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MRC Study: Networks Paint Dark Picture of War Effort, Emphasizing Terrorist Attacks and U.S. Deaths

TV's Depressing, Defeatist Coverage of Iraq War

Millions of Iraqis walked to the polls on Saturday and apparently approved a democratic constitution, more progress for that embattled country. Back in January, the three broadcast networks devoted huge resources to Iraq's first free elections, and the anchors celebrated the high turnout and relative tranquility of the day. On that first election day, CBS's Dan Rather enthused that Iraqis saw "the potential for a future brighter than many people thought possible before the vote."

This time around, network coverage was more muted and the tone more ambivalent. On Friday, the night before the vote, the networks held their Iraq coverage to a single story, balancing security worries with predictions of a high turnout. Unlike in January, none led with the Iraqi vote: ABC's *World News Tonight* started off with a story on the bird flu, the *CBS Evening News* led with Karl Rove's testimony, while the *NBC Nightly News* made inflation their headline of the day.

The day after Saturday's success, NBC anchor John Seigenthaler offered a positive lead: "The people of Iraq took another step this weekend toward self-government." But reporter Mike Boettcher quickly warned: "With the issue of the constitution almost settled, Iraqis face a host of other questions about how to unite a fractured nation. Those will require more than just a simple yes or no answer."

With the exception of those January elections, ABC, CBS and NBC have stuck with their "Iraq is a quagmire" theme all year. A new MRC study of every broadcast evening newscast from January 1 to September 30 computed the extent of the networks' doom and gloom coverage:

■ **TV's Iraq coverage has been extremely 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 discussed a positive development (just 211 stories, or 15%).

■ **TV's gloom is growing.** 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, while bad news stories swelled to 73 percent, a ten-to-one disparity.

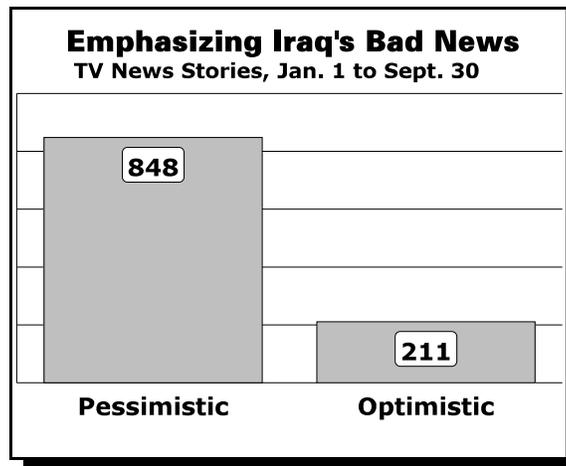
■ **Terrorist attacks were the centerpiece of TV's war news.** Two out of every five network evening news stories (564) featured car bombings, assassinations, kidnappings or other attacks, more than any other topic.

■ **Few stories focused on the heroism or generosity of American soldiers.** Just eight stories recounted episodes of heroism by U.S. troops, while nine told about American soldiers helping individual Iraqis. In contrast, 79 stories focused on allegations of combat mistakes or outright misconduct on the part of U.S. military personnel.

Visiting Iraq last August, NBC's Matt Lauer was startled when a group of soldiers told him troop morale was high. "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?" Army

Captain Sherman Powell zinged the pessimistic press corps, telling Lauer: "Sir, if I got my news from the newspapers also, I'd be pretty depressed as well."

Here's the good news: Iraq's army is getting stronger, its infrastructure is being rebuilt and democracy is taking root. But the networks often bury this progress beneath the bad news of daily attacks and U.S. deaths. Are reporters too busy looking for the next Vietnam to appreciate the real story of American accomplishment in Iraq? — *Rich Noyes*



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