

Truth, lies and the media: Wartime misperceptions

by [William F. Fore](#) in the [November 29, 2003](#) issue

Why, when almost every major denomination on record opposed unilateral U.S. action in Iraq, did most people in the pews support it? In recent months researchers have begun to address that question by examining knowledge, attitudes and beliefs about involvement in Iraq. The findings reveal a deeply disturbing gap between the facts and the public's beliefs.

"Misperceptions, the Media and the Iraq War," the most recent study, was released in early October by the Program on International Policy Attitudes of the Center on Policy Attitudes and the Center for International and Security Studies at the University of Maryland (UM). The primary question asked was, "Are average Americans 'misperceiving' information about Iraq and the war?"

Between January and September of 2003, after conducting seven different polls, researchers found that the answer was yes: "A substantial portion of the public had a number of misperceptions that were demonstrably false, or were at odds with the dominant view in the intelligence community. . . . [These misperceptions] have played a key role in generating and maintaining approval for the decision to go to war."

Early in 2003, for example, 68 percent of respondents believed that Iraq played an important role in the terrorist attack on the World Trade Center, while 13 percent went on to claim that they had seen "conclusive evidence" of such involvement. At that time, both propositions were unsupported and in some cases denied by the U.S. intelligence community. In August a *Washington Post* poll reported that 69 percent of Americans still believed that Saddam Hussein was "personally involved" in the attack on the Twin Towers. And as late as September, approximately half of respondents said that the U.S. had actually found evidence in Iraq that Saddam was working closely with al-Qaeda. As President Bush clarified on September 17, Saddam had nothing to do with the 9/11 attack.

From May to September, 35 percent of the public believed that weapons of mass destruction had been found in Iraq, and 22 percent believed that Iraq used such weapons during the war. An ABC/*Washington Post* study showed similar percentages. But U.S. troops have failed to discover any such weapons, and the Pentagon's Defense Intelligence Agency earlier had reported that "there is no reliable information on whether Iraq is producing and stockpiling chemical weapons, or whether Iraq has—or will—establish its chemical warfare agent production facilities." On October 2, David Kay, the U.S. inspector in charge of finding weapons of mass destruction, reported to Congress that he had found no chemical, biological or nuclear weapons, although their existence was one of the major rationales for going to war with Iraq.

Finally, the researchers asked Americans, "How [do] all of the people in the world feel about the U.S. going to war with Iraq?" Thirty-one percent expressed the mistaken view that attitudes overseas were evenly balanced on the issue, while another 31 percent believed that a majority of people in the rest of the world favored U.S. action.

In fact, polls have shown—for more than a year—that world opinion is strongly opposed to America's action. In a Gallup International study, not a single one of 38 countries polled (including 20 in Europe) expressed majority support for unilateral action by the U.S. A Pew Global Attitudes Survey in April-May 2003 found that between 67 and 97 percent of people in six out of eight Muslim nations (Turkey, Indonesia, Pakistan, Lebanon, Jordan, Kuwait, Morocco and the Palestinian Authority) opposed U.S. action, and only one—Kuwait—was in favor.

These studies make it clear that Americans are full of misperceptions about the war and, in particular, about three issues—the link between Iraq and al-Qaeda, the existence of weapons of mass destruction, and the nature of world public opinion. Why? The chilling answer is that their "misperceptions" are closely related to their news sources.

When people were asked where they get most of their news, 19 percent said newspapers and 80 per cent said radio and TV. The primary source of radio and TV news was: two or more networks, 30 percent; Fox, 18 percent; CNN, 16 percent; NBC, 14 percent, ABC, 11 percent; CBS, 9 percent; PBS-NPR, 3 percent. The degree of misperception varied according to the source of news. To quote the UM study: "Those who receive most of their news from Fox News are more likely than average

to have misperceptions. Those who receive most of their news from NPR and PBS are less likely to have misperceptions.”

In fact, Fox News watchers were three times more likely to hold all three misperceptions than those watching the next most watched network. In the NPR-PBS audience, an overwhelming majority had none of the three misperceptions. If one looks at each of the categories, the differences are dramatic. Sixty-seven percent of Fox viewers had a wrong perception about links between Iraq and al-Qaeda (16 percent for the PBS-NPR audience). On the existence of weapons of mass destruction, 33 percent of Fox viewers had the wrong perception (11 percent for PBS-NPR). On world opinion, 35 percent of Fox viewers had misperceptions (5 percent of PBS-NPR viewers). In all three cases, the misperception percentages decreased when moving from Fox to CBS to NBC to CNN to ABC, to print media, to PBS-NPR.

The UM report also found that “supporters of the president are more likely to have misperceptions” than nonsupporters. Potential voters for the president were more likely to misperceive the three issues and support the war; potential voters for a Democratic nominee were less likely to misperceive or to support the war.

That supporters and opponents of the president’s policies have differing views is not surprising, and is even desirable in a democracy. What is troubling is that *all* citizens were significantly affected by the news media; that the media are fostering a considerable amount of misperceptions about issues of great public importance; and that these misperceptions tend to follow a particular ideological line—namely, that the war in Iraq was justified.

What we are seeing is the result of deregulation in the U.S. broadcasting system. Instead of being required to ascertain the local community’s “needs and interests” as once required by the Communication Act, stations are now allowed to provide programs that meet the economic and ideological needs of the owners. This has resulted in intentional news bias and distortions.

Fox News, owned by Australian-born Rupert Murdoch, is the prime example, having pushed the envelope of buccaneer broadcasting to new heights as the FCC knuckles under to pressures from the multinational communication companies. Murdoch bends his broadcast and print news to fit his politics. He has played a crucial role in persuading Americans to support the war in Iraq.

The Fox network could not have existed three decades ago because the Federal Communications Commission still used the Fairness Doctrine and equal time rules to require stations to provide time—even free time—to air all sides of issues of public importance. FCC regulations prevented any single broadcasting company from owning more than seven stations in major markets nationwide. The outcome, although never perfect or free of controversy, helped maintain a level playing field in which no small group of companies could control all the sources of news and information coming into a given community—as they can today.

An alternative to regulation might be simply to let the liberals have their own version of Fox, conservatives their own network, and so on. But because there are still only a limited number of frequencies, and thus a limited number of TV and radio stations, each station has an obligation under the law to meet the needs and interests of the public—*all* the public. A reasonable amount of regulation is essential to make certain this is done.

Ronald Reagan began deregulation in 1980; for two decades power steadily moved to the owners at the expense of the public. This year Federal Communications chairman Michael Powell, son of Secretary of State Colin Powell, proposed to further loosen restrictions. In June the FCC ruled that a single company could increase its ownership of TV stations covering U.S. households from 35 percent to 45 percent. The ruling outraged both liberals and conservatives, and a bipartisan group of senators pushed through an unprecedented vote to roll back the FCC's new rules. The matter still has to come before the House, however, and Bush has threatened to veto the legislation if it is passed.

The connection between the public's misperceptions about Iraq and the administration's support of further media deregulation is an unholy alliance. Government supports the interests of the broadcasting industry, and the broadcasters are allowed to mislead the public. If this were an ordinary industry—say, airlines or electric utilities—the problem would be serious enough. But we are dealing with information—the lifeblood of how citizens exchange ideas and come to form their opinions. We need some reregulation of broadcasting in order to maintain a balance in media news and information.

Broadcast bias resulted in significant national misperceptions about a major political policy issue—going to war in Iraq. If the unholy alliance between government and broadcasters is allowed to persist, if broadcast media remain unregulated and unrestrained, then the misperceptions about Iraq are only a harbinger of many more

to come. The democratic experiment cannot survive for long if the citizenry is, with state approval, systematically misinformed.