

War Reports: Cable News Networks and Differences in  
United States Viewers' Knowledge about the War in Iraq  
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Research Methods

### Abstract

This research project attempts to analyze the Fox News Corporation's effectiveness in educating Americans about major political issues in the United States. Recognizing the increase in popularity of cable news programming in general, and specifically Fox News Corporation's position as one of the most popular cable television news outlets in the U.S., this study aims to compare Fox News and CNN (the second most popular cable news network) viewers' knowledge of basic facts regarding military conflict in the Middle East from March, 2003 to the present (December, 2006). We will examine the responses to a series of questions designed to evaluate respondents' objective knowledge of the War in Iraq and determine if there is a correlation between respondents' knowledge and the sources on which they rely for news.

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Often referred to as the “fourth estate,” media — specifically the news press — wield a tremendous amount of power to not only frame political issues but also to influence public opinion around those issues. Decisions of what issues to cover (and not cover), at what time issues are covered, and how they frame their coverage, afford media outlets the privilege and power to influence how citizens determine what issues are important and where they stand on those issues. Add to this the consolidation of ownership in corporate media, and we see witness the power to shape public opinion being held in the hands of very few corporations. Since the passage of the 1996 Federal Telecommunications Act (in which limits on media ownership consolidation were relaxed), consolidation of mass media ownership has seen a rapid increase — with roughly 90 percent of broadcast and cable networks being owned and operated by less than 10 corporations. This increased consolidation has led to the defacto homogenization of mass media in the United States through the marginalization of diverse media outlets.

At the same time that media ownership is being consolidated, the number of available news media outlets has expanded, particularly with the increasing availability and accessibility of online news and the dramatic rise in popularity of cable television programming. With an increasing number of citizens gleaning their news from cable news programs (Pew, 2005), it is worth investigating the leading provider of cable news and determining how effective it is in providing fundamental knowledge about current events and hard news (as opposed to op-ed and inter. According to Pew Research Center's 1998-2004 Biennial Media Consumption Survey, Fox dominates the cable news landscape commanding a over 55 percent of the cable news viewer population. CNN follows with just 30 percent and MSNBC attracting 15 percent of the cable news viewers.

This significant influence on the general public's knowledge and understanding of current news and political events is staggering on the surface and even more troubling when we begin to inquire about the role that Fox News reporting may play in framing important national issues like the military engagement in Iraq.

### Hypotheses

Based on our review of the literature (below), we see several emerging themes that form the foundation for our research. First, Fox News Channel is increasingly responsible for the dissemination of information and knowledge via the Fox News Channel, and there is reason to believe that the corporation is doing an inadequate job of informing viewers. Second, Fox News Channel explicitly presents the news (particularly news about the War in Iraq) with a biased slant. Third, the misperceptions individuals have about a war may be mobilized to generate popular support for a military engagement. Combining these themes, we are able to draw some reasonable expectations for what we may find when we survey Fox News and CNN viewers. We propose the following hypotheses:

H1: U.S. citizens who get their news primarily from the cable network Fox News know less about basic facts surrounding the military conflict in Iraq than individuals who rely on CNN for their news.

H0: There is no relationship between U.S. citizens' knowledge of basic facts about the military conflict in Iraq and the source from which individuals get their news.

### Review of the Literature

In his analysis of the Pew Research Center's 1998-2004 Biennial Media Consumption Surveys, Morris (2005) laid a foundation for our research in examining the role that cable news, specifically Fox News, plays in mass media landscape. Morris used the data culled by Pew to test a number of expectations or assumptions one might have about the consumers of a given media source. The study asked if there were "attitudinal

and demographic factors [that] play into determining who makes use of a certain new or traditional television news source ... [and] does exposure to one source versus another significantly influence the type of information an individual receives.”

Additionally, Morris examined the Pew data to assess levels of political knowledge among viewers and the relationship of that knowledge to the new sources they consume. The levels of political knowledge were determined through a series of questions posed to respondents aimed to evaluate their understanding or familiarity with a broad range of domestic and international news. He drew the qualified conclusion that “Fox News viewers are clearly the least knowledgeable of the three audiences (Fox, CNN, and network news).” Morris qualified his conclusion in stating that it is likely that Fox News is not necessarily responsible for the lack of education among its viewers, rather one may assume that Fox News simply attracts a less-knowledgeable audience on the whole. We intend to correct for this ambiguity in our methodology.

Morris’s analysis of political knowledge does not focus specifically on a particular news event or series of related events. We turn to the work of Aday, Livingston, and Hebert (2005) for an understanding of objectivity and bias in Fox News reporting. In analyzing six networks for their news coverage of the War in Iraq, Aday et al. aimed to assess the objectivity in reporting on the War in Iraq by each network (ABC, NBC, CBS, CNN, Al Jazeera, and Fox News Channel). They concluded, “the overwhelming number of stories aired during the war on American networks and on Al Jazeera—with the exception of FNC (Fox News Channel) — were neutral at the story level but that the general picture of the war presented by the news focused primarily on its whiz-bang aspects at the expense of other important story lines.” Moreover, they concluded that the tone of the coverage (a measure of the objectivity in reporting based on a 5-point scale where a score of 3 indicates balance and fairness in the story) for most networks presented 89 to 96 percent of their stories with an unbiased or “neutral” tone. Fox News

Channel reported less than 60 percent of the stories with a neutral tone.

A recent study by the Program on International Policy Attitudes (2003) conducted several polls to assess the level of misperceptions U.S. citizens had about the War in Iraq. Their findings revealed that an alarming number of respondents held at least one misperception about the war in Iraq, and those misperceptions have a positive effect on individuals' support for the War in Iraq. The PIPA study asserted that the number of misperceptions held by individuals was not tied to how well they paid attention to the news, but was directly linked to the news source to which they paid attention. Building on this sampling of 9,611 respondents, our project will extend the depth of our line of questioning, increase the sampling pool, and focus primarily on consumers of two main cable news networks.

#### Method

To glean a reasonably clear understanding of U.S. citizens' knowledge about the war in Iraq, we intend to conduct a short survey of cable news viewers' basic knowledge of the military conflict in Iraq. In testing for the null hypothesis, we will present identical surveys to viewers of Fox News and CNN over the course of five weeknight prime time periods.

#### *Participants*

In order to focus our survey on Fox News and CNN viewers, we will conduct the survey during prime time (8pm – 11pm Eastern and Pacific and 7pm-10pm Central and Mountain) coverage for both networks. News viewers will be asked via an on-air advertisement to call a toll-free number to participate in an important news media survey. Anticipating a conservative .25 percent of the average 2,500,000 prime time cable news viewers will respond to our call for participation during each prime time period, we expect to survey approximately 6,250 individuals each evening. Due to the substantial volume of calls we expect to receive, we will use an automated voicemail

system to cull the data from each response to the survey. Recognizing that a percentage of individuals will not complete the survey process due to unforeseen technical issues (dropped calls) or users opting out from the voicemail survey, we will conduct the survey over the course of five evenings to gather data from approximately 6,000 individuals each evening. Caller identification software will be used to eliminate responses coming from multiple calls from the same phone line. This will provide us with responses exceeding 1 percent of the average census population of 3,000,000 prime time cable news viewers — a substantial sample population from which we can draw inferences about the census population of CNN and Fox News cable news viewers.

The advertisements will appear at during the bottom of each hour during primetime and each cable news network will have a corresponding toll-free number. By advertising at the bottom of the hour, we expect to focus the self-selection of respondents on those individuals who regularly tune in to the cable news program — significantly reducing the chances of attracting respondents who may be “surfing” through channels at the top of the hour for a show to watch.

### *Instrumentation*

During the call, individuals will be asked a series of questions (see Appendix A) constituting the independent and dependent variables for our study. The survey will be conducted via an interactive voice response (IVR) phone survey system where individuals will be asked to reply by saying or pressing the number corresponding to an answer. Independent variables for this study will include the respondent's age, the highest level of education achieved by the respondent, whether they consider the media source being investigated to be their primary source for news, what percentage of their news diet is constituted by the source in question, and how often the individual watches this network.

Aiming to isolate and focus our attention on individuals who primarily watch one of the two networks for their news, we will use answers to questions three and four (“Is this your primary news source?” and “What percentage of this source constitutes your daily news diet?”) to rule out respondents who do not self-report using one cable network or another for their primary news source. Eliminating these respondents will allow us to diminish the possibilities that individuals’ responses will be based on knowledge gleaned from news sources other than the networks we are investigating. Answers from respondents who do not report getting at least 50 percent of their news from Fox News or CNN will be discarded.

The dependent variables in this study will be the responses to a 10-question survey of respondents’ knowledge about the War in Iraq. The questions have been designed to objectively target basic facts about the War in Iraq — avoiding leading or subjective lines of inquiry (i.e. asking respondents’ opinions about the coverage of the war or the merits of the military engagement, in general). See Appendix A for the complete survey that respondents will be asked to answer. We are indebted to the Program on International Policy Attitudes for their initial work in establishing a line of questioning regarding the War in Iraq (2003), as the questions used in our survey build on the initial line of questioning put forth in this study.

### *Analysis*

We are attempting to focus our analysis on the scores of individuals who identify either Fox News or CNN as their primary news source. To achieve this, we will discard responses from individuals that do not identify Fox or CNN as their primary news source (evaluated by their reporting of using the news source for 50 percent or more of their news). We will calculate the mean of correct responses to the questions for each sample population in an attempt to generalize to the census Fox News and CNN viewership population. Respondents’ scores (n) will range from 0 (none correct) to 10 (all correct).

We anticipate that 68 percent of the scores will  $\sigma \geq -1$  or  $\sigma \leq +1$ . To achieve this, we will normalize the scores to eliminate irregular scores with  $\sigma \geq -2$  or  $\sigma \geq +2$  (ideally capturing 95 percent of the scores). Through a comparison of scores from each randomly selected population, we expect to either affirm the null hypothesis or fail to affirm the null hypothesis with a confidence level  $p < .01$ .

If we fail to affirm the null hypothesis and increase the likeliness that H1 is valid, further analysis of the data may be warranted. Building from Morris's assertion that less political knowledge among Fox News viewers may be attributed to Fox News attracting less-educated viewers, we may use the independent variable data regarding respondents' education levels to determine whether less knowledge among respondents may be due to differences in formal education levels.

#### Discussion

The limitations of this study present some useful opportunities for further inquiry. Drawing inferences about respondents' knowledge of the War in Iraq and the news they consume fails to take into account that respondents may recall information about the War that they gleaned from other sources (friends, family, co-workers, or other media). To correct for this "leak" in the analysis, it may be useful to do a more controlled study in which a smaller sample of subjects is brought in individually to watch prime time news on Fox News or CNN and immediately surveyed for their knowledge of basic facts on news stories that are common to both networks.

Additionally, as we have done here in our focus on the War in Iraq, similar studies may prove useful that focus on respondents' knowledge of other domestic and international issues (i.e. the state of the U.S. economy, welfare, reproductive rights, crime, etc...). Such a study would also benefit from added questions regarding a respondent's personal opinions on a given subject. For example, the scores of correct

answers from a series of questions related to facts about the U.S. welfare system may be compared with individual's general opinions about welfare policy.

Another useful direction for further research may include adding a third sample population that explicitly self-identifies as consuming a variety of media sources (domestic and international). Comparison of these respondents' scores with those of the sample populations that identify as primarily consuming one form of mass media may present interesting findings.

APPENDIX A  
Independent Variables

1. What is your age?
2. What is the highest level of education you have completed?
  - a. Grade school
  - b. High school (or equivalent)
  - b. Business, technical, or vocational education
  - c. College
  - d. Graduate school
3. Is [insert media source] your primary source for news?
  - a. yes
  - b. no
4. What percentage of this source would you say constitutes how much of your news you get from this source?
  - a. 1 percent-25 percent
  - b. 26 percent-50 percent
  - c. 51 percent-75 percent
  - d. 75 percent+
5. How frequently do you watch this news network:
  - a. every day
  - b. 3-5 times a week
  - c. once a week

Dependent Variables

1. How soon after the war in Iraq was launched, did the U.S. military find weapons of mass destruction?
  - a. Immediately after the invasion (March 2003)
  - b. After the fall of Baghdad (April 2003)
  - c. Shortly after Saddam Hussein was captured (December 2003)
  - d. Weapons of mass destruction have not been found
2. Saddam Hussein was directly involved in the terrorist attack on September 11, 2001.
  - a. True
  - b. False
3. How many coalition troops do you recall have been killed in the war in Iraq since the engagement began in 2003?
  - a. Less than 500
  - b. 500-1,000
  - c. 1,001-1,500
  - d. 1,501-2,000
  - e. more than 2,000
4. How many countries currently make up the coalition of forces in Iraq?
  - a. 5

- b. 15
  - c. 25
  - d. 35+
5. The United States has laws restricting the showing of coffins of soldiers being returned from war.
    - a. True
    - b. False
  6. A majority (more than 50 percent) of the world is in support of the coalition-led war in Iraq.
    - a. True
    - b. False
  7. Iraqi military employed weapons of mass destruction in their engagement with coalition forces.
    - a. True
    - b. False
  8. Members of the governing council in Iraq were:
    - a. Voted in by Iraqi citizens
    - b. Appointed by the United States.
    - c. Appointed by the United Nations
    - d. Self-selected from the previous Iraq government leaders.
  9. Since the beginning of the War in Iraq, voluntary enlistment in branches of the U.S. military has:
    - a. Increased.
    - b. Decreased.
    - c. Stayed the same.
  10. Halliburton, one of the primary United States contractors charged with rebuilding Iraq was formerly headed by which U.S. government official:
    - a. Condoleeza Rice.
    - b. Dick Cheney.
    - c. Donald Rumsfeld.
    - d. Colin Powell.

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