

## Front Page

China  
Southeast Asia  
South Asia  
Japan  
Korea  
Central Asia

Middle East  
War and Terror

Business in Brief  
Asian Economy  
Global Economy

Letters

Search Asia  
Times

Advanced  
Search

Currency  
Converter

Book  
Reviews

Archive

About Us

Contact Us

Advertise

Media Kit

## Middle East

Oct 4, 2003

### We report, you get it wrong

By Jim Lobe

WASHINGTON - The more commercial television news you watch, the more wrong you are likely to be about key elements of the Iraq War and its aftermath, according to a major new study released in Washington on Thursday.

And the more you watch the Rupert Murdoch-owned Fox News channel, in particular, the more likely it is that your perceptions about the war are wrong, adds the report by the University of Maryland's Program on International Policy Attitudes (PIPA).

Based on several nationwide surveys it conducted with California-based Knowledge Networks since June, as well as the results of other polls, PIPA found that 48 percent of the public believe US troops found evidence of close pre-war links between Iraq and the al-Qaeda terrorist group; 22 percent thought troops found weapons of mass destruction (WMD) in Iraq; and 25 percent believed that world public opinion favored Washington's going to war with Iraq. All three are misperceptions.

The report, *Misperceptions, the Media and the Iraq War*, also found that the more misperceptions held by the respondent, the more likely it was that s/he both supported the war and depended on commercial television for news about it.

The study is likely to stoke a growing public and professional debate over why mainstream news media - especially the broadcast media - were not more skeptical about the Bush administration's pre-war claims, particularly regarding Saddam Hussein's WMD stockpiles and ties with al-Qaeda.

"This is a dangerously revealing study," said Marvin Kalb, a former television correspondent and a senior fellow of the Shorenstein Center on the Press, Politics and Public Policy at the Kennedy School of Government at Harvard University.

While Kalb said he had some reservations about the specificity of the questions directed at the respondents, he noted that, "People who have had a strong belief that there is an unholy alliance between politics and the press now have more evidence." Fox, in particular, has been accused of pursuing a chauvinistic agenda in its news coverage despite its motto, "We report, you decide".

Overall, according to PIPA, 60 percent of the people surveyed held at least one of the three misperceptions through September. Thirty percent of respondents had none of those misperceptions.

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Surprisingly, the percentage of people holding the misperceptions rose slightly over the last three months. In July, for example, polls found that 45 percent of the public believed US forces had found "clear evidence in Iraq that Hussein was working closely with al-Qaeda". In September, 49 percent believed that.

Likewise, those who believed troops had found WMD in Iraq jumped from 21 percent in July to 24 percent in September. One in five respondents said they believed that Iraq had actually used chemical or biological weapons during the war.

In determining what factors could create the misperceptions, PIPA considered a number of variables in the data.

It found a high correlation between respondents with the most misperceptions and their support for the decision to go to war. Only 23 percent of those who held none of the three misperceptions supported the war, while 53 percent who held one misperception did so. Of those who believe that both WMDs and evidence of al-Qaeda ties have been found in Iraq and that world opinion backed the United States, a whopping 86 percent said they supported war.

More specifically, among those who believed that Washington had found clear evidence of close ties between Hussein and al-Qaeda, two-thirds held the view that going to war was the best thing to do. Only 29 percent felt that way among those who did not believe that such evidence had been found.

Another factor that correlated closely with misperceptions about the war was party affiliation, with Republicans substantially "more likely" to hold misperceptions than Democrats. But support for Bush himself as expressed by whether or not the respondent said s/he intended to vote for him in 2004 appeared to be an even more critical factor.

The average frequency of misperceptions among respondents who planned to vote for Bush was 45 percent, while among those who plan to vote for a hypothetical Democrat candidate, the frequency averaged only 17 percent.

Asked "Has the US found clear evidence Saddam Hussein was working closely with al-Qaeda"? 68 percent of Bush supporters replied affirmatively. By contrast, two of every three Democrat-backers said no.

But news sources also accounted for major differences in misperceptions, according to PIPA, which asked more than 3,300 respondents since May where they "tended to get most of [their] news". Eighty percent identified broadcast media, while 19 percent cited print media.

Among those who said broadcast media, 30 percent said two or more networks; 18 percent, Fox News; 16 percent, CNN; 24 percent, the three big networks - NBC (14 percent), ABC (11 percent), CBS (9 percent); and three percent, the two public networks, National Public Radio (NPR) and Public Broadcasting Service (PBS).

For each of the three misperceptions, the study found enormous differences between the viewers of Fox, who held the most misperceptions, and NPR/PBS, who held the fewest by far.

Eighty percent of Fox viewers were found to hold at least one misperception, compared to 23 percent of NPR/PBS consumers. All

the other media fell in between.

CBS ranked right behind Fox with a 71 percent score, while CNN and NBC tied as the best-performing commercial broadcast audience at 55 percent. Forty-seven percent of print media readers held at least one misperception.

As to the number of misconceptions held by their audiences, Fox far outscored all of its rivals. A whopping 45 percent of its viewers believed all three misperceptions, while the other commercial networks scored between 12 percent and 16 percent. Only nine percent of readers believed all three, while only four percent of the NPR/PBS audience did.

PIPA found that political affiliation and news source also compound one another. Thus, 78 percent of Bush supporters who watch Fox News said they thought the United States had found evidence of a direct link to al-Qaeda, while 50 percent of Bush supporters who rely on NPR/PBS thought so.

Conversely, 48 percent of Fox viewers who said they would support a Democrat believed that such evidence had been found. But none of the Democrat-backers who relied on NPR/PBS believed it.

The study also debunked the notion that misperceptions were due mainly to the lack of exposure to news.

Among Bush supporters, those who said they follow the news "very closely", were found more likely to hold misperceptions. Those Bush supporters, on the other hand, who say they follow the news "somewhat closely" or "not closely at all" held fewer misperceptions.

Conversely, those Democratic supporters who said they did not follow the news very closely were found to be twice as likely to hold misperceptions as those who said they did, according to PIPA.

(Inter Press Service)

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