

Media Reality ✓ Check

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MRC Study: Amid Iraq Progress, Networks Continue to Emphasize Violence and Calls for Withdrawal

No End to Media's Defeatism on Iraq War

According to an ABC News/*Time* magazine survey of 1,700 Iraqi citizens, released in advance of historic parliamentary elections on Thursday, "surprising levels of optimism prevail in Iraq," according to ABC's polling director, Gary Langer. "Despite the daily violence there, most living conditions are rated positively, seven in 10 Iraqis say their own lives are going well, and nearly two-thirds expect things to improve in the year ahead."

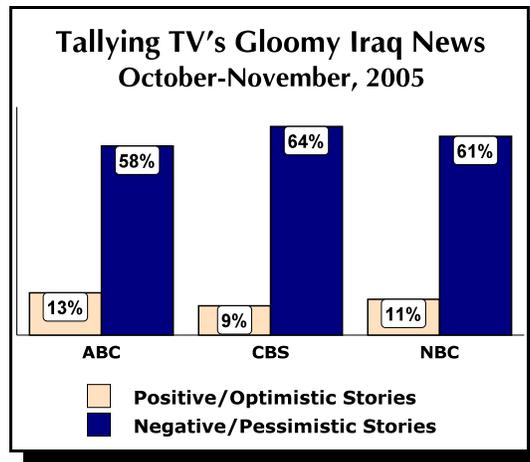
Of course, those optimistic Iraqis don't watch ABC, CBS and NBC every night. A new Media Research Center study of network evening news coverage of Iraq during October and November found the networks maintained the same negative approach our team found during a review of Iraq news during the first nine months of 2005. In spite of a successful constitutional referendum in October, the start Saddam's trial for mass murder, successful U.S. offensive campaigns along the Syrian border and the return of a number of cities and town to full Iraqi control, the networks continued to offer mainly downbeat coverage of the situation in Iraq.

MRC's latest analysis focused on 324 Iraq stories aired on the three broadcast evening newscasts between October 1 and November 30. Unlike the earlier study, MRC found that the three newscasts did not provide relatively similar amounts of Iraq war news. The *CBS Evening News* led the way, airing 139 stories on Iraq — 90 full reports, plus another 49 short items read by the anchor. *NBC Nightly News* aired 113 stories (81 full reports vs. 32 anchor briefs), while ABC's *World News Tonight* aired only 72 Iraq stories in two months (49 full reports and 23 anchor briefs).

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 military

victories or progress on the political front)? We catalogued each story, counting as "positive" any story where optimistic news or analysis eclipsed any pessimistic news by at least a three-to-two margin, while "negative" stories emphasized bad news by the same ratio. If a story could not be assigned to either group, it was counted as balanced or neutral.

Using these criteria, we could classify only 34 stories (10%) as positive or optimistic, compared to 200 (62%) that emphasized negativity or pessimism about the Iraq mission, a six-to-one disparity. (The remaining 90 stories were neutral.) During the first nine months of the year, we found 211 stories (15%) emphasizing positive developments, compared with 848 (61%) that relayed mainly bad news. For the year, the number of negative stories on Iraq stands at 1,048 (61%), to just 245 positive stories (14%).



TV's BAD NEWS AGENDA

One reason for all the negativity was heavy coverage of suicide bombings and other terrorist violence. The networks collectively aired 125 stories about such attacks, about 39 percent of the total. Some of the carnage seemed aimed at getting media coverage, and the networks did not resist those who murdered their way onto TV screens.

NBC's Mike Boettcher, for example, reported on November 18 bombings that nearly demolished the hotel he was sleeping in. "I thought, 'Oh, my God! I hope this hotel does not collapse,'" Boettcher told anchor Brian Williams. CBS's Bob Schieffer introduced an October 24 story about bombings near another hotel housing journalists. "The whole thing was caught on tape," Schieffer announced before reporter Kimberly Dozier narrated the grisly scene captured by hotel security cameras. "The vicious attack shows the insurgents are studying their targets carefully, biding their time, and waiting for that moment's lapse that leaves their victims vulnerable," Dozier relayed.

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NETWORK PESSIMISM ON IRAQ (cont.)

The networks also emphasized the number of American dead and wounded in Iraq, with 98 stories on casualties in October and November. ABC's *World News Tonight* led their October 25 broadcast with the news of the 2,000 U.S. death. "It is a milestone," claimed anchor Elizabeth Vargas. That same night, CBS's Schieffer could not resist taking a political jab: "More than 90 percent of the 2,000 who died in the war have died since the President declared major combat was at an end in May 2003."

As we found earlier this year, few stories (just five in two months) featured stories of American soldiers' heroism, while nearly four times as many (19) focused on allegations of U.S. wrongdoing, including the accidental killing of civilians and claims of prisoner mistreatment. ABC's Jake Tapper on November 14 offered a long report (touted as "exclusive") on two Iraqi men who said they were beaten, tortured and sexually humiliated by American forces. Tapper spent most of the story uncritically relaying the Iraqis' claims, except for one sentence mentioning that the Pentagon denied any U.S. wrongdoing.

But CNN's Tom Foreman, in a story on the same two men shown the next night on *Anderson Cooper 360*, found a number of "strange" elements to their story, including claims by one of the men that American soldiers tormented him with lions. "This lawsuit may produce evidence that more Iraqis were brutalized by American soldiers, or it may show that American soldiers are being unjustly accused of things they did not do," Foreman skeptically concluded.

EXCITED BY ANTI-WAR POLITICIANS

The networks devoted relatively heavy coverage (64 stories, or 20% of the total) to the debate over the war. That is a significant change in focus from the first nine months of 2005, when such stories only accounted for just seven percent of Iraq news. Continuing a trend that began in August with heavy coverage of Cindy Sheehan's anti-war protests, the networks mainly focused on the complaints of those opposed to the administration's Iraq policies.

On October 10, after months of negative coverage, CBS's Bob Schieffer reported how a new poll found "nearly two-thirds of the American people, 64 percent, now believe the

war in Iraq was not worth the cost." In a November 21 profile of Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice, CBS's Wyatt Andrews could not accept her optimistic assessment of Iraq: "Is it typical political stagecraft from someone critics fear is over her head, or could it be bedrock belief?"

And all three networks led their November 17 newscasts with Representative John Murtha's call for withdrawal. NBC's Brian Williams began by touting Murtha's authority: "When one Congressman out of 435 members of Congress speaks out against the war in Iraq, it normally wouldn't be news, but it was today, because of who he is: Congressman John Murtha, a Vietnam veteran."

	Media	Public
Decision to Take Military Action Was Right.....	28%	48%
Effort to Build Iraqi Democracy Will Succeed.....	33%	56%
War in Iraq Helpful to Overall War on Terrorism.....	22%	44%

— Based on Pew Research Center polls of top journalists and the general public, report released November 17.

But the networks paid almost no attention to Murtha before his liberal-pleasing call to withdraw. A Nexis search of the last five years revealed just one reference to Murtha on *NBC Nightly News* before November 17. That was on June 28, when Tim Russert found Murtha worried that "the administration is laying the groundwork to cut and run in 2006, and he fears the entire area will be taken over by Iran." The *CBS Evening News* and

ABC's World News Tonight never quoted Murtha in the five years before November 17.

THE MEDIA VS. THE MISSION

On November 22, the *Washington Times* ran a lengthy op-ed from an anonymous Marine in Iraq: "Morale among our guys is very high. They not only believe they are winning, but that they are winning decisively. They are stunned and dismayed by what they see in the American press, whom they almost universally view as against them....They are inflicting casualties at a rate of 20-1 and then see s*** like 'Are we losing in Iraq?' on television."

A recent poll by the Pew Research Center found that top journalists are far more pessimistic than the U.S. public (which itself has faced month after month of bad news on Iraq). Plainly, many journalists are approaching the Iraq story from the premise that the U.S. mission has been a big mistake. Will their negative drumbeat make that belief a self-fulfilling prophecy? — *Rich Noyes*

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