

In 2003

TV News was “All Iraq, All the Time”

By Jim Lobe | January 13, 2004

How many people have to die before TV news decides it's a story? AIDS killed three million people around the world last year, more than two million of them in Africa. The three major U.S. television networks' evening news programs devoted a combined total of 39 minutes to the issue.

The American Geophysical Union and the U.S. National Academy of Sciences both concluded last year that greenhouse gas emissions almost certainly contribute to global warming, which is altering the Earth's weather and climate in potentially catastrophic ways. The three evening network news shows devoted 15 minutes to global warming in 2003.

Over the same year, the United States invaded and occupied Iraq, an operation in which some 8,000 people might have been killed, the same toll as AIDS takes in a single day. The three major networks' evening news shows devoted 4,047 minutes to coverage of Iraq.

It is statistics like these, compiled annually by ADT Research of New York, that make this observation by United Nations Secretary General Kofi Annan sound ludicrously understated. “All of us—leaders, politicians, diplomats and journalists—have been very focussed on Iraq this year,” he told reporters at his year-end press conference in December. “We simply haven't paid enough attention to the many other pressing challenges facing us.”

Indeed, the 2003 statistics—compiled by ADT President Andrew Tyndall—who has been monitoring the half-hour evening news shows daily for more than a decade, suggest that Iraq shined so brightly in the television “foreign news” universe of 2003 that it blotted out almost everything else.

“It shows that the news agenda is being set in Washington, when it comes to foreign news in particular,” said William Dorman, who teaches political science and journalism at California State University in Sacramento. “It focuses our attention on something—Iraq—that many people never really considered a major threat in the first place, and distracts us from very real dangers in the world.” Recent surveys have shown that about 80% of the U.S. public say they get most of their news from television, rather than other media sources like newspapers.

While cable news television, such as CNN and Fox News, has become more widely watched in recent years, the three networks normally attract about 30 million consistent viewers each evening, surveys add.

For many North Americans, the nightly news is the only contact with the world outside U.S. borders.

ADT's “Tyndall Report,” a weekly summary of the national network news broadcasts that is considered authoritative within the industry, tabulated all of the 14,635 minutes of news coverage on the three networks' evening shows from Monday through Friday throughout 2003.

Of the year's top 20 stories—all those that claimed more than 107 minutes of coverage—Iraq-related stories ranked one through four.

Invasion and combat stories, which featured “embedded” reporters, were at the top with 1,602 minutes, followed by coverage of the fall of the Saddam Hussein regime (1,007 mins), the post-war reconstruction effort (658 mins) and the pre-war UN weapons inspections and controversy (575 mins). All Iraq-related stories added up to 4,047 minutes, or about 30% of all news in 2003 and about 25% more than the networks' combined coverage of the 2000 presidential elections.

Claiming the number five position was the Israeli-Palestinian conflict, which accounted for 284 minutes during the year, a dramatic drop from 2002, when it was the top news story with 999 minutes.

The California governor recall election and Arnold Schwarzenegger's victory ranked number six (239 mins), followed by domestic terrorism preparedness (205 mins); the Space Shuttle Columbia disaster (198 mins); the SARS outbreak in Asia and Canada (178 mins); and the electricity blackout in the northeastern U.S. and Canada (165 minutes).

The most widely covered foreign story after SARS was the hunt for al Qaeda members (132 mins), while North Korea's nuclear program, which—unlike that of Iraq—is believed to have already produced weapons, ranked number 19. Remarkably, Afghanistan, which ranked first in 2001 and third in 2002, fell below the top 20 in 2003,

Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF)



www.fpi.org
A Think Tank Without Walls

despite the resurgence of Taliban activity and the continued operations of some 11,000 U.S. troops there.

In 2003, the three networks gave coverage of Afghanistan a total of only 80 minutes, or less than 20% of the attention it received the year before. Following Afghanistan in coverage terms was the civil war in Liberia (72 minutes), primarily due to the debate last summer over whether to send in U.S. troops, who had been deployed just offshore, to help secure a cease-fire.

Liberia was the networks' top story for Africa, followed by the AIDS crisis, and Bush's trip to the continent (18 minutes).

Terrorist attacks against tourist facilities in Kenya earned that country eight minutes of coverage, while the civil war in the Democratic Republic of Congo (DRC), which is believed to have claimed three million lives in the past five years, was covered for a total of ... five minutes.

"It seems that Africa receives attention only when Americans are there—either in the form of warships, Bush, or tourists," noted Salih Booker, director of Africa Action, a grassroots advocacy group. The paucity of Africa coverage, including the AIDS crisis, he added, "confirms Africa's status as the invisible continent."

If Africa was virtually invisible on network news, Latin America practically disappeared. The U.S. response to violence in Colombia and repression in Cuba were the top-rated Latin American stories of the year, each having received 18 minutes on the three networks.

The total amount of foreign-related news that appeared on the network news in 2003 was about 25% more than

the average year over the past 15, according to the Tyndall report, but much of it, particularly regarding Iraq, "was not really foreign coverage," noted Daniel Hallin, a political science professor at University of California at San Diego and the author of an influential book on TV coverage of the Vietnam War. "If you look at the coverage, you'll find it's mostly about Americans, not Iraqis," he said, although he added that more attention is being paid to Iraqis than was paid to Vietnamese during the Vietnam War.

Dorman noted that, through its policy of "embedding" reporters with U.S. troops, the Pentagon probably succeeded in claiming much more time in news broadcasts than if it had barred reporters from the action, as in the first Gulf War. "It was 'gun-slit journalism'," he said. "It wasn't surprising that television was overwhelmed by it; it was like reality TV writ large, although, like reality TV, it totally distorts our sense of global realities." He continued that the U.S.-centered agenda illustrated by the ADT report underscored the "narcissism of American news," a point echoed by Hallin. "This kind of coverage feeds American narcissism," Hallin said. "Americans are given the sense they are some kind of unique victims and heroes of the world; everything revolves around them."

Booker said the coverage has devastating results in the real world. "People ask: 'how is it possible that so many people could perish in 2003, and the world failed to act'? Well, the abject failure of the media to adequately cover the worst epidemic in recorded history is a big part of the answer."

(Jim Lobe is a political analyst for Foreign Policy in Focus (online at www.fpif.org). He also writes regularly for Inter Press Service.)

Published by Foreign Policy In Focus (FPiF), a joint project of the Interhemispheric Resource Center (IRC, online at www.irc-online.org) and the Institute for Policy Studies (IPS, online at www.ips-dc.org). ©2003. All rights reserved.

Foreign Policy In Focus

"A Think Tank Without Walls"

Established in 1996, Foreign Policy In Focus is a network of policy analysts, advocates, and activists committed to "making the United States a more responsible global leader and global partner." For more information, visit www.fpif.org.

Recommended citation:

Jim Lobe, "In 2003 TV News was 'All Iraq, All the Time'," (Silver City, NM & Washington, DC: Foreign Policy In Focus, January 13, 2004).

Web location:

<http://www.fpif.org/commentary/2004/0401news.html>

Production Information:

Writer: Jim Lobe

Editor: John Gershman, IRC

Layout: Tonya Cannariato, IRC

