

Cable's War Coverage Suggests a New 'Fox Effect' on Television

By Jim Rutenberg

The two commentators were gleeful as they skewered the news media and antiwar protesters in Hollywood.

"They are absolutely committing sedition, or treason," one commentator, Michael Savage, said of the protesters one recent night.

His colleague, Joe Scarborough, responded: "These leftist stooges for anti-American causes are always given a free pass. Isn't it time to make them stand up and be counted for their views?"

The conversation did not take place on A.M. radio, in an Internet chat room or even on the Fox News Channel. Rather, Mr. Savage, a longtime radio talk-show host, and Mr. Scarborough, a former Republican congressman, were speaking during prime time on MSNBC, the cable news network owned by Microsoft and General Electric and overseen by G.E.'s NBC News division.

MSNBC, which is ranked third among cable news channels, hired the two shortly before the war in Iraq, saying it sought better political balance in its programming. But others in the industry say the moves are the most visible sign of a phenomenon they call "the Fox effect."

This was supposed to be CNN's war, a chance for the network, which is owned by AOL Time Warner, to reassert its ratings lead using its international perspective and straightforward approach.

Instead, it has been the Fox News Channel, owned by the News Corporation, that has emerged as the most-watched source of cable news by far, with anchors and commentators who skewer the mainstream media, disparage the French and flay anybody else who questions President Bush's war effort.

Fox's formula had already proved there were huge ratings in opinionated news with an America-first flair. But with 46 of the top 50 cable shows last week alone, Fox has brought prominence to a new sort of TV journalism that casts aside traditional notions of objectivity, holds contempt for dissent and eschews the skepticism of government at mainstream journalism's core.

News executives at other networks are keeping a wary eye on Fox News, trying to figure out what, if anything, its progress will mean to them.

"I certainly think that all news people are watching the success of Fox," said Andrew Heyward, president of CBS News. "There is a long-standing tradition in the mainstream press of middle-of-the-road journalism that is objective and fair. I would hate to see that fall victim to a panic about the Fox effect."

The American news media have been here before. Newspaper headlines in World War II clearly backed the Allies. In 1944, *The New York Times* used the following headline above a photo essay about an air raid: "We Strike at the Japs."

But until Fox News, television news had rarely taken that sort of tone, though opinion has broken through at times. The major networks were first considered bullish on the Vietnam conflict. Then Walter Cronkite editorialized against it.

Still, for all the claims of disinterest from network anchors and correspondents, conservatives believed that they were masking liberal bias.

Rupert Murdoch played off that suspicion when he started the Fox News Channel in 1996, declaring it would take both sides of the political spectrum into account while overtaking CNN. Fox kept most of its political commentary to its prime-time schedule, which it called the equivalent of a newspaper's opinion page.

After the Sept. 11, 2001, attacks, though, Fox News Channel covered the fighting in Afghanistan with heavy patriotism, referring to "our troops" who were fighting "terror goons." Fox jumped to first in the cable news ratings in January 2002.

The channel has now taken its brand of pro-American journalism to a new level. One recent night, a correspondent in Iraq referred to war protesters as "the great unwashed."

After the first statue of Saddam Hussein fell in Baghdad, Neal Cavuto, an anchor, delivered a message to those "who opposed the liberation of Iraq": "You were sickening then, you are sickening now." Another Fox anchor, John Gibson, said he hoped Iraq's reconstruction would not be left to "the dopey old U.N."

CNN's ratings also rose during the war, to 2.65 million average daily viewers, from 610,000, but CNN trailed Fox, which had 3.3 million. Though MSNBC remained in third place with 1.4 million, it saw its share of the cable news audience grow, and for the first time in years had a sense of momentum.

Fox News executives would not comment for this article, beyond contending that their channel's success had more to do with its reporting than its editorial approach. They noted, for instance, that Fox showed the first live reports from the push to central Baghdad and from Mr. Hussein's palace there.

Fox's success initially seemed to push CNN to reconsider its editorial direction. In 2001, the network's former chairman, Walter Isaacson, made a public show of meeting with Republican leaders in Washington to discuss CNN's perceived liberal bias. Like Fox News and MSNBC, CNN featured an American flag on its screen after Sept. 11.

Since CNN's new chief, Jim Walton, took over last winter the network has reaffirmed its role as an international news network. It is the only one of the three cable-news networks without a flag on its screen now.

MSNBC, on the other hand, has added several features to capture more conservatives, who, along with moderates, make up a larger share of the cable news audience than do liberals, according to analysts.

MSNBC has patriotic flourishes throughout the day. Along with the regular screen presence of an American flag, Mr. Bush's portrait is featured on MSNBC's main set and an "America's Bravest" studio wall shows snapshots of men and women serving in Iraq.

Neal Shapiro, the NBC News president, said MSNBC hired Mr. Scarborough and Mr. Savage to add political equilibrium to its lineup of hosts. Before the war, Mr. Shapiro said, all of them — Chris Matthews, Phil Donahue, Bill Press and Pat Buchanan — opposed the war. Mr. Donahue's program was canceled in February.

"If you have a range of opinion that leaves out a whole part of the country," Mr. Shapiro said, "you're unintentionally sending a message that `you are not welcome here.' "

Erik Sorenson, MSNBC's president, said it was trying to differentiate its report from what he called a mainstream style of automatic questioning of the government.

"After Sept. 11 the country wants more optimism and benefit of the doubt," Mr. Sorenson said. "It's about being positive as opposed to being negative. If it ends up negative, so be it. But a

big criticism of the mainstream press is that the beginning point is negative: 'On Day 2, we're in a quagmire.' "

MSNBC's programming moves were welcomed by L. Brent Bozell III, founder of the Media Research Center, a conservative media analysis group. "What Fox is doing, and frankly what MSNBC is also declaring by its product, is that one can be unabashedly patriotic and be a good news journalist at the same time," Mr. Bozell said.

Still, MSNBC's moves have news executives and some liberal critics worried that Fox's success will push TV news too far from a neutral tone.

"I'm a huge believer in the forces of the market and the audience's ability to make choices among various channels," Mr. Heyward of CBS said. "What I would not like to see happen is legitimate debate stifled, or journalists' skepticism, heated journalistic inquiry, somehow dampened by a flock of Fox imitators."

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