

# The Media Go to War

## TV News Coverage of the War in Iraq

### Major findings:

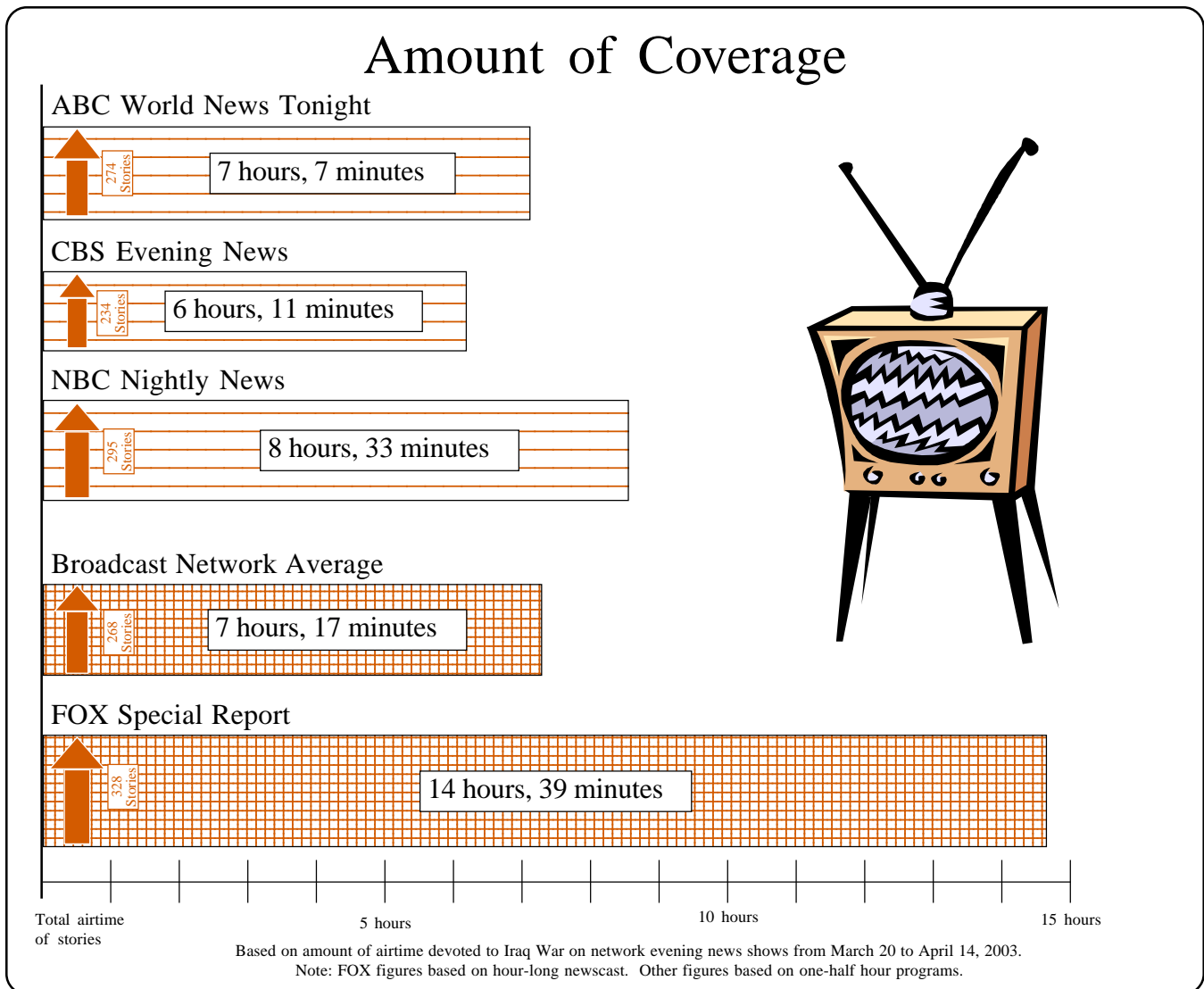
- **Gung Ho:** CBS and FOX had the most prowar coverage. *Page 3*
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How did TV news cover the war in Iraq? And how did the coverage compare to reporting on the Gulf War in 1991? This month's *Media Monitor* examines TV news coverage of the Iraq war from the first missile strike on March 19 through the fall of Tikrit on April 14. We compare coverage on the broadcast networks with that of Fox News Channel, the upstart cable news network whose approach to news has expanded its audience while provoking controversy within journalism. Finally, we compare the findings with the results of our 1991 study of Gulf War news.

**T**he war in Iraq brought a rare showing of praise for the American media. A Pew Center study found that 74 percent of those surveyed on coverage of the war gave the media a grade of good to excellent. And a Readership Institute survey found that TV news was rated as providing the most engaging and accurate coverage of the war.

Of course, news coverage of major events is never without its critics. There were many complaints that the news was fragmented and lacked context. As journalists struggled to make sense of the endless stream of reports from the front lines, the ebb and flow of battle was sometimes over-dramatized and over-analyzed. Predictably, some conservative groups derided the television coverage as anti-war, while their liberal counterparts condemned the networks as propagandists for the Pentagon.

To provide a systematic perspective on how television news covered the war, we analyzed the four most heavily viewed evening newscasts: ABC's *World News Tonight* with Peter Jennings, CBS's *Evening News* with Dan Rather, NBC's *Nightly News* with Tom Brokaw, and Fox News Channel's (FOX's) *Special Report with Brit Hume*. We were especially interested in comparing FOX's distinctive and controversial approach to war coverage with that of the broadcast networks. (Limited



resources prevented us from including the other cable news networks, CNN and MSNBC.)

### Amount of Coverage

We examined all coverage of the war, from the surprise missile strike on Baghdad on March 19 through the fall of Tikrit on April 14, which marked the end of major combat operations. During this period of 26 days, the four evening newscasts ran a total of 1,100 stories on the war, amounting to 33 hours and 30 minutes of coverage. CBS devoted the least coverage to the conflict

with 234 stories, representing six hours 11 minutes of airtime. ABC came next with 274 stories and seven hours seven minutes of airtime. Among the broadcast networks, NBC carried the most war coverage, with 295 stories lasting eight hours 33 minutes.

FOX's evening news show devoted many more stories (328) and much more time (14 hours and 19 minutes) to the conflict than did any of the "big three." This difference reflects the hour-long running time for "Special Report," double that of the broadcast network news shows. When this is taken into account, the

amount of coverage per half-hour of FOX was almost identical to the average for the broadcast networks. Nonetheless, FOX featured the most concentrated agenda of war news. The war accounted for 95 percent of all stories on the FOX newscast, compared to 88 percent on ABC, 85 percent on NBC, and 77 percent on CBS.

### Tone of Coverage

We measured the tone of coverage in terms of opinions expressed on the war, the administration's policies, and the military's performance.

The overall results reflect four phases of the media's portrayal of the war.

Initially, there was upbeat "shock and awe" coverage of U.S. military might. This gave way to doubts and recriminations, as the Coalition's offensive seemed to stall. Pro-war sentiment surged again when it became evident that U.S. forces were advancing on Baghdad almost at will. Finally, a new wave of criticism accompanied problems with the humanitarian relief efforts and the urban chaos that erupted during the war's final days.

Analyzing this aspect of the coverage allowed us to examine a long-simmering controversy over FOX's

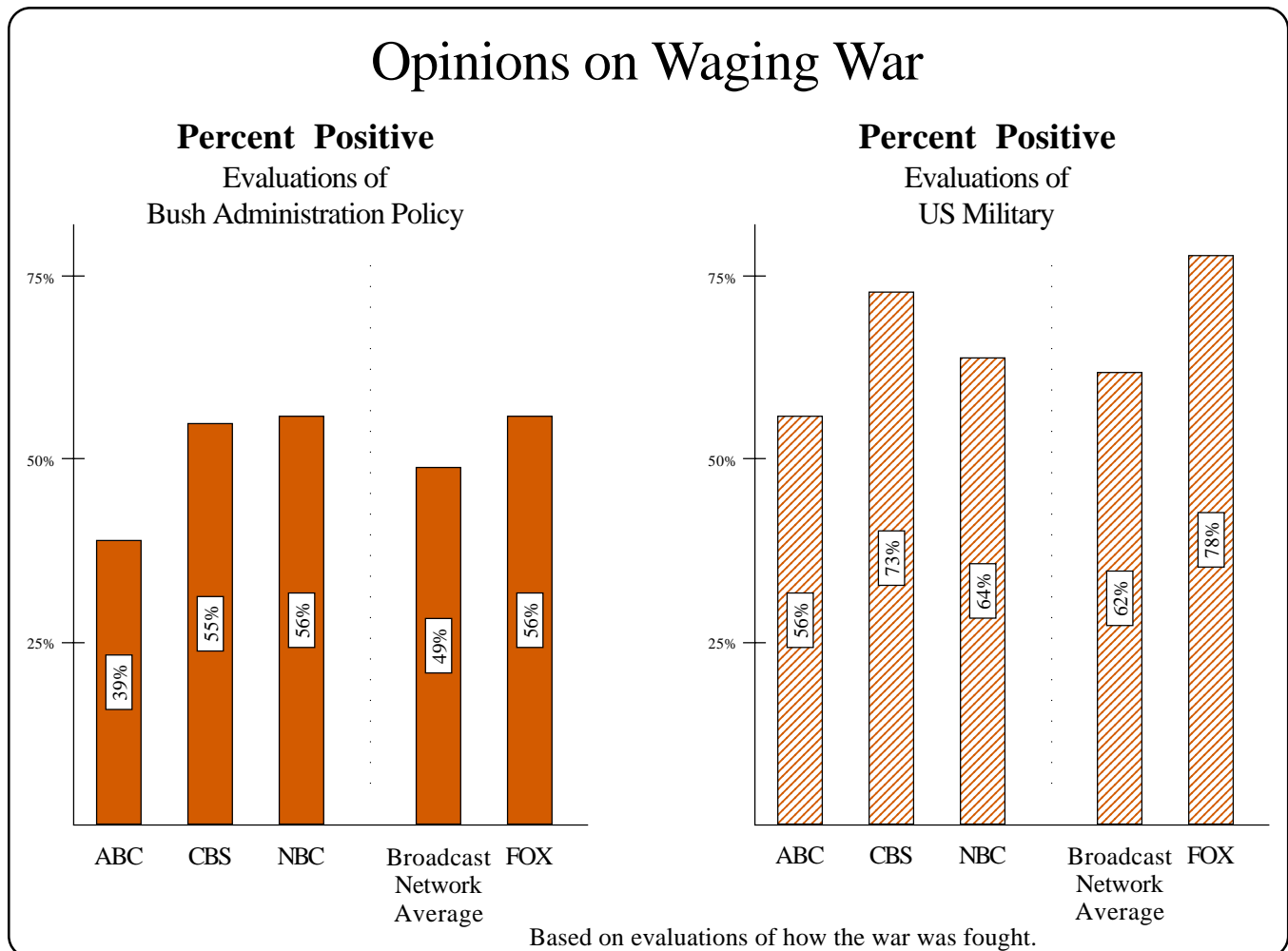
approach to journalism. Though FOX advertises its coverage as "fair and balanced," critics have charged that its news agenda is openly conservative. So it was not surprising that FOX presented itself as proudly patriotic when war broke out, while its critics charged it with cheer-leading or jingoism.

Our study found that FOX could indeed be termed the most pro-war network on some (but not all) measures. However, we did not find a clear division between FOX's approach to covering the war and that of the other broadcast networks. Instead, there was a spectrum of coverage that ranged from pro-war to anti-war, with FOX at one end and ABC at the other. This diversity

meant that viewers who tuned into each of the four newscasts received four distinct views of the war.

### Judging Bush's Policies

Overall, the four news shows were almost evenly balanced in their evaluation of the Bush administration's war policies (53 percent positive vs. 47 percent negative judgments). ABC aired a preponderance of criticism -- fewer than two out of every five evaluations were positive (39 percent) on "World News Tonight." For example, in a March 24 story that criticized the Bush administration's humanitarian aid efforts, an Iraqi plaintively asked ABC's John Donvan, "Where is the



helping? No helping. Give me helping. My children hungry, my old man hungry, my woman hungry. No medicine, no water, no food."

CBS and NBC, on the other hand, came closer to achieving a balance between supportive and critical comments (55 percent positive on CBS and 56 percent positive on NBC). Clearly, the broadcast networks were not the cheerleading section for President Bush that some anti-war critics believed they were. But they were not overly disposed to air evaluations of administration policy in either direction. Relative to the number of stories broadcast, there were, in fact, few comments overtly supporting or opposing government policy on the war.

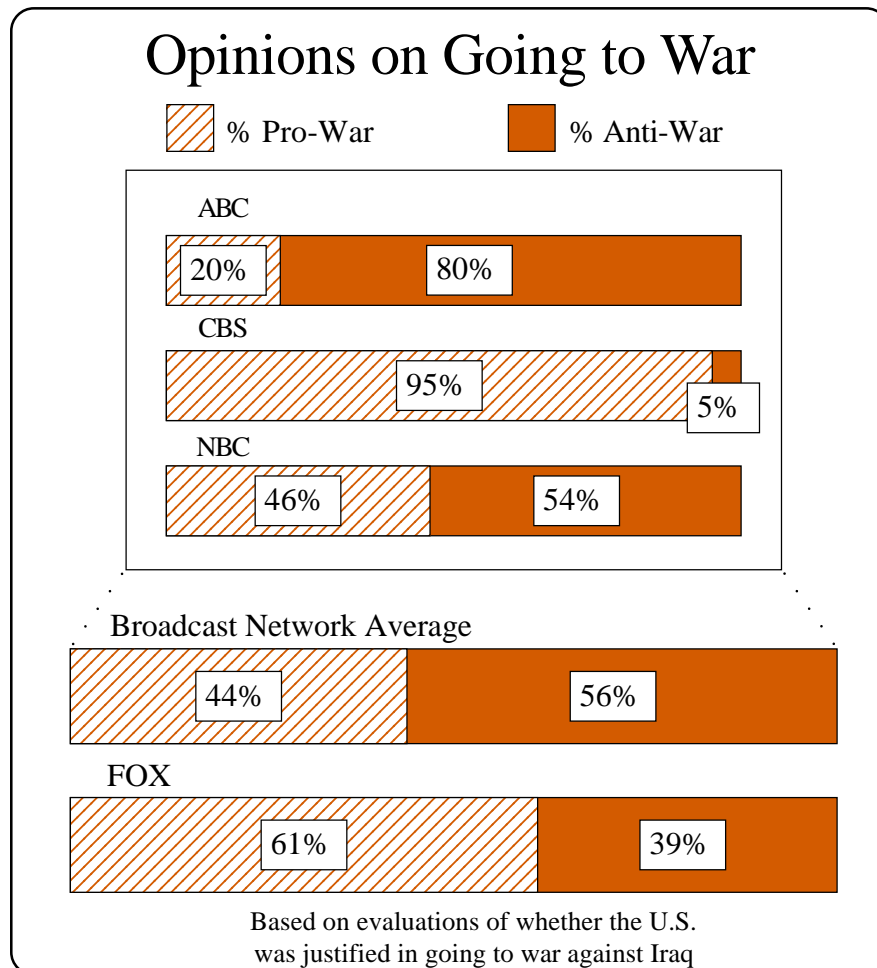
This reticence contrasted sharply with FOX's approach. Although FOX had about the same proportion of positive and negative evaluations of Bush's policies on the war (56 percent positive) as CBS and NBC, viewers watching "Special Report with Brit Hume" would have heard these kinds of judgments far more often. In fact, each half-hour of "Special Report," averaged almost twice as many positive evaluations of the Bush administration as did the broadcast network newscasts. For example, after exiled Skeikn Haakim Al Hukeem was brought back to Iraq, he told FOX's Maya Zumwalt: "I think my life just started today and I really want to thank coalition troops and George W. Bush for the wonderful steps to liberate us from the regime."

Correspondingly, of course, FOX averaged almost twice as many criticisms as the other networks. For example, on April 3 FOX aired Senate Minority Leader Tom Daschle's complaint, "I am saddened that this president failed so miserably at diplomacy that we're now forced to war." In this sense, FOX's coverage of Bush administration policy on the war was more opinionated than its competitors, but not necessarily less balanced.

### Judging the Military

The American public typically responds to the onset of combat with instinctive concern and support for the troops. So it was hardly surprising to see that goodwill mirrored in the most-watched news shows' coverage of the military. Overall, 70 percent of all evaluations of the military's performance were positive. For example, on March 31 FOX Pentagon correspondent Bret Baier expressed what he called "a growing confidence at the highest levels in this building that the air campaign... is indeed working, that the coalition ground movement is going according to plan, and that the Iraq regime is quickly losing control of that country."

FOX's coverage of the military was more favorable than that of the broadcast networks by 78 to 62 percent positive comments. However, there was very little difference between FOX and CBS, which featured 73 percent favorable judgments. ABC and NBC also aired more support than criticism of the military's performance, although they were less favorable than the other two networks (56 percent and 64 percent positive respectively). For example, on April 8 ABC's



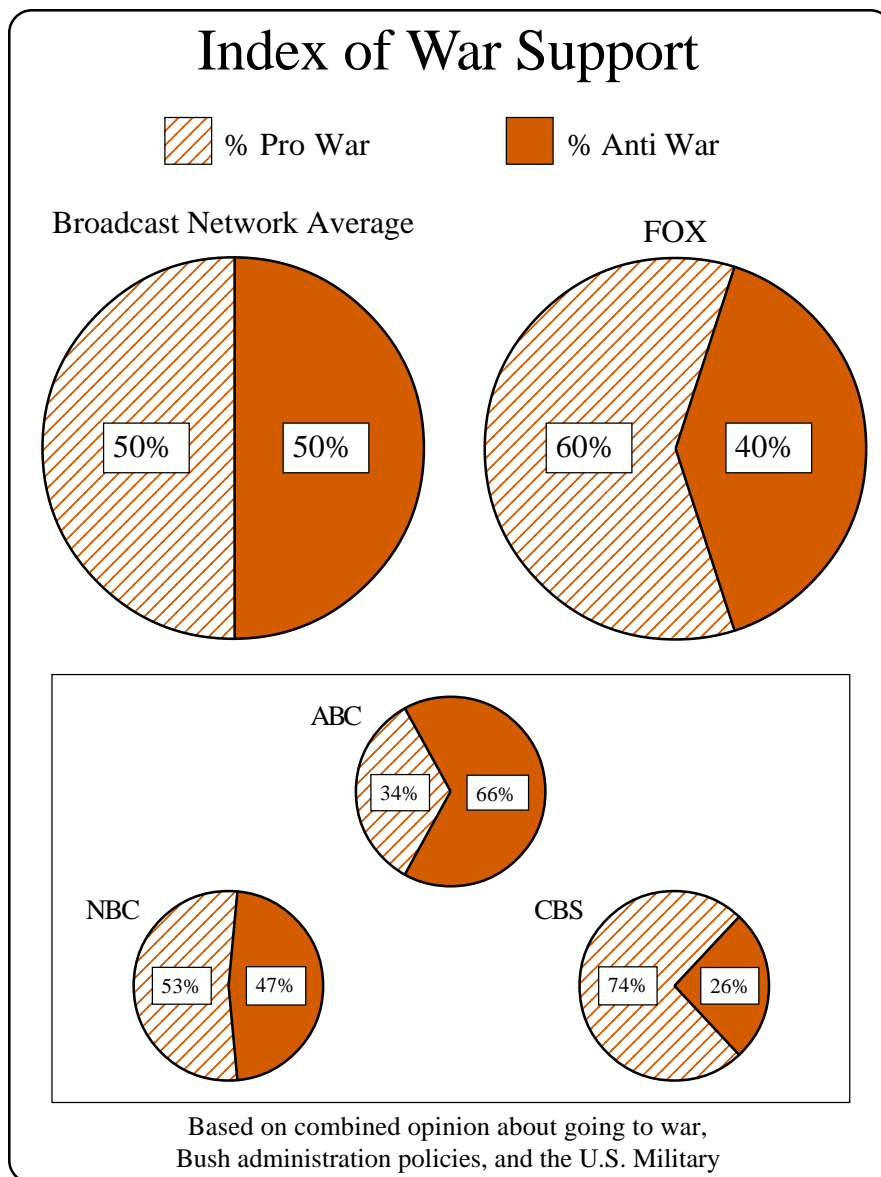
Martha Raddatz translated an Iraqi civilian's anguished complaint, "My neighbor and my wife died here. Because of Americans, there are three families that are all under the rubble."

Once again, however, it is important to take account of the number of evaluations as well as their direction. Fox carried more evaluations of the military's performance than the other three networks combined. Even after correcting for the difference in available airtime, FOX led all networks in the rate of evaluations per half-hour of news.

### Judging the War

Beyond evaluations of the leading actors in the conflict, we also tallied all comments that directly expressed support for or opposition to the war itself. ABC, which aired the most criticism of the Bush administration and the U.S. military, also featured the most opposition to the war. Four out of every five such comments (80 percent) expressed anti-war sentiment on "World News Tonight." For example, in response to ABC reporter Chris Cuomo's question, "What is your message?" one protester replied, "Stop the war and bring the troops home." (3/22) On NBC, opinions were almost evenly balanced -- 46 percent pro-war vs. 54 percent antiwar.

It was CBS rather than FOX that produced the greatest proportion of pro-war sentiment -- 95 percent of relevant sound bites on "The CBS Evening News" expressed support for the war. For example, on March 21 CBS's Vince Gonzalez interviewed an American man whose brother had died in the fighting but



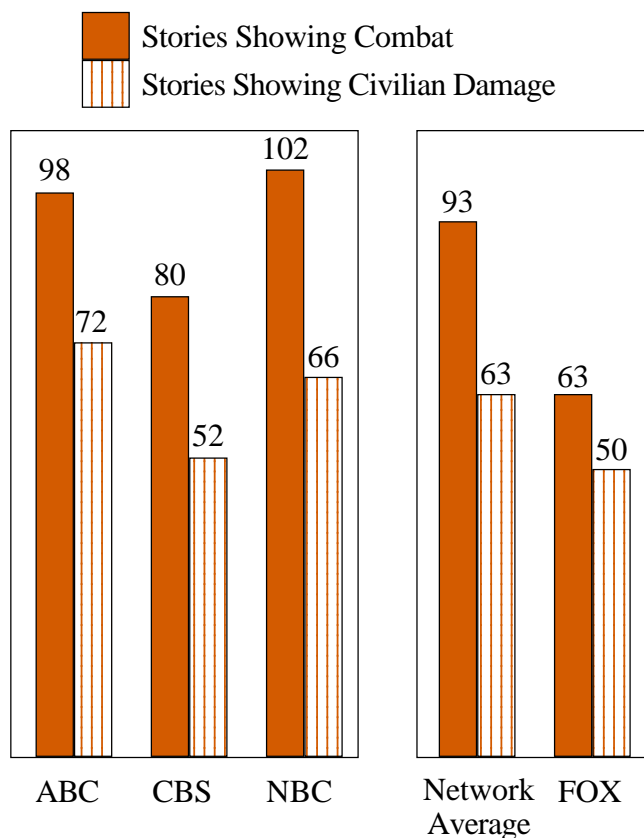
who still supported the war: "It doesn't make me angry... we need to disarm Saddam and get rid of those weapons of mass destruction, and they're over there doing their job."

On FOX, the level of support was a more modest 61 percent. But once again, FOX's coverage stood out for the sheer number of opinions expressed. Compared to CBS's total of 19 judgements (all but one of which supported the war), FOX aired 67. ABC and NBC occupied a middle ground with 45 and 46 opin-

ions respectively. FOX was, therefore, the most visible source of pro-war opinion, but not the most one-sided. Indeed, opinion on the war was more balanced on FOX than it was on ABC.

These different perspectives reflected the sources whose opinions the networks sought out. ABC was over four times as likely to quote anti-war protesters (38 percent of all opinions) as members of the Bush administration (9 percent of all opinions). On FOX, the sourcing was reversed: Thirty-three percent of

## Stories Showing Combat and Civilian Damage



opinions on the war came from the administration and only two percent from protesters. NBC split the difference, with 11 percent from the administration and 15 percent from protesters. On CBS, a majority of opinions (53 percent) came from government officials, but no anti-war protesters were quoted. This again reflects the low number of opinions that were voiced on CBS. FOX aired statements in support for the war from administration officials more often than the three broadcast networks combined.

We also analyzed the content of sound bites in support of the war to see how often they contained any of the major rationales the Bush administration offered for the inva-

sion -- to remove weapons of mass destruction, to oust Saddam Hussein, and to free the Iraqi people. We found that FOX aired these rationales more frequently than the other three networks combined.

Finally, we combined these three opinion dimensions -- toward the Bush administration, the military, and the war itself -- into a single index measuring the "hawkish" vs. "dovish" tone of Iraq war coverage. This revealed a clear spectrum of opinion toward the war across the four networks: ABC aired the most dovish sentiments; opinion on NBC was close to balanced; there was solid but not overwhelming support for the war on FOX; and the most hawkish distribution of opinion ap-

peared on CBS. However, given the paucity of opinion on CBS, FOX could be awarded the mantle of media hawk. And combined war-related opinion on the three broadcast networks was evenly balanced between hawks and doves.

### Images of War

The experience of Vietnam taught Americans that images can be more powerful than commentary in television's coverage of war. Whether driven by news judgment or a result of having fewer reporters in the field, FOX showed the fewest images of the destruction wrought by the war, despite the additional airtime on "Special Report." FOX showed 50 percent fewer stories containing visual images of civilian casualties than the three broadcast networks averaged, 66 percent fewer visuals of U.S. and British military casualties, 50 percent fewer visuals of Iraqi military casualties, and 20 percent fewer visuals of property damage. Out of 328 FOX stories on the war, only ten contained images of civilian casualties, 11 featured images of military casualties, and 50 showed images of property damage. FOX also showed significantly less combat footage than the broadcast networks -- 63 stories compared to an average of 93 for its competitors.

By contrast, NBC aired the most stories showing scenes of combat (102) and military casualties (34), while ABC featured the most stories showing civilian casualties (28) and property damage (66). These totals represent a relatively small segment of all war coverage. Although the three broadcast networks aired 772 stories among them, just 61 con-

tained images of civilian casualties, 81 showed military casualties and 190 depicted property damage. Combat imagery appeared in just over one-third (35 percent) of all broadcast network stories and just under one-fifth (19 percent) of all stories that appeared on FOX.

## ABC v. FOX

While FOX was arguably the most pro-war network, there can be no doubt that ABC was the most anti-war. We have seen that ABC carried the most negative coverage of the Bush administration's policies, the American military's performance, and the decision to go to war. FOX and ABC proved to be bookends on several other measures as well. For example, when specific justifications for the war were articulated, FOX cited the removal of WMDs eight times as often as ABC, the removal of Saddam Hussein five times as often, and the liberation of the Iraqi people over three times as often.

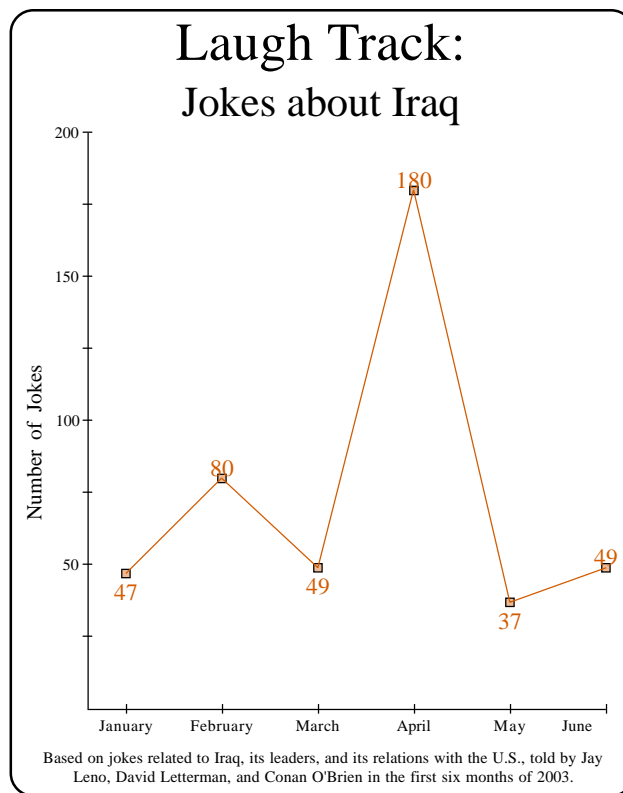
On an issue that loomed large in the final days of the war and its aftermath, ABC gave voice to the complaint that the U.S. was handling civil unrest poorly on 14 occasions, whereas that viewpoint never appeared on FOX. For example, on April 12 an Iraqi complained to ABC's Dan Harris, "Where is the Americans? Is this how they want Iraq to be? Everybody's stealing and looting from everybody! We want secure! We want peace for our country!" Similarly, the criticism that the U.S. was doing too little about civilian casualties appeared five times on ABC but never on FOX. Conversely, the viewpoint that the U.S. was indeed doing enough about civilian casualties was

heard three times on FOX but not on ABC.

Finally, the differences went beyond the verbal tone of the coverage to encompass the choice of visuals as well. ABC ran almost three times as many stories with visuals of civilian casualties as FOX (28 vs 10). ABC also aired over twice as many stories with images of military casualties (26 vs 11), as well as more stories with images of property damage (72 vs 50).

## Iraqi Freedom vs. Desert Storm

**Amount of coverage:** Media coverage of Operation Iraqi Freedom was heavy but not unprecedented. Though the battle phase lasted only 26 days, compared to 42 days for Operation Desert Storm in 1991, the second Gulf War received proportionally less coverage on the three broadcast network evening newscasts. In 2003 they ran, on average, 32 stories per evening during the war compared to 41 in 1991 -- a 22 percent drop. (FOX News



Channel did not exist when war broke out in 1991).

**Evaluations:** Despite widespread debate over "gung-ho" media coverage, the networks were less supportive of the military in the second Gulf War than they were in the first. The average network rating for the U.S. military's performance during Desert Storm was 95 percent positive; during Iraqi Freedom it was only 62 percent positive.

The network news shows also aired slightly more criticism of the second Bush administration's handling

I had something strange happen to me yesterday. I'm coming to work, I turn on the radio in the morning. It seems the war is going badly. We weren't in control. The enemy was escaping, the people of Iraq hated us. Then I'm driving home, we're winning every battle, we're racing towards Baghdad, we're being cheered on by the Iraqi people. And then I realized what happened. On the way in I was listening to National Public Radio. On the way home, I was listening to Fox!"

-Jay Leno, 4/7/03

of the war than they did of the first Bush administration's (49 percent positive vs 56 percent positive).

The network news shows were about equally critical of why and how war was being waged during both wars. In 1991, 57 percent of sources on the broadcast network evening news expressed anti-war opinions, compared to 56 percent in the second Iraq War.

These results might call into question the Pentagon's strategy of allowing reporters to embed with combat units. After all, even though the press chafed under Desert Storm's tightly controlled pool system and news policy, they still ended up giving the military better press. We found, however, that reporting from embedded correspondents in the field provided mostly neutral coverage, with few expressions of opinion. Debate over the conduct of the war was heard much more often back in the studio, in the interactions between journalists and analysts.

**Imagery:** There was more war to see the second time in Iraq, as the embedding program increased the volume of war-related images on

the evening newscasts. Over one in three stories contained footage of combat in Operation Iraqi Freedom (35 percent) compared to one in five in Operation Desert Storm (20 percent).

The embedding program, however, did not produce a more sanitized picture of war. Relative to the overall number of stories, there were, proportionately, six times as many visuals showing civilian casualties in the second Gulf War than there were in the first (18 percent vs 3 percent of stories). By the same measure, there were six times as many visual images of US and British military casualties (12 percent in 1991 vs 2 percent in 2003), and there was a slightly greater proportion of stories showing Iraqi military casualties (3 percent vs 1 percent) and property damage (8 percent vs 6 percent).

Finally, there was one noteworthy similarity over time among the broadcast networks. On a variety of measures, ABC provided the most anti-war coverage in 1991, just as we found it did in 2003. During the first Gulf War, CBS and NBC provided balanced assessments of the war's justification (a com-

bined 49 percent positive for judgments supporting the war), while on ABC support for the war was only 36 percent positive. Likewise, only one out of four evaluations of U.S. policy (26 percent) was positive on ABC, while the other networks provided balanced coverage -- 48 percent positive on CBS and 50 percent positive on NBC. ABC also showed over 50 percent more visuals of Iraqi civilian casualties than the other networks averaged.

## Latenite Laughs

Iraq is this year's leading topic of jokes by late-night TV comedians Jay Leno, David Letterman, and Conan O'Brien. Since January 1st the country, its leaders, and its relations with the USA have figured in 422 jokes, peaking at 160 jokes in April. Saddam Hussein personally was the target of 83 jokes, but this placed him only third among newsmakers, behind President George W. Bush (159) and former President Bill Clinton (126), who remains a favorite foil for TV jokesters. Sample joke: "The bad news is Saddam is still alive. The good news is we still get to kill him." (Leno, 4/7)

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