



SPECIAL REPORT

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

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TV's Bad News Brigade

ABC, CBS and NBC's Defeatist Coverage of the War in Iraq

EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

Ever since the United States and an international coalition toppled Saddam Hussein's dictatorship in the spring of 2003, the Iraq war has dominated network newscasts. Since then, there's been a lot of undeniably bad news, as terrorists have launched a savage campaign to thwart efforts to establish democracy in a major Arab state. But are network reporters giving the public an inordinately gloomy portrait of the situation, as some critics charge? Are the positive accomplishments of U.S. soldiers and Iraq's new democratic leaders being lost in a news agenda dominated by assassinations, car bombings and casualty reports?

The answer to both questions is: Yes.

This conclusion is based on a Media Research Center study of broadcast network news coverage of the Iraq war so far this year. MRC analysts reviewed all 1,388 Iraq stories broadcast on ABC's *World News Tonight*, the *CBS Evening News* and *NBC Nightly News* from January 1 through September 30. (In 2006, the MRC will release a similar analysis of cable news coverage of Iraq.) Among the key findings:

- **Network coverage has been overwhelmingly pessimistic.** More than half of all stories (848, or 61%) focused on negative topics or presented a pessimistic analysis of the situation, four times as many as featured U.S. or Iraqi achievements or offered an optimistic assessment (just 211 stories, or 15%).
- **News about the war has grown increasingly negative.** In January and February, about a fifth of all network stories (21%) struck a hopeful note, while just over half presented a negative slant on the situation. By August and September, positive stories had fallen to a measly seven percent and the percentage of bad news stories swelled to 73 percent of all Iraq news, a ten-to-one disparity.

■ **Terrorist attacks are the centerpiece of TV's war news.** Two out of every five network evening news stories (564) featured car bombings, assassinations, kidnappings or other attacks launched by the terrorists against the Iraqi people or coalition forces, more than any other topic.

■ **Even coverage of the Iraqi political process has been negative.** More stories (124) focused on shortcomings in Iraq's political process — the danger of bloodshed during the January elections, political infighting among politicians, and fears that the new Iraqi constitution might spur more civil strife — than found optimism in the Iraqi people's historic march to democracy (92 stories). One-third of those optimistic stories (32) appeared on just two nights — January 30 and 31, just after Iraq's first successful elections.

■ **Few stories focused on the heroism or generous actions of American soldiers.** Just eight stories were devoted to recounting episodes of heroism or valor by U.S. troops, and another nine stories featured instances when soldiers reached out to help the Iraqi people. In contrast, 79 stories focused on allegations of combat mistakes or outright misconduct on the part of U.S. military personnel.

■ **It's not as if there was no "good news" to report.** NBC's cameras found a bullish stock market and a hiring boom in Baghdad's business district, ABC showcased the coalition's successful effort to bring peace to a Baghdad thoroughfare once branded "Death Street," and CBS documented how the one-time battleground of Sadr City is now quiet and citizens are beginning to benefit from improved public services. Stories describing U.S. and Iraqi achievements provided essential context to the discouraging drumbeat of daily news, but were unfortunately just a small sliver of TV's Iraq news.

It is probably predictable that journalists would emphasize bad news, but network TV's profoundly pessimistic coverage has shortchanged the accomplishments of both the U.S. military and Iraq's new leaders and has certainly contributed to the public's growing discontent with the war. Just as it would be wrong for reporters to conceal any bad news, it is wrong for journalists to downplay the good news that is being made in Iraq. Reporters have the responsibility to fully inform citizens about progress that is being made amid great sacrifice, and they are not doing so.

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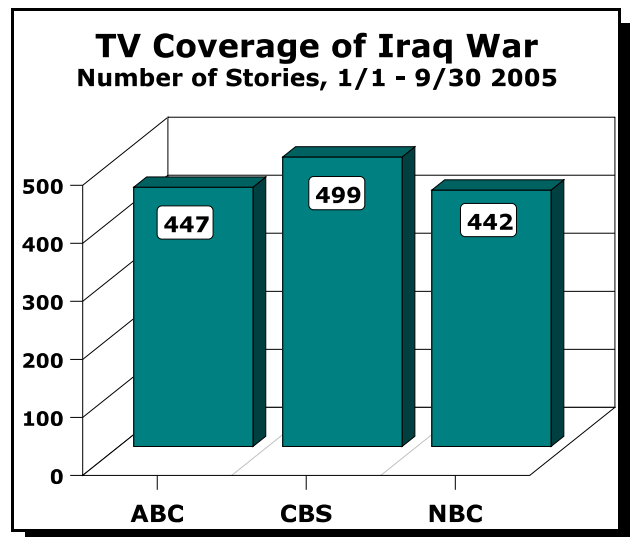
BY RICH NOYES
RESEARCH DIRECTOR

Ever since the United States and an international coalition toppled Saddam Hussein's dictatorship in the spring of 2003, the Iraq war has dominated network newscasts. Since then, there's been a lot of undeniably bad news, as terrorists have launched a savage campaign to thwart efforts to establish democracy in a major Arab state. But are the media giving the public an inordinately gloomy portrait of the situation, as some critics charge? Are the positive accomplishments of U.S. soldiers and Iraq's new democratic leaders being lost in a news agenda dominated by assassinations, car bombings and casualty reports?

To find out how the three broadcast networks have covered the war so far this year, Media Research Center analysts reviewed every report on the Iraq war that aired on ABC's *World News Tonight*, the *CBS Evening News* and *NBC Nightly News* from January 1 through September 30. In spite of their shrinking ratings, these three broadcasts boast far higher audiences than even the most widely watched cable news programs. And the network evening newscasts provide more consistent coverage of serious issues (such as Iraq) than either their morning counterparts or the networks' prime-time magazine shows, although many of the same packaged reports found on the evening news also appeared in some form on those other newscasts.

[The MRC plans to release an analysis of cable news coverage of the war in Iraq in 2006.]

The war has received a tremendous amount of TV coverage. During the first nine months of 2005, the three evening newscasts have broadcast 1,388 reports about Iraq, making it the year's single largest broadcast news topic. The *CBS Evening News* offered the most coverage (499 stories, split between 312 full reports and 187 brief items read by the news



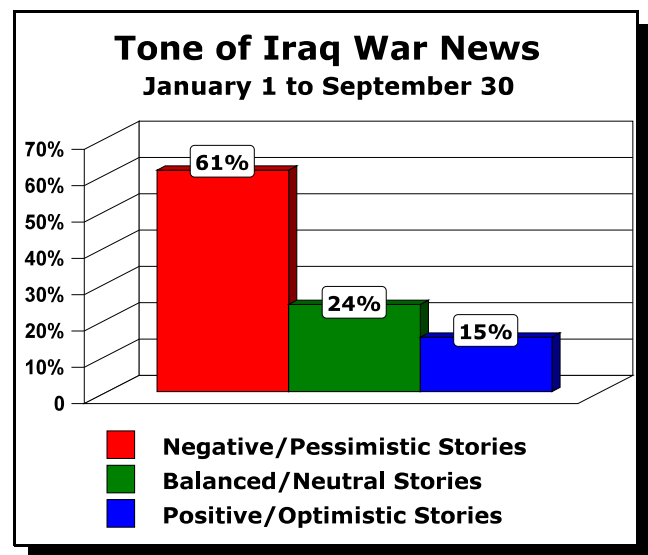
anchor). CBS also aired an additional 177 short items paying tribute to “Fallen Heroes,” American military personnel who died while serving our country in Iraq, Afghanistan and elsewhere. These items were not considered part of CBS’s daily Iraq coverage, but were reviewed and analyzed separately. (See page 6.)

ABC’s *World News Tonight* discussed Iraq in 447 stories (278 full reports and 169 anchor-read briefs). The *NBC Nightly News* aired slightly fewer items (442 stories), but more full field reports than either ABC or CBS (325, compared to 117 short anchor-read items). Coverage on all three networks was most intense in January (283 stories), as Iraq prepared for its first democratic, multi-party elections, an exercise that would have been unthinkable just two years earlier. September saw the fewest Iraq war stories (64 stories), as network reporters focused on the damage caused to the U.S. Gulf Coast by Hurricane Katrina.

Night after Night, a Deluge of Discouraging News

More than any overt editorial judgments, our researchers were interested in the agenda of the networks’ Iraq stories. How many stories focused on pessimistic developments, such as terrorist attacks or U.S. casualties, and how many told audiences about positive news, such as schools being rebuilt or progress on the political front? We went through each news story, cataloguing the various news topics and the way they were reported each night. To be classified as “positive,” the optimistic news had to exceed the pessimistic by at least a three-to-two margin; to be counted as a “negative” story, the story had to be similarly dominated by bad news. Stories that could not be assigned to either group were counted as balanced or neutral.

The results show just how heavily the network news agenda was skewed towards bad news. More than three out of five stories (848, or 61%) emphasized setbacks or obstacles to the U.S. mission in Iraq. Conversely, only 211 stories (15%) could be categorized as positive or optimistic, a four-to-one disparity. (See chart.) The remaining 329 stories (24%) contained a generally balanced mixture of optimistic and pessimistic information, or focused on a neutral topic (such as U.S. troops going to Easter services).



A principal reason for the dour tone was near-constant coverage of terrorist attacks, including kidnappings, car bombings, assassinations and massacres. Nearly every day, TV audiences were confronted with the horrors caused by the last remnants of Saddam Hussein's Ba'athist regime and the carnage created by foreign terrorists such as the Jordanian Abu Musab al-Zarqawi, al Qaeda's leader in Iraq.

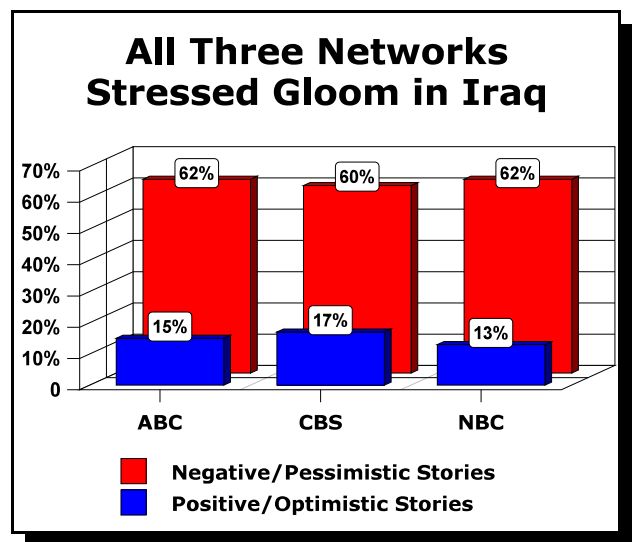
Terrorist attacks are designed to attract attention and spread fear. The networks' daily coverage relayed the terrorists' deeds in gruesome detail. On February 28, ABC's Nick Watt gave viewers a graphic account of a suicide bombing targeting a medical clinic in the city of Hillah: "Pools of water turned red with blood; buildings scarred by shrapnel and body parts." Ten days later, Watt told how terrorists had bombed a funeral in Mosul, a city in northern Iraq: "Survivors carried out the bodies of the dead and wept. One of them described a ball of fire and a huge explosion, then, scattered blood and human flesh."

"It's been another terrible day in Iraq," CBS anchor Bob Schieffer typically began as he introduced a May 24 story on a series of car bombings aimed at civilians. From Baghdad, correspondent Mark Strassmann amplified Schieffer's grimness: "The carnage has been shocking; nearly 600 Iraqis killed in less than a month, attacks that have left this country tilting toward civil war."

Fully 40 percent of the networks' Iraq news (564 stories) featured terrorist or insurgent attacks, an average of two stories every night. In about half of these stories (269), the mayhem caused by terrorists was either the principal or sole focus of the story. In the other 295 stories, news of terrorist attacks shared attention with other topics, such as Iraq's progress toward a democratically-elected government or U.S. military strategy.

No other aspect of the Iraq war received as much attention from reporters. On June 14, NBC anchor Brian Williams was somber. "The insurgency in Iraq took an evil and gruesome turn today," Williams charged as he related how a suicide bomber had thrust himself into "a large crowd of retirees, older civilians, waiting at a bank to pick up their pension checks." That attack killed more than 20 people.

When it came to the dispiriting tone of the coverage, there was little difference between the three networks. The *CBS Evening News* carried a slightly higher percentage of positive stories (17%) and a slightly lower percentage of negative stories (60%) than the other two networks, but the differences are hardly significant. Stories about terrorist attacks comprised a slightly higher percentage of coverage on ABC's



World News Tonight (44%) than on either the *CBS Evening News* (39%) or *NBC Nightly News* (38%), but those differences are also insignificant. When it came to Iraq, all three networks pursued essentially the same negative news agenda.

TV's portrait of Iraq grew bleaker as the year progressed. The percentage of pessimistic stories grew to more than 70 percent in August and September, up from about 50 percent back in January and February. At the same time, the percentage of optimistic stories fell, from about 20 percent of the coverage early in the year, to just seven percent by the end of the summer. By August and September, negative stories outnumbered positive stories by an astounding ten-to-one margin. (See chart.)

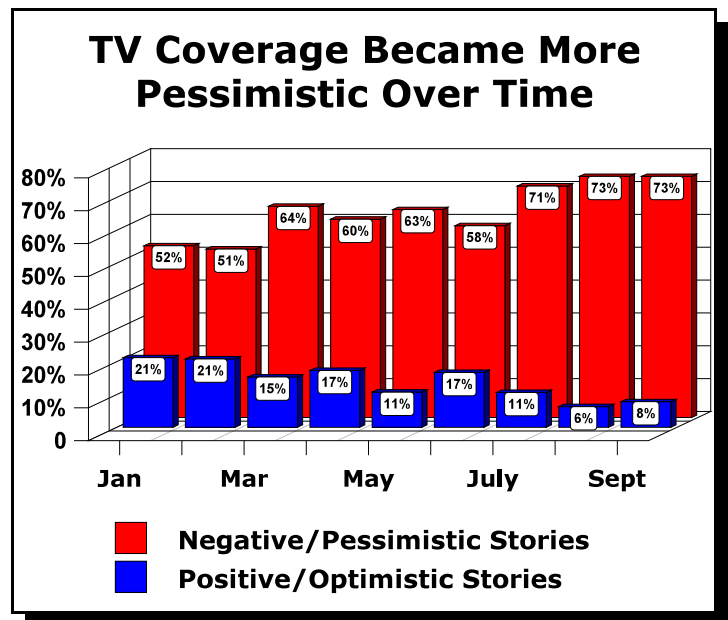
When it came to the terrorist attacks, a rare bit of optimism came in the few reports that documented how the Iraqi people are fighting back against the bombers. On March 15, CBS's Kimberly Dozier reported how more Iraqis are stepping forward to help the coalition thwart the terrorists. "They are killing their fellow Muslim Iraqi citizens, and this is not acceptable among the Iraqis," Iraq's National Security Advisor Mowaffak al-Rubaie told Dozier. "Iraqi blood is not cheap. These people should be denounced."

Reporting on rumors that the terrorist Abu Musab al-Zarqawi might be badly injured, ABC's Brian Ross on May 25 noted that "some Arabs on this popular Web site said they hoped the news was true. 'Let this criminal Zarqawi go to Hell,' wrote one. 'God curse him alive or dead. To Hell,' wrote another."

Anchor Charles Gibson soon asked Baghdad reporter Nick Watt: "I'm surprised by something in Brian's piece, the vehemence of the comments on Arab Web sites in opposition to Zarqawi, because we keep hearing that he has considerable support." Watt confirmed that many Iraqis "will be very glad if he does die."

The July 22 *World News Tonight* similarly told viewers about an Iraq television program that features confessions from captured insurgents. Reporter Mike von Fremd noted "the show is wildly popular and many viewers think those captured are getting what they deserve. 'They are terrorists,' this man said, 'they have no excuses.'"

Terrorist bombings, and the mayhem and chaos they cause, are certainly news events that ought to be reported. But when the terrorists bypass military targets and instead



attack elderly pensioners, day laborers, medical clinics, schools and other civilian targets, their obvious goal is to discourage and demoralize the American and Iraqi publics, perhaps believing that at some point the televised scenes of horror will erode the will to complete the mission.

Nearly every journalist would agree that it is important to show the grisly reality of terrorist activity in Iraq. But by placing such a heavy emphasis on these bloody attacks, the networks are also giving the enemy some of the terrifying publicity they seek.

Tallying the Dead

The networks also provided heavy coverage of another discouraging topic: American soldiers killed or wounded in Iraq. Nearly three out of every 10 Iraq stories (400, or 29%) discussed U.S. casualties suffered in Iraq; in nearly one out of 10 stories (126), the American losses were the main focus of the story.

Some of these were positive stories reporting on tributes to those who died. On March 24, NBC's Andrea Mitchell reported on a Washington, D.C. exhibit, "Faces of the Fallen." Mitchell explained: "At first, they are a blur of faces, men and women, young and not so young. Then they come into focus, 1,327 individual portraits, created by 200 volunteer artists. A memorial to military heroes of the conflicts in Afghanistan and Iraq." She showed the father of a soldier killed in Iraq in 2003: "It's really nice to know that these boys and girls aren't forgotten. You know, people remember them."

More often, the number of dead or wounded was reported as a dry statistic, a morbid scorecard of what America had lost. On June 12, ABC weekend anchor Terry Moran presented numbers with few details: "The U.S. military announced the death of four more soldiers today. That raises the total American death toll to more than 1,700." On August 18, CBS's John Roberts noted the deaths of four Americans killed by roadside bombs, then did the requisite math: "That pushes the total number of U.S. military dead in Iraq to at least 1,860."



It's one thing to note the passing of an individual soldier, or tell viewers about an incident that claims American lives. But the networks' fixation to provide an accumulated roll call of the dead suggested that the numbers themselves had more meaning than the individuals, or the cause for which they were fighting. Some reporters suggested that the casualty count was politically significant, that the number of those lost will some day reach a point where the public will demand an end to the war. "Rising U.S. casualties have

fed an increasingly vocal campaign against the war here at home," CBS's Roberts declared as he introduced an August 17 story about Cindy Sheehan's anti-war protests.

But the number of dead and wounded in Iraq, while painful, does not come anywhere close to rivaling the number lost in previous wars. More than 35,000 Americans died in Korea, nearly 60,000 in Vietnam. More than 400,000 Americans died in World War II, a ghastly total that never provoked the public into insisting that the fighting end before victory was achieved.

More Stories of Wrongdoing than Tales of Bravery and Generosity

Besides depicting American soldiers as victims of terrorist violence, 79 stories focused primarily about allegations of wrongdoing against Americans in Iraq, including numerous follow-up stories about prisoner abuse at Abu Ghraib, new charges of U.S. abuse of

On the Bright Side: CBS News Honored "Fallen Heroes"

As they did throughout much of last year, nearly every *CBS Evening News* weekday newscast in 2005 dedicated a few moments to positive reminiscences of American men and women who died while serving their country overseas. Most of these soldiers died in Iraq, although some served in Afghanistan or elsewhere. While not considered part of CBS's daily Iraq coverage, these segments merit praise for the kindness with which they recalled America's fallen soldiers.

anchors Dan Rather, Bob Schieffer and John Roberts narrated the brief 20-second spots that gave viewers a glimpse into what made each soldier unique, often illustrated by personal photos. Abraham Simpson "went from Eagle Scout to Marine overnight, and hoped one day to join the LAPD." Jason Poindexter "was a happy man who smiled a lot, which did not please his Marine drill sergeants." Michelle Witmer "loved kids and animals. She volunteered in an Iraqi orphanage and got her family to adopt an Iraqi puppy." Army Reservist Paul Kimbrough was "known for his kindness, he loved preaching the Bible. His favorite passage says, 'Be kind to strangers.' He always was."

CBS showcased courage: Alex Vaughn "was a big bouncing light who made you happy whenever he entered a room....Hit by shrapnel, he went on a mission to rescue a wounded comrade and was killed by small arms fire." Luke Wullenwaber "often volunteered for missions alongside or in place of his men. It was on such a mission that he was killed by a suicide car bomber."

About a quarter of these short profiles made it clear that the fallen heroes themselves supported the mission. Rob Sweeney "once said he was out to prove his generation are not slackers by fighting for democracy in Iraq." Aaron Holleyman was a special forces medic who saved "countless lives. When a roadside bomb damaged his hearing, he still insisted on staying in Iraq." And "in his last call from Iraq," Marine Sergeant Jayton Patterson said, "We're doing some good things for the people here." □

prisoners, claims that the American military had killed civilians in mistaken attacks, and even charges that a U.S. Marine murdered two Iraqi prisoners.

The networks offered heavy coverage of the accidental shooting in March of an Italian journalist, Giuliana Sgrena, who had been kidnapped by terrorists and who had been released into the custody of a top Italian secret service officer, Nicola Calipari. When Calipari and Sgrena were being driven at high speed to the airport, American soldiers at a military checkpoint signaled for them to stop, then opened fire. Sgrena was wounded, Calipari killed.

Recuperating from her wound in Italy, Sgrena charged that the soldiers had intended to kill her. "I can't exclude that I was the real target of the shooting," Sgrena said on Italian state television just days after the shooting, a charge picked up by NBC. CBS's Allen Pizzey relayed that her partner, Pierre Scolari, "accused the Americans of ambushing the car because, he claimed, she knew things they did not want published."

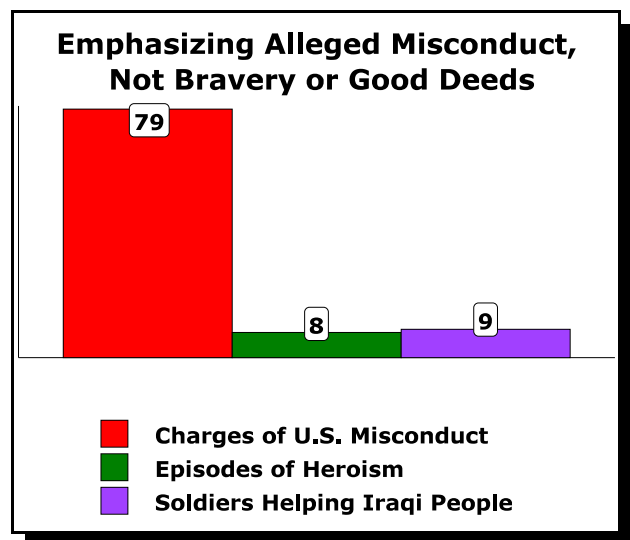
Angela Pascucci, a colleague of Sgrena's at her newspaper, *Il Manifesto*, told ABC's Mike Lee that the American soldiers were lying about the incident: "No, their car wasn't going fast. And she couldn't hear anything."

Lee asked, "No warnings?"

"No warning," came the reply. Only *NBC Nightly News*, in a story reported by Keith Miller on March 6, told viewers that Sgrena's *Il Manifesto* was a communist newspaper, and he could have added that long before the shooting, she was a vociferous critic of U.S. policy in Iraq. A surveillance satellite actually recorded the incident, and found that contrary to Sgrena's story, her car had to be going at least 60 miles per hour. The U.S. military cleared the soldiers of any wrongdoing.

If wrongdoing by soldiers merited such attention, what about the heroism or good deeds? All three networks did produce such optimistic stories, but very few – just eight that focused on episodes of valor and heroism, and nine that featured acts of kindness and generosity from American soldiers.

CBS, for example, told the story of Wisconsin Army National Guard Captain Scott Southworth, who bonded with an Iraqi orphan with cerebral palsy, and after six months of fighting red tape, was able to adopt the boy. ABC saluted the 115th



engineering group from Draper, Utah, who discovered a five-year old Iraqi girl who needed a heart operation to survive. The girl and her father made it to Portland, Maine in February, where doctors told ABC that her prognosis was excellent.

And all of the networks covered the April 4 ceremony where the young son of Sergeant Paul Smith accepted the Medal of Honor on his late father's behalf. As NBC's Andrea Mitchell explained, "The 33-year-old sergeant and his platoon were trying to secure the airport when they were attacked....In the firefight, a company of at least 100 Iraqis hit an armored personnel carrier, wounding the three soldiers inside and leaving their .50-caliber machine gun unmanned. Braving a hail of Iraqi bullets, Sergeant Smith jumped onto the gunner's position and fired back, exposed from the waist up."

"He could have fallen back. Instead, Smith used three boxes of ammunition to kill as many as 50 Iraqi soldiers before being fatally struck in the head," Mitchell continued. "One soldier, choosing to stand alone in the line of fire in order to save his men."

In a war where American soldiers are too often presented as casualty statistics or tainted by charges of misconduct, these positive stories of heroism and generosity were essential for balance. It's unfortunate that news audiences saw so few of them.

Pessimists on the Road to Democracy

Network coverage of Iraq was at its most hopeful the weekend that Iraqis voted in their first ever free, democratic elections. For a short while it was seen as an incredible transformation. Just two years earlier, Iraq was controlled by a brutal dictator; now, the country was set upon the path to join Israel as one of the Middle East's only democratic states. But just days after the January elections, network reporters reverted to a more skeptical stance, with stories placing the heaviest emphasis on the problems confronting Iraqis on their road to democracy.

Let's Hope Journalists Listen

Captain Christopher Vick, 18th Airborne Corps in Iraq: "I think it's hard for Americans to get up every day and turn on the news and see the horrible things that are going on here, because there's no focus on the good things that go on. What they see is another car bomb went off."

Reporter Kimberly Dozier: "Do you think that's exactly what the militants are trying to do?"

Vick: "Sure. You've got to win the information war. I mean, it's, if they can turn public perception away from the good that is happening in this country, then they will eventually win the battle."

– *CBS Evening News, June 29.*

Out of 343 stories that discussed Iraq's political process, negative news stories outnumbered positive ones by a four-to-three margin (124 to 92), with another 127 stories providing a mixed or neutral view. More than a third of the stories featuring optimistic or hopeful developments were broadcast over the course of just two days, January 30 and 31, the moment of Iraq's historic elections.

With all three news anchors in Iraq, the networks gave the elections heavy coverage. While all of the evening news broadcasts had featured gloomy predictions before the vote, the large turnout and relative tranquility of the day provided a pleasant surprise. Of the 40 stories that focused on Iraq's political process on January 30 and 31, fully 80 percent cast the situation in hopeful and optimistic terms.

"Iraqis came out by the many millions, literally, to take part in an Election Day pilgrimage," CBS anchor Dan Rather enthused from Baghdad's "Green Zone" on January 30, the day of the vote. "By the time the polls closed today, the celebrations spoke of a new Iraq, one with the potential for a future brighter than many people thought possible before the vote."



The same day, ABC's David Wright interviewed a Kurdish voter whose father had been killed by Saddam's regime. "Can you put into words what the feeling was like when you put that paper in the ballot box?" Wright asked.

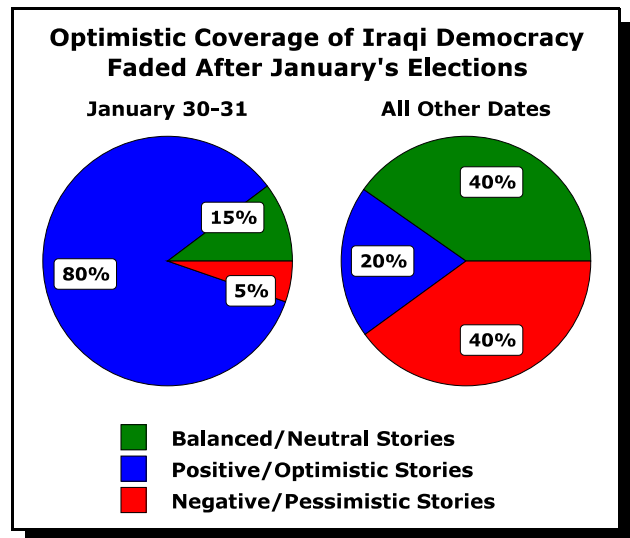
"Freedom. Happiness. Victory," came the enthusiastic reply.

Before the vote, reporters expected that Iraqi voters would be thwarted by terrorism. "This has to be the most dangerous political campaign in the world, with suicide bombings and assassination attempts just about every day," ABC's Wright fretted on January 9. As for election day itself, "there could be a bloodbath," NBC's Jim Maceda predicted on the January 17 *Nightly News*.

Three days before the election, CBS's Rather ominously passed along the terrorists' threats: "Fear is running high as the insurgency's campaign of intimidation left more Iraqis dead today. Bombs exploded at two Baghdad schools that are expected to serve as polling stations, and anti-election leaflets were everywhere threatening to, quote, 'wash the streets of Baghdad with the blood of voters.'"

The next night, January 28, CBS reporter Elizabeth Palmer despaired that "the first taste of democratic choice for many people will be a bitter one. They not only have to decide who to vote for on Sunday, but when to vote. One young man asked us this morning whether he'd have a better chance of avoiding a terrorist attack if he went to the polls in the morning, or the afternoon."

Journalists' pessimism returned soon after the votes were counted. When Iraq's newly-elected parliamentarians – representing parties that did not even exist two years earlier – were slow to name a new government, reporters voiced impatience. On April 21, NBC's Richard Engel complained that the naming of a new government had been held up by "paralyzing horse trading." Three days later, he declared that the Iraqi government "remains paralyzed by disputes over power....Too much negotiating, it's dragged on since January."



Two weeks later, on May 8, Engel reported that while "Iraq finally has a nearly-complete government after nearly 13 weeks of excruciating negotiations" the country "in general, is floundering without decisive leadership."

Engel was hardly the only reporter seeing dark clouds. On August 12, CBS's Sharyn Alfonsi was upset that women might be victimized if the new Iraqi constitution were too rooted in Islam. "Islamic hardliners who were contained under Saddam's regime have re-emerged. Their teachings encourage men to discipline their wives and daughters and, as their views become more widespread, so too could domestic violence."

Two weeks later, on August 28, CBS's Lara Logan chastised the Iraqis for failing to finalize their constitution: "Iraq's unity is in question here in this hall, where their leaders were supposed to agree on a draft constitution inside this very hall. But instead, just hours before the midnight deadline, it stood empty. There is still no consensus, but at least the parties have not stopped talking....The constantly shifting deadlines have turned into political farce."

A few days earlier, when it became clear that the constitution submitted to voters would not meet all of the demands of the minority Sunni group, ABC's Martha Raddatz posited the no-win situation facing the U.S. and the rest of the international coalition. Reporting from the Pentagon, Raddatz explained the reasoning:

"This is a very, very worrisome development to some military officials and defense officials in the building. Because if the Sunnis do not feel empowered, they believe the insurgency will get worse." But the Sunnis could also compete in the constitutional referendum: "If they vote this down, everything goes back to square one. The government dissolves, they have to start over again."

Reporters were guilty of letting the disorder of day-to-day democratic politics blind them to the potentially wonderful story unfolding before them. Only occasionally, such as the January elections, did journalists lift their eyes from the messy details of Iraqi politics and focus on the revolutionary big picture.

Another such occasion was after Lebanon's "Cedar Revolution," where peaceful protests helped lead to the withdrawal of Syrian troops who had occupied that country for nearly 30 years. NBC anchor Brian Williams saw the chance for a positive tide to sweep the Middle East, and allowed that some of the credit might rest with American policy in Iraq. Introducing a March 8 story, he described it as "a heady time for a White House that has been calling for the spread of freedom and watching it slowly break out in some spots."

Reporter David Gregory followed Williams: "The President boasted today that historic change is sweeping the Middle East, and he left little doubt he feels vindicated." But from the White House lawn he warned, "they insist no one here is gloating. Today, the President said democracy in the region will require a generational commitment, even when the good news these days disappears."

When it came to Iraq's democratic revolution, the good news disappeared from the network newscasts all too quickly.

The Networks' Good News

Believe it or not, there was good news to be found in Iraq. In fact, although such stories were easy to miss amid the depressing daily coverage, all three broadcast networks ran a number of stories documenting the progress being made by U.S. soldiers and the Iraqis themselves. While such positive pieces were a tiny fraction of the overall total, the occasional look at progress in Iraq offered crucial context to audiences exposed to months of discouraging news.

A Metaphor for Life in Iraq

"One thing you notice immediately on coming back [to Iraq] is that life goes on. It is a struggle, but people go to work and they shop. They buy flowers. But this city that has been running down for 30 years is simply battered in places. The people are battered, too. They really are....It has been true since the beginning of the occupation: Where there is tangible improvement in the quality of life, people are more optimistic. In parts of Sadr City in eastern Baghdad, new water pipes and new paving don't go unnoticed. In Baghdad's Shula neighborhood, lousy plumbing equals pessimism....Our reporters and camera people say that sewage comes up all the time, like a metaphor for what Iraqis are trapped by."

— ABC's Peter Jennings in Baghdad, *World News Tonight*, January 25.

Back on June 29, for example, ABC sent reporter Nick Watt to check up on a well-known trouble spot in Baghdad that has turned into a success story. "Last year, Haifa Street became known as 'Death Street.' Insurgents set up their own check points. They terrorized local people. They ambushed and killed troops who ventured in."



Now, Watt explained, "U.S. and Iraqi troops have turned it around." The street is now patrolled exclusively by troops of the new Iraqi army, and "not one of them has been shot, not one killed," Watt related. "A coffee shop owner thanks Iraqi soldiers for bringing peace. 'I couldn't even open my shop for five months because of the violence,' he tells them. 'Now, I stay open until midnight.'"

Watt concluded: "They don't call it 'Death Street' anymore."

Earlier in the year, on March 16, NBC's Michelle Caruso-Cabrera reported on a hiring boom in Baghdad's commercial district, reducing the country's 30 percent unemployment rate. "More and more reconstruction jobs, from Baghdad's airport, to Sadr City sewers, to the new television network are now going to Iraqis rather than foreign contractors," Caruso-Cabrera disclosed.

"One of the economy's most vibrant spots: the Iraqi stock exchange. When the Iraqi stock exchange opened last summer, only 15 companies were traded here. Now there are more than 40," she added. "Investors don't want to miss their chance."

A few days later, ABC reporter Keith Garvin documented how U.S. reconstruction efforts were helping Iraq's children: "One of the success stories is the Fine Arts Institute for Girls in Baghdad. After a \$60,000 renovation, students are flourishing in their new environment. The school's headmistress, Karima Hassan Ahmad, says with fresh paint, new supplies and a place to display their artwork, they're expressing themselves like never before."

Last year saw major fighting in the Sadr City section of Baghdad, but CBS's Kimberly Dozier found the situation much improved when she visited in June. Referring to the followers of Shi'ite cleric Muqtada al-Sadr, Dozier discovered that "now, once-armed followers of this radical cleric are working with Iraqi police. They're an unarmed, plain-clothes neighborhood watch sanctioned by the U.S. military."

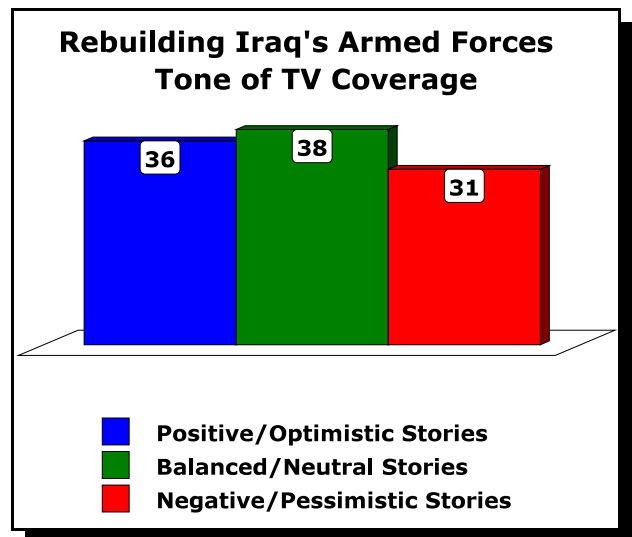
The truce in Sadr City has meant "U.S.-funded contractors [are] able to work, unimpeded by insurgent intimidation. In this neighborhood, a refurbished pumping station has kept the area free of sewage. The manager says now people are thanking her." While other areas still need their facilities restored, Dozier said complaining residents are "trading barbs instead of bullets. And some Iraqis are starting to see the foundation of a better life."

In almost any other country, it would not be international news when a city pumping station is brought back on line, or a school refurbished. But in Iraq, each such step is an important sign of growing normalcy, a positive development at odds with the perception that Iraq is a nation in chaos.

But in the first nine months of 2005, the networks ran only 10 positive stories about the re-building of Iraq's infrastructure, less than one percent of the total coverage. And another 11 stories cast the rebuilding mission in negative terms, focusing on jobs that still needed to be accomplished or the slowness at restoring normal life.

When it came to another major task – recruiting, training and deploying a new Iraqi army – the networks made it the focus of just 22 stories, while it was mentioned in 83 others for a total of 105, about seven percent of the overall coverage. But more of these stories actually took a positive angle about progress in establishing a credible Iraqi army (36) than those emphasizing setbacks or problems (31), making this a comparatively bright spot in the coverage.

Reporting on a July 24 suicide bombing in Baghdad, NBC reporter Kerry Sanders highlighted the praise of a U.S. army major for the way the Iraqi forces conducted themselves: "The Iraqi security forces here today have held firm. They are here and they are in charge. They have evacuated the wounded, they're caring for the dead, they're consoling the people who have lost loved ones. They are here for the Iraqi people."



On September 11, NBC reporter Peter Alexander noted another milestone in the coalition effort to rout terrorists from the northern city of Tal Afar: "It is the largest military offensive in Iraq since the assault on Fallujah ten months ago, with significant differences: the majority of soldiers here are Iraqi, backed by American armored forces."

Visiting Baghdad just before the January elections, *NBC Nightly News* anchor Brian Williams asked U.S. Army General David Petraeus, "Why do you think it is so dangerous right now? You and I could not walk into an open-air market right now in Baghdad."

The general disputed Williams' premise: "We could. And I'll do it if you want, in all honesty."

Narrating his January 28 story, Williams suggested General Petraeus was hardly the right test subject. "In all honesty, while he may truly mean it, when the general moves

around it's with massive security, the kind of armor plating strongly recommended for all visiting Americans."

Yet precisely six months later, on July 28, ABC's *World News Tonight* went with Petraeus on exactly such a walk "on one of the most dangerous streets in Baghdad" without any American military escorts. Instead, the general's security detail consisted solely of members of the new Iraqi army. Trusting the Iraqis he had trained, General Petraeus went up to a random street vendor and bought a Coke. He told ABC reporter Mike von Fremd the new Iraqi forces "do have a dangerous job. And they're not shrinking from it. There's not a case, since the elections at the end of January that we know of, where Iraqis didn't fight back. And they've taken some pretty horrific losses at various times."

Over the course of the last nine months, the networks also reported on the capture of wanted terrorist leaders and successful military operations that killed or captured numerous insurgents. But perhaps the most important "good news" stories coming out of Iraq are no more exciting than the bland stuff of day-to-day life. Yet their importance cannot be overstated, for as the commercial, social and political life of Iraq slowly but steadily edges closer to normality, the coalition's mission to liberate Iraq moves closer to final victory.

Conclusion: The Progress We're Making in Iraq Is Too Important to Ignore

Over the course of the year, all of the networks reported an erosion in the American public's support for the mission in Iraq. NBC took a survey in May asking whether "removing Saddam Hussein from power was or was not worth the number of U.S. military casualties and the financial cost?" More than half (51%) said the war was not worth it, while just 40 percent said the benefits of invading Iraq have been worth the cost.

In late August, after two weeks in which the networks lavished attention on Cindy Sheehan and her left-wing protest group, ABC asked the public whether "the United States is or is not making significant progress toward restoring civil order in Iraq?" It was nearly an even split, but the pessimists outnumbered the optimists, 50 to 48 percent.

In mid-September, CBS asked if "United States troops [should] stay in Iraq as long as it takes," or "leave Iraq as soon as possible, even if Iraq is not completely stable." Just over half (52%) wanted our troops to leave as soon as possible, compared with 42 percent who thought it important to finish the job.

Given the gloomy portrait that has been painted for them, the public's mood is entirely understandable. Much of the reality of Iraq is still depressing, particularly the loss of American lives and the nearly-constant terrorist activity. But many of the soldiers who

have served in Iraq think American media coverage has been too pessimistic, too focused on car bombings to really appreciate the progress being made on the ground.

In the October 9 *Pittsburgh Tribune-Review*, reporter David Brown wrote about his conversation with Army Specialist Bobby Hillen, who saw enormous progress in the year he was in Iraq. "It was a drastic difference," he told the reporter, as children went from playing in bomb craters to attending new schools. Hillen was upset that most Americans were not aware of all of the good work being done in their name.

"It's a slap in the face to a soldier when you turn on the news and all you hear are the negative aspects," Hillen told the newspaper.

Earlier this year, on NBC's *Today* show, co-host Matt Lauer interviewed a group of American soldiers in Iraq. When they all reported that morale among the troops was high, Lauer was incredulous.

"Don't get me wrong here," Lauer told the soldiers. "I think you are probably telling me the truth, but a lot of people at home [are] wondering how that could be possible with the conditions you're facing and with the attacks you're facing. What would you say to those people who are doubtful that morale can be that high?"

"Sir, if I got my news from the newspapers also, I'd be pretty depressed as well," replied Captain Sherman Powell. "We are confident that if we're allowed to finish the job we started, we'll be very proud of it and our country will be proud of us for doing it."



Just as it would be wrong for reporters to conceal the bad news (of which there has been plenty) journalists have an equal responsibility to fully inform citizens about the progress that is being made in Iraq. As the networks' own polls illustrate, our citizens are trying to make up their minds about whether the mission in Iraq is likely to succeed or fail, whether our soldiers are working towards a result that will benefit American security and the cause of freedom. The conundrum is that the daily journalism on which they rely usually does not do a very good job of providing citizens with the kind of big-picture overview they need to make such important decisions. In the case of Iraq, TV journalists have spent much of their time following the terrorists' agenda of violence and mayhem, pushing the accomplishments of our soldiers off the public's radar screen.

But there have been good things happening in Iraq, too, and it may turn out that the daily, not-so-glamorous work being done by our soldiers and the Iraqis themselves will turn out to be history's big headline on the war. It is a challenge for journalists, especially TV reporters, to find ways to balance the dramatic daily attacks with the big picture of a

country slowly but surely being restored and democracy dawning in the heart of the Middle East.

But such balance is crucial, since it is ultimately the public that is watching all of this unfold on their TV screens who will decide if the mission in Iraq proceeds to victory, or is ended short of success.

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