

62/03

**EMBARGOED UNTIL 00.01 HRS, TUESDAY 21 OCTOBER**

**MASSIVE INCREASE IN TV NEWS AUDIENCES DURING WAR**

Audiences for news programmes on television received a massive boost during the Iraq War, according to *Conflict Around the Clock*, new research by the Independent Television Commission published today. Television was the main source of international news for 67% of people, compared with 16% for newspapers, 13% for radio and 1% the internet.

Multichannel viewers are traditionally less likely to watch news programmes, but in the first week of the Iraq war, this group's viewing increased by 145%, from 118 minutes per week to 289 minutes per week. Viewing in terrestrial-only homes increased too, by 84%: from 171 minutes to 315 per week.

Although 77% of viewers surveyed in the ITC's report said they were interested in the television coverage, 61% thought there was too much of it. Viewers who did not support the war (over a third had reservations about going to war without UN support or exploring diplomatic avenues more fully) were more likely to consider the amount of coverage excessive. These viewers were also more likely to consider the coverage unbalanced.

Of all those surveyed, 52% considered television coverage as a whole to be balanced, compared with 62% saying the same for radio. Newspapers were seen as being less balanced, with 53% considering The Sun was biased in favour of the war. Pro-war bias was perceived to a lesser extent (between 25-40%) in The Times, Daily Telegraph, Daily Mail and Daily Express. The Mirror was seen as having an anti-war bias by 43% of respondents.

Channels 4 and Five were considered to show the most fair television coverage, and CNN the least. 25% thought that BBC1, ITV1 and Sky News showed a bias towards America and Britain. Looking at television coverage overall, 84% of viewers thought that Tony Blair's position was explained, compared with 38% saying the same for that of the Iraqi people. The majority of viewers (42%) felt that the UK and US governments were being as honest as they could be, with information only withheld when there was a legitimate security reason, while 32% thought that information was being censored.

The issue of whether images of bodies and prisoners of war should be shown proved complex. For 63% of those surveyed, the feelings of families of those involved should be paramount, and if coverage was likely to upset them, then the images should not be broadcast. Yet 57% also said that using images of prisoners of war was a legitimate news story and that they should be broadcast, but with appropriate warnings.

Viewers commented on the practice of using 'embedded' reporters (those who work alongside the troops) on television, with 69% agreeing they were an important and relevant way of showing the reality of war. Their reports were seen to assist viewers' understanding of events, although 52% also thought that this kind of reporting could make the war seem more fictional. There was also concern that embedded reporters were perceived as less likely to remain fair and objective in their reporting.

The largest single news audience was for ITV's 9pm bulletin on 24 March (9.2m), although overall, the BBC's 10pm bulletin was the most popular, drawing an average audience of 6.2m viewers in March and April, compared with ITV's 4.7m for the same period. Sky News tended to attract younger audiences, with 20% of the 16-24s favouring the channel, which achieved 29% of the total news viewing during the war.

### **Notes to Editors**

1. The ITC report, *Conflict Around the Clock* by Jane Sancho, is available for £5 from the Viewer Relations Unit (020 7255 3000). The text can also be downloaded from the ITC's website ([www.itc.org.uk](http://www.itc.org.uk)).
2. Jane Sancho will present findings from the research at *News World 2003* in Dublin today, where the media war in Iraq is one of the conference highlights. For details of the conference, please contact Patrick Stoddart on 07710 535790.

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