iraq stories. CNN gave slightly more coverage to these attacks (96 stories, or 39% of coverage) than either MSNBC (86 stories, 37%) or FNC (79 stories, 32%), but the differences do not appear especially significant.

Apart from the drumbeat of daily attacks, the news agendas of the three cable networks diverged. CNN and MSNBC devoted more resources to covering stories that reflected poorly on the U.S. mission in Iraq, while FNC aired more stories about U.S. achievements in Iraq than either of its rivals.



CNN and MSNBC, for example, focused extensively on allegations of misconduct by U.S. forces in Iraq – principally a November 2005 incident in Haditha in which a group of U.S. Marines are alleged to have attacked and killed perhaps 24 unarmed civilians after a roadside explosive killed a Marine in their unit. The story received renewed focus in May after anti-war Congressman John Murtha held a news conference in which he alleged the Marines “killed innocent civilians in cold blood.” At the time, the incident was still being investigated by the military; as of early December, no charges had actually been filed against any of the Marines involved.

FNC made sure viewers knew about the allegations, broadcasting a total of 12 stories on Haditha and other allegations of U.S. military misconduct. But MSNBC and CNN pursued those same stories much more aggressively. MSNBC aired a total of 36 stories on alleged U.S. misconduct, three times as much coverage as the Fox News Channel, while CNN’s coverage was an astounding five times greater (59 stories).

CNN and MSNBC’s coverage took on the characteristics of a feeding frenzy, with the U.S. troops presumed guilty. CNN anchor Tony Harris echoed Murtha’s inflammatory charges during a May 30 report: “Men, women and children, gunned down in cold blood. That’s the allegation....U.S. Marines are suspected of killing two dozen unarmed civilians, accusations of a cover-up also a part of the mix. Democratic Congressman John Murtha has been briefed on what happened....Murtha calls the alleged atrocity as bad as the Abu Ghraib prison abuse scandal, if not worse.”

Three days later, CNN’s John Vause extended the indictment to all U.S. troops, not just the few being investigated regarding Haditha: “There is a perception that U.S. forces are brutal and are, at times, trigger happy.”

Similarly, CNN and MSNBC were more likely than FNC to highlight news of U.S. military casualties, including both the announcement of new casualties and such media “milestones” as the 2,500th U.S. combat death in mid-June. In the 50 weekdays we examined, CNN aired a

total of 50 stories on the killing and wounding of U.S. forces – just slightly more than MSNBC (44 stories) and exactly twice as many as FNC (25 stories).

Few stories about fallen soldiers were framed as tributes to their bravery or sacrifice; most just noted the deaths of another one, two or three soldiers without linking their deaths to any greater purpose. Appearing during MSNBC’s live coverage on June 8, the day Zarqawi’s death was announced, *Hardball* host Chris Matthews was especially bleak. “Americans keep getting killed,” he somberly noted, “and more Americans will be killed next week and the week after and the week after and the week after. These casualties keep coming and they keep hurting the people in this country.”

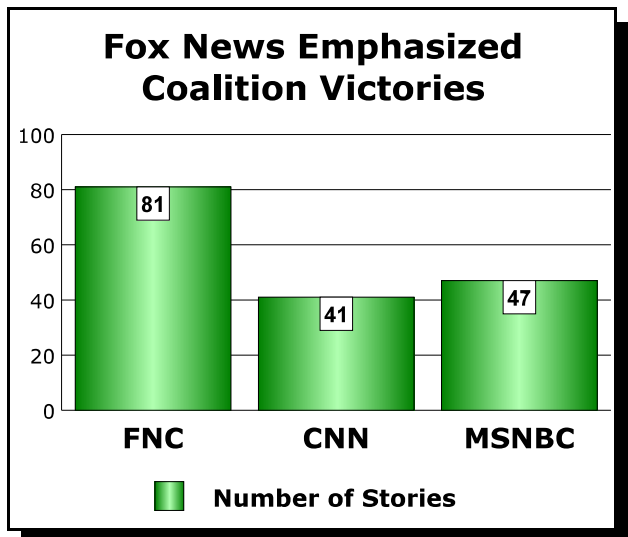
Highlighting Iraq’s “Misery”
“Violence casts a long shadow in Iraq and there’s little sign of an end to the misery it causes.”
— ITN reporter Tim Ewart reporting on *MSNBC Live*, May 22.

CNN and MSNBC were also more likely than FNC to air stories about the deaths of Iraqi civilians and other non-military combatants, although the differences were modest. CNN ran 49 such stories, compared to MSNBC’s 41 and FNC’s 35. As with stories about U.S. military casualties, FNC could hardly be accused of censoring such material, as the network aired dozens of reports about the dead and dying in Iraq. But CNN and MSNBC both made the decision to air even more such reports than their cable news competitor.

FNC Devoted More Time to Covering U.S. Achievements: While CNN and MSNBC emphasized the negative news out of Iraq, FNC used its airtime to highlight a decidedly more positive agenda. FNC aired 81 stories relating news of coalition victories in Iraq, many following the June 8 announcement of the successful U.S. air strike that killed al-Qaeda in Iraq leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi. When it came to telling viewers about our military’s successes, MSNBC’s 47 stories made them a distant second to FNC, with CNN coming in dead last (41 stories).

Hours after Zarqawi’s death was announced, FNC daytime anchor Martha MacCallum expressed what most Americans probably felt upon hearing the news: “It is clearly a good day in this fight and in this effort.”

Apart from Zarqawi’s demise, FNC featured many other reports of successful U.S. and Iraqi-led military efforts to kill and capture other insurgent leaders. Anchor Bob Sellers reported one such success on July 7: “A key capture in the war on terror. Backed by U.S. aircraft, Iraqi troops stormed a Shiite stronghold in eastern Baghdad and took out a militia leader. At least 30 other terrorists were killed in that raid.”



Fox was also more likely than CNN or MSNBC to note the success of other (non-military) efforts in the campaign to bring peace to Iraq. “A cash crunch putting a strain on al-Qaeda in Iraq. Former Deputy CIA Director John McLaughlin telling the Senate Foreign Relations committee there is evidence that the terror group no longer has control of its network,” FNC anchor Brigitte Quinn noted on June 19. “In a letter before he was killed, Zarqawi pleaded for cash, writing that many of his lines of support have been cut off. To cope, terrorists have had to resort to cash couriers who are being tracked by intelligence agents.” Only FNC viewers were told about McLaughlin’s upbeat testimony, which was ignored by CNN and MSNBC.

The U.S. “Murder” of Terrorist Leader Zarqawi?

“Jack, what about the recent murder of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi? Did that help buy time for the President in his plan, whatever it may be?”

— **MSNBC anchor Natalie Allen to retired U.S. Army Colonel Jack Jacobs during live coverage June 14.**

When it came to coverage of Iraq’s political process, FNC again led the way with 63 stories, a level that nearly doubled MSNBC (38 stories) and CNN (34 stories). During the period our analysts examined – which included the final formation of a permanent government headed by Prime Minister Nouri al-Maliki and including representatives of all of Iraq’s major groups – much of the coverage of Iraq’s politics (on all three networks) was positive in tone. FNC anchor Brigitte Quinn gave voice to that optimism in a June 8 report about the end of negotiations for the permanent Iraqi government, calling it “a momentous occasion.”

The trends that our analysts discovered during the ten weeks we examined are clear: CNN and MSNBC gravitated toward major “bad news” topics such as military and civilian casualties and allegations of U.S. misconduct, while FNC emphasized “good news” topics such as U.S. military achievements and the creation of a permanent, representative, democratically-elected Iraqi government. That is not to say that FNC never mentioned any of the terrible things that were happening in Iraq (they did), or that CNN and MSNBC never revealed the accomplishments of the U.S.-led coalition (they did). But both CNN and MSNBC systematically chose to emphasize news stories and topics that reflected poorly on the U.S. mission in Iraq, while FNC made it a point to also tell viewers about the positive developments in the war.

Tone: Fair & Balanced FNC vs. Pessimistic CNN and MSNBC

In addition to examining each networks’ news agenda, our analysts also looked at the tone of each news item on the Iraq war. For much of the past three years, journalists have been criticized for unduly emphasizing the setbacks and losses of the Iraq war and paying less attention to accomplishments and progress; by so emphasizing the bad news coming out of Iraq, critics charge, the media have served to demoralize the public and build sentiment for a withdrawal from Iraq without regard to the effect this might have on the overall War on Terror. The argument is not that the media’s day-to-day reporting is inaccurate or untruthful,

but that journalists' predisposition to publicize bad news has skewed the public's overall perception of the Iraq war.

So, as we did in our study of broadcast news in 2005, our analysts looked at how many stories focused on positive developments (such as reports of U.S. and coalition achievements and progress on the political front) or negative developments (including reports of insurgent attacks and incidents of U.S. military misconduct). To be labeled a "positive" report, the amount of optimistic or upbeat news contained in the story had to

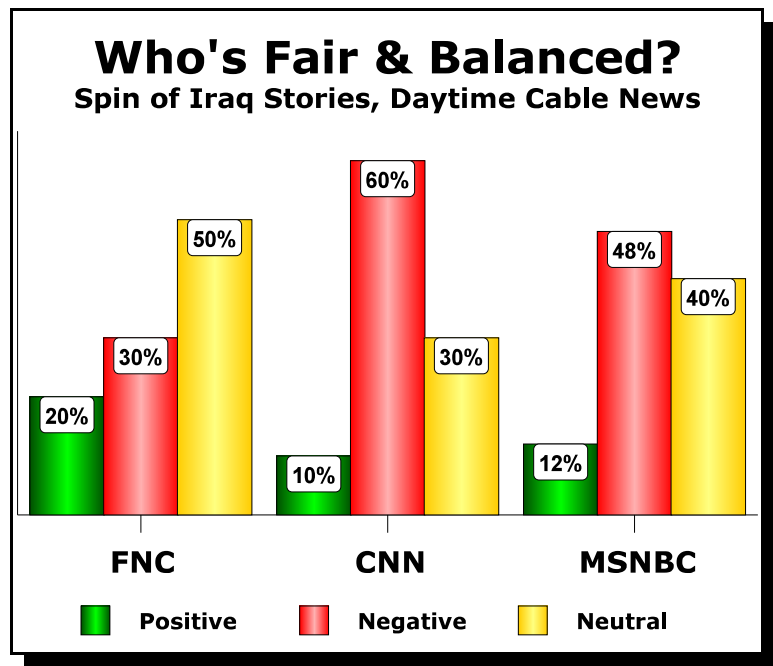
exceed negative or pessimistic news by at least a three-to-two margin. Conversely, a news story was considered "negative" when there was a three-to-two margin in favor of pessimistic news. All other stories were categorized as "balanced/neutral."

While all three networks were reporting on the same day-to-day developments, the difference in tone is fairly remarkable. As the chart on this page shows, both CNN and MSNBC emphasized news that carried a pessimistic or downbeat spin. On MSNBC, negative news overwhelmed positive stories by a four-to-one margin, while on CNN the disparity was a whopping six-to-one.

Over on the Fox News Channel, the number of pessimistic stories (75, or 30% of FNC's total coverage) was greater than that of optimistic or positive stories (48, or 20%), but the end result is much more balanced coverage than was found at either of its cable competitors. FNC also had the highest number of neutral stories (123), significantly more than either MSNBC (91) or CNN (73).

The differences in tone are strongly related to the differences in the networks' choice of news topics (as discussed in the previous section). Both MSNBC and CNN aired much heavier coverage of the allegations of U.S. troop misconduct in late May, which helped tilt their overall coverage in a heavily pessimistic direction. In the case of the Haditha allegations, reporters seemed to presume guilt despite the lack of any official report. On the last day of May, CNN's Iraq reporter Arwa Damon framed the options this way: "Twenty-four Iraqi civilians killed in a bloody rampage allegedly by Marines. Among the dead, women and children. Was it a rampage fueled by rage? An unprovoked massacre?"

The day before, MSNBC invited viewers to voice their outrage, as anchor Chris Jansing posed her network's Question of the Day: "Based on what you know, do you think there's any justification for what happened in Haditha?"



On May 26, CNN anchor Kyra Phillips echoed Democratic war critics like Congressman John Murtha, who argued that the Haditha incident was part of a larger pattern of eroding military discipline after three years of ugly fighting: “Some critics have come forward and said, look, this is just one more reason troops have to come home. They’ve been there too long. They’re becoming insensitive to the fight over there, and this is what happens....[People] start to fall apart emotionally, psychologically.”

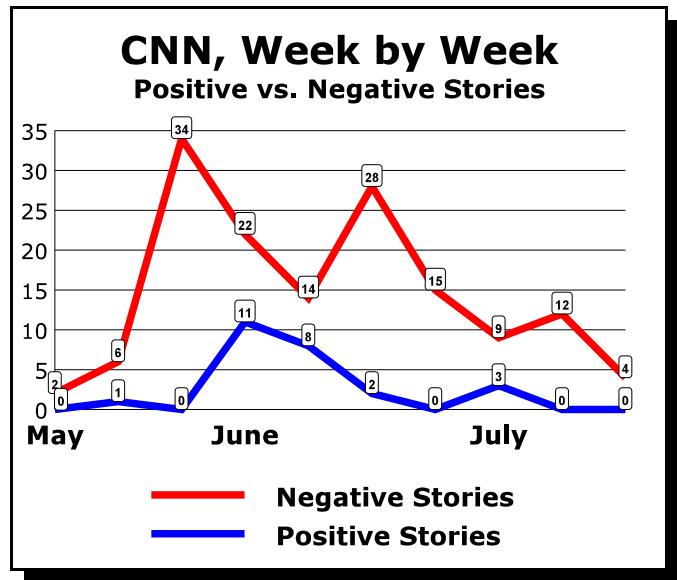
Pentagon correspondent Jamie McIntyre seemed to agree with Phillips’ assumption: “The accounts of this house-to-house search for, apparently searching for one of the bombers who killed one of their own Marines, gives all the impression that it was almost like they were on a — they were looking for revenge.” But McIntyre quickly added: “But, again, we just want to say the investigation is not complete.”

In fact, according to research conducted by University of Minnesota professor Colin Kahl during a fellowship with the Council on Foreign Relations, the truth is that U.S. forces have done an excellent job of avoiding civilian casualties and have gotten better, not worse, over the course of the war. Writing in the policy magazine *Foreign Affairs*, Kahl noted that “despite some dark spots on its record, the U.S. military has done a better job of respecting noncombatant immunity in Iraq than is commonly believed....U.S. compliance with noncombatant immunity in Iraq is relatively high by historical standards...[and] has been improving since the beginning of the war.”

All three cable networks ran the greatest number of positive stories during the first and second weeks of June, coinciding with Zarqawi’s death and President Bush’s trip to Baghdad to meet with Prime Minister Maliki and his newly-formed government. While all three networks generally treated Zarqawi’s elimination as a success for the coalition, FNC’s coverage was the most enthusiastic. Anchor Jon Scott began the 10am hour by touting “news that the most-wanted man in Iraq has been killed in a U.S. air strike, in what turned out to be an *unsafe* house for Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.” Scott asked lead-off guest Senator John McCain: “Is this a sign that patience and perseverance pays off?”

After his interview with McCain, Scott turned to co-anchor Brigitte Quinn: “It’s nice to have some good news to report out of Iraq.” Quinn agreed: “Yeah, it sure is, Jon.”

A few minutes later, Baghdad correspondent Andrew Stack recounted how news of Zarqawi’s death “definitely affected us here personally,” recounting how a triple car bombing — plotted and carried out by Zarqawi’s group months earlier — had damaged FNC’s offices in Iraq. “We didn’t have any injuries or deaths on our staff, but there were 17 people killed



that night, and it's something none of us will ever forget," Stack related. "And so this morning when we heard about this, you can bet a lot of us were pretty happy to see Zarqawi gone."

Over on CNN that same day, while the anchors and reporters generally heralded the successful strike on Zarqawi as good news, the network introduced some decidedly pessimistic themes. Afternoon anchor Kyra Phillips brought aboard journalist and author Nir Rosen, and asked him whether he thought Zarqawi's death would make much of a difference:

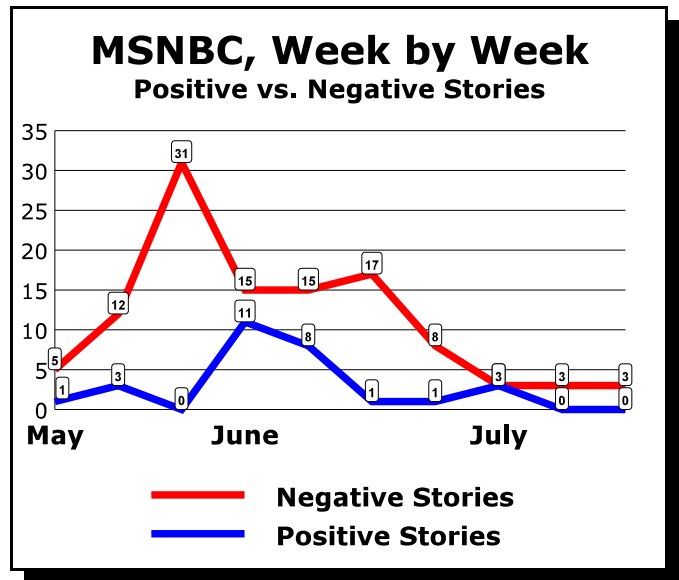
"From what I understand, you think we're going a bit overboard with this coverage and he's not as big a fish as everyone is making him out to be?" Rosen agreed, then launched into a deeply pessimistic analysis after Phillips asked him about the formation of the new government:

There's no good news in Iraq. There's no corner that's been turned, there's no milestone. The civil war began intensively in 2005, and it's continuing. This ethnic cleansing, Sunnis from Shia neighborhoods, Shias being expelled from Sunni neighborhoods, dead bodies on the street every day, tortured and killed because they're Sunni or because they're Shia. Events inside the Green Zone just don't really matter....The Green Zone is just a theater for people outside of Iraq. The militias are on the street in Iraq. They are the ones killing each other every day. And I just feel very depressed and hopeless. I think the civil war is going to intensify.

While most Americans were presumably taking a moment to celebrate the death of Zarqawi, or at least appreciate the efforts of the U.S. military in eliminating the vicious terrorist, CNN and MSNBC continued with their more pessimistic agenda. CNN featured two reports on the already much-covered Haditha allegations; a piece by senior correspondent John Roberts closed with a hyperbolic quote from Dartmouth College's Aine Donovan: "If Haditha proves true, it will be, unfortunately and very sadly, the most memorable episode of this war."

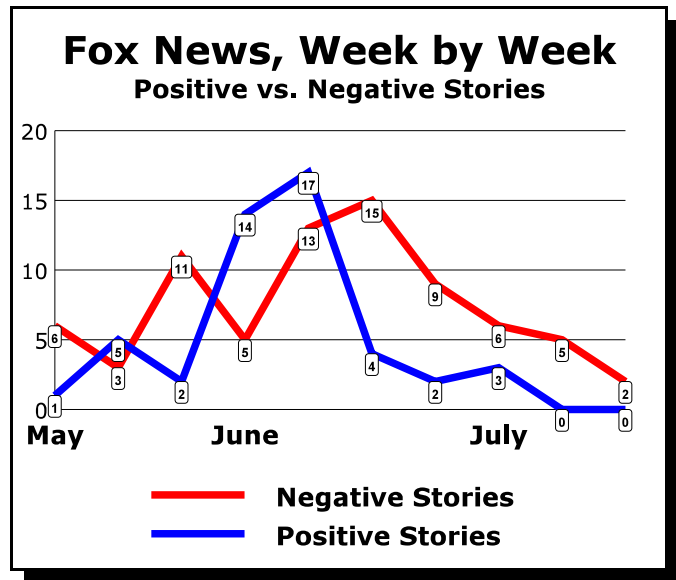
Over on MSNBC, the network took time away from covering the breaking news of Zarqawi's death to feature positive profiles of United States military deserters, highlighting their claims that the Iraq war is immoral. Anchor Melissa Stark attempted to smoothly transition between the contrary subjects: "On this very successful day for the U.S. military with the killing of Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, one U.S. soldier is refusing to deploy to Iraq. Army First Lieutenant Ehren Watada believes the Iraq war is morally wrong and a breach of American law." Reporter Tim Haas claimed Watada has "become the new face of the anti-war movement."

A few minutes later, Stark introduced another segment on another American soldier who refused to fight for his country: "Marine reservist Stephen Funk was the first U.S. serviceman



to object to the Iraq war. He explained his decision to NBC's Matt Lauer shortly after the war began." A clip of Funk's earlier appearance on NBC's *Today* program showed Funk rationalizing his conduct: "It isn't moral to kill someone just because you signed a contract to....In the Gulf, in the last Gulf War, there was only 111 conscientious objectors. And before that, there, in the Vietnam War, there were 200,000. So a lot of people in this generation don't know this is an actual option and I'm just trying to spread that."

When they got through flaunting Funk, MSNBC offered up reports on Gulf War deserters and Vietnam protests, bringing to four the number of reports on anti-military activities aired on the morning that was crowded with news of a U.S. military success.



Five days after Zarqawi's death was announced, President Bush surprised the media by arriving in Baghdad for a meeting with Prime Minister Maliki that was originally supposed to have been conducted via a teleconference. The President's presence in Iraq meant more coverage than would otherwise have been expected, although the tone was split between the three networks. FNC reporter Malini Bawa argued that the President's trip would help the situation: "The visit of President Bush certainly tends to lend some legitimacy and some momentum to his [Maliki's] new government."

Over on MSNBC, however, reporter Andrea Mitchell argued the opposite, telling anchor Contessa Brewer during the 2pm hour of *MSNBC Live* that the visit could undermine the new Iraqi Prime Minister: "While it could help him with his own supporters, it could also backfire, of course, with those who view the American presence as interference with the domestic affairs in Iraq. Of course, those who are anti-American view the President very negatively, so it could undercut his credibility there as well. So, it remains to be seen."

As for CNN, 10am anchor Daryn Kagan asked correspondent Aneesh Raman what he thought the visit would mean to everyday Iraqis. Raman was pessimistic: "I think very little. This visit to the average Iraqi will perhaps signal that maybe there's something in terms of momentum that clearly President Bush is trying to seize upon....But for the average Iraqi, and I've seen it over the time period that I was there, that the confidence in the government has eroded and legitimately so."

The key difference between the networks: CNN and MSNBC were eager to devote dozens of stories to sifting through the details of bad news stories like Haditha, but were quick to move beyond stories about U.S. and coalition achievements. FNC, in contrast, provided more level-headed coverage of the bad news that invariably arose, and seemed unembarrassed to

cheer U.S. victories such as the killing of one of the single worst enemies the U.S. has faced, terrorist leader Abu Musab al-Zarqawi.

Conclusion:

In mid-November 2006, CNN polled Americans to find out if they still thought the U.S. “can win” the war in Iraq. Even amid all of the bad news, a majority (54%) said they still thought victory was possible, although the same poll found 56 percent predicted the U.S. “will not win” in Iraq. In other words, while most of us think our country has the inherent capacity to prevail in Iraq, our citizens are not optimistic that such a victory will ever be realized.

The pessimistic reporting of the past few years has helped move the debate over Iraq from “How do we win?” to “How do we get out?” Network reporters have focused on the discouragingly brutal realities of war, but have spent relatively little air time analyzing the consequences of U.S. forces leaving Iraq before even the basic goals of stability and self-defense have been realized. TV news viewers (apart from those who regularly watch FNC) could be forgiven if they believe the American military’s role in Iraq has been primarily *destructive*, since journalists have focused most of their energy detailing the awfulness of what is happening now. Rarely mentioned is the fact that U.S. soldiers remain a key bulwark preventing even greater chaos and violence, and that it is their bravery that prevents Iraq from falling prey to the car bombers and terrorists.

There’s no doubt that the Fox News Channel offered viewers a different editorial approach than that found at CNN and MSNBC – or ABC, CBS and NBC, for that matter. FNC’s reporters certainly presented their fair share of bad news about Iraq, but did a better job of balancing the setbacks and difficulties with proper acknowledgment of U.S. achievements in Iraq. Given the stakes of the war in Iraq, such a balanced approach seems preferable to lopsidedly negative coverage that seems designed more to influence the course of events than to merely report on them.

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