



Media Reality ✓ Check

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ABC, CBS, and NBC's Trial News Stresses Ex-Dictator's Outbursts, Not Evidence or Victims' Testimony

Covering Saddam's Shenanigans, Not His Crimes

With the Iraq war now three years old, one of its main achievements — the toppling of Saddam Hussein's mass-murdering dictatorship — has been largely shunted to the sidelines as the media focus on bad news: terrorist attacks, U.S. casualties and pessimistic warnings that Iraq is on the verge of "civil war."

Not even Saddam's trial for crimes against humanity has encouraged TV to take more than a cursory look at the ex-dictator's horrifying record. MRC analysts reviewed every mention of the trial on the ABC, CBS and NBC evening news from October 16 (when the networks began previewing the trial) through March 15 (when Saddam himself took the stand).

MRC found the networks spent nearly three times as much airtime on Saddam's courtroom antics as on the serious testimony of his victims and the documentary evidence that Saddam himself ordered the killing of more than 140 residents of the Shiite town of Dujail and the imprisonment and torture of hundreds more townspeople. Details:

■ **He's No O.J. Simpson.** Saddam's trial has been mentioned in just 64 stories (including brief anchor-read items) over the last 5 months. Total coverage amounted to just under 90 minutes. The *CBS Evening News* offered the most coverage (21 stories, 34 minutes) followed by ABC's *World News Tonight* (23 stories, 30 minutes). *NBC Nightly News* aired the least: 20 stories amounting to 25½ minutes of coverage, barely five minutes per month.

In contrast, the first six months of O.J. Simpson's murder trial garnered 431 stories (824 minutes) from those same networks, a 1994 Center for Media and Public Affairs study found. Simpson was accused of killing two people; Saddam is thought responsible for hundreds of thousands of deaths.

■ **Saddam Steals the Show.** In spite of a record equal to some of the worst tyrants in human history, reporters found Saddam's personal reactions and orchestrated antics more compelling than the witness testimony against him. The

networks gave Saddam's behavior more airtime than any other topic — nearly 30 minutes, one-third of the coverage.

In contrast, the networks allotted just 11½ minutes for witness testimony and evidence, just slightly below the nearly 12 minutes devoted to suggestions Saddam would not get a fair hearing. On the Oct. 18 *World News Tonight*, ABC's Jim Sciutto pointed out how "human rights groups doubt the former dictator will get a fair trial." On March 15, after Saddam's testimony was cut off by the judge, ABC showed complaints from Ramsey Clark: "Look, he's on trial for his life. A defendant has a right to give his background and his thoughts and his emotions."

Saddam Trial Coverage

October 16, 2005 to March 15, 2006

Saddam Courtroom Antics	33%
Trial Unfair to Saddam	13%
Testimony/Evidence of Guilt	13%
Trial Not Safe for Lawyers	12%
Iraqi Public Reaction	12%
Background of Case	6%
Other/General Procedural	11%

■ **Hiding the Evidence.** The networks provided merely sporadic coverage of the evidence. ABC was the only newscast to air a full report on Saddam's admission on March 1 that he ordered the Dujail killings. (CBS and NBC gave that news just 11 and 18 seconds, respectively). Only CBS mentioned

the December 21 testimony of Ali al-Haydari, who was 14 when he saw evidence of torture: "I heard screaming and shouting, then silence as a body came out in a blanket." But that same night all of the networks mentioned Saddam's claim that U.S. soldiers had beaten him.

Despite the severity of the crimes, reporters fixated on the villain. "Saddam seemed like he was still president," claimed NBC's Richard Engel (Oct. 19). To CBS's Lara Logan, Saddam's disruptive shenanigans were winning the day: "The appearance of credibility is what really matters in this trial, and that's what's missing at the moment." (Feb. 2)

The networks could have resisted the impulse to reward Saddam's cynical strategy and focused on the evidence. Instead, they've played right into his hands. — *Rich Noyes*

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