

Reporting Official Positions

Local News Coverage of Iraq January 12–March 12, 2004



A Report by the Grand Rapids Institute
for Information Democracy

www.griid.org

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Methodology

We monitored the *Grand Rapids Press* and three local TV stations for their coverage of Iraq between January 12 and March 12 of 2004. (weekends were not included) For the TV stations we monitored the 5:30, 6 and 11 pm for WOOD TV 8 and WZZM 13, and the 10 pm newscast for WXMI 17.

This study not only looked at the amount of coverage, but provides content analysis. Data from this study can be found on pages 12-14.

GRIID staff Tom Schwallie and Jeff Smith contributed to this study.



GRIID monitors the Grand Rapids-based news media, conducts media literacy workshops, and assists community organizations to develop media strategies for organizing.

GRIID has a lending library of videos, DVDs and books and has produced some of their own video/DVD and online resources for educators.

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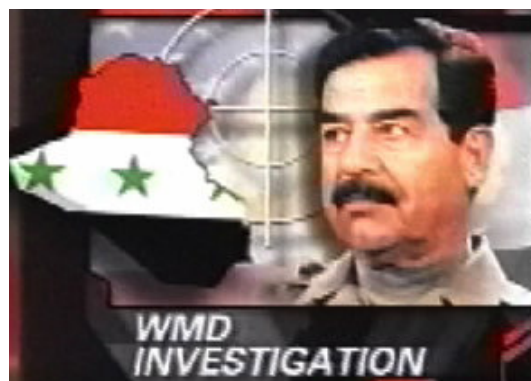
Major Findings

- Compared to our study from March—May 2003, the amount of coverage on Iraq for all four news outlets decreased significantly.
- The *Grand Rapids Press* had substantially more stories (88), than any of the three TV stations (WOOD TV 8—27, WZZM 13—32, and WXMI 17—22)
- All four news outlets continued to rely on official sources, mostly US government sources for news stories (page 5& 7)
- The framing of most news stories did not question the legality or legitimacy of the US military campaign in Iraq.
- The human cost of the war was downplayed in all four news outlets, except when reporting on US troop casualties.
- There was some reporting on the failure of US government intelligence, weapons inspection and war contracting, but these stories were narrowly framed or, in the case of war contracts, given limited coverage.

Introduction

In April 2004, the University of Maryland's Center on Policy Attitudes released a study that showed that a majority of Americans (57%) continue to believe that Iraq has ties to Al Qaeda and possessed weapons of mass destruction (WMDs). (See entire study at <http://www.pipa.org/>) One conclusion that could be made from this research is that the news media in this country continues to present the perspective of the US government/military in an unchallenging manner.

There was some reporting during our two month study that acknowledged that the President may have had "faulty" intelligence ("Bush defends war in Iraq, but not initial weapons claims," *GR Press*), but these stories were not repeated over and over again, unlike the original allegations. Even the language of reporting and the graphics used continued to present the WMD pretext as legitimate. This graphic from FOX 17 not only furthers the WMD position, but continues to use Saddam well after his capture.



However, as recent polls have also shown there is less and less support for the US military presence in Iraq, especially as US troop deaths/casualties continue to mount. This reflects the dilemma of US news reporting on Iraq. People are motivated to support or oppose the war/occupation based more on the risk to US soldiers than the fundamental intention of the US government policy towards Iraq. This is due, in part, to the lack of analysis of that policy, as both our previous study of local news coverage on Iraq http://www.griid.org/pdfs/iraq_war_study.pdf, and this study demonstrates.

In addition to the data provided at the end, we will look at the amount of coverage as compared to the first few weeks of the war, sources used by local news agencies, the framing of stories, human rights issues, and how the local media presented the local impact of the war.

News sources in the *GR Press*

US govt/military spokespersons

US Military – 22
Unnamed US politicians – 5
Unnamed US officials – 3
Military family – 2
Paul Bremer – 5
Colin Powell – 4
US intelligence – 1
Weapons Inspector David Kay – 5
Bush – 4
John Kerry – 1
Howard Dean – 1
Senator Bill Frist – 1
Senator Carl Levin – 1
Dick Cheney – 2
CIA Director Tenet – 3
Donald Rumsfeld – 3

Think Tank/Expert sources

CATO Institute – 1
American Enterprise Institute – 1
Financial Dynamics- 1

Iraqi sources

Iraqi religious leader – 8
Ahmad Chalabi – 1
Iraqi citizens – 5
Olympic representative in Iraq - 1
Kurdish leader – 2
Iraqi police – 3
Iraqi doctor – 1
Iraqi Party spokesperson – 1
Iraqi Council member – 6

International sources

United Nations official – 3
French official – 1
German official – 1
Canadian official – 1
Kofi Annan – 2
International Tennis federation – 1
London analyst – 1
Tony Blair – 2
Clair Short – 1
Human Rights Watch – 1

Official Sources

As was the case in our previous study of local news coverage and Iraq, the sources used by area news agencies relied on “official sources,” such as government, military and expert opinions. This was clearly the case with the *Grand Rapids Press* as is indicated in the box on the left.

Iraqi voices were limited and tended to be cited in response to a bombing or an internal conflict. Very rarely did we document voices that were critical of the US military presence.

The international perspective was also limited, even from the UK, which has been the strongest supporter of the US position. A few other countries were sourced, but in limited number despite having a military presence in Iraq as well.

Most striking was the amount of coverage that the *Grand Rapids Press* devoted to this issue, compared to the first 6 weeks of the war. In this 2 month study we documented a total of 88 stories, but last year there were 504. Another big difference was that despite there being an Iraq war story on the front page of the *Press* every day of the previous study, this time we documented only 2 front page stories. This supports the notion that the news media tends to engage in “hot spot” reporting, despite the fact that it could be argued that the real work of resolving the conflict in Iraq is the important and ongoing story .

When it came to sources used by the local TV stations we saw an even larger decrease from the previous study. Here the sources are almost all govt/military sources, with the exception of 3 Iraqi voices on channel 13, Non-governmental organization (NGO) voices on channel's 8 and 17, and the United Nations chairman Kofi Annan was heard once on channel 8.

On local TV news the stories generally ran for 30 seconds with video b-roll provided by the networks, a marked contrast to last year when stories were often 3-4 minutes in length. In fact the total time for the 3 stations combined during this 2 month study was just 55 minutes and 24 seconds. In last year's study the combined time of the 3 stations was nearly 17 hours.

Framing Stories

How the local news media framed stories about the ongoing US military presence in Iraq was very similar to the previous study, in that the framing of the stories tended to accept the US administration's position as fact. There were stories on the claim of David Kay that no Weapons of Mass Destruction existed in Iraq and the coverage of the "failure" of the intelligence community, but these stories do not question, nor use independent sources that challenge the legitimacy of the US military actions in Iraq.

Sources/Voices on local TV news:

Bush – 2
McCain – 2
White House Press Sec. Scott McClellan – 1
Rumsfeld – 1
Senator Levin – 1
John Ashcroft – 1
Weapons Inspector David Kay – 1
Powell – 1
US military – 2
Kofi Annan – 1
NGO – 1



Military Families – 2
US military – 2
McCain – 1
Iraqi Doctor – 1
Iraqi Council member – 1,
Ahmad Chalabi – 1



Bush – 2
CIA Director Tenet – 1
US military – 2
Paul Bremer - 1
Military Families - 1
NGO – 1

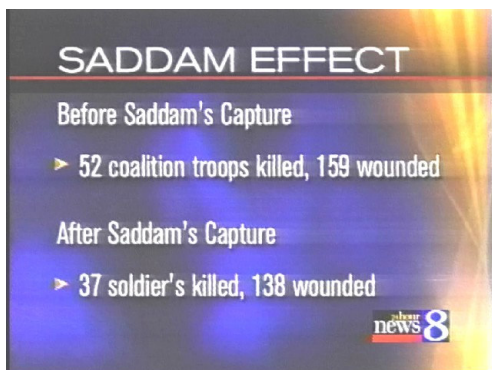


In addition, as was documented in the previous Iraq coverage study, the news media often used the language of the Pentagon in it's framing of news stories and the general coverage of the ongoing US campaign in Iraq. Here you can see some examples of how the local media framed the larger issue. WOOD TV 8 regularly used this corner screen graphic which said "Iraq after Saddam," and the *Grand Rapids Press* used a graphic on many of their Iraq stories that said "Iraq: The Aftermath." This graphic was accompanied by a sun in the background with a tank in the foreground.



Story examples

On January 29, the *GR Press* ran a story headlined "Saddam intended to develop weapons, Kay tells Senate committee." Upon reading the story you find a significantly different picture compared to what the headline suggested. The story begins with Kay saying that he blamed "faulty intelligence" and then states "It turns out we were all wrong" on matters of WMD claims. Kay goes on to say that "The best evidence is they (the Iraqis) were telling the truth." Eventually in paragraph 5 Kay says that he believes that Iraq "intended to develop" WMDs, but this is not the story. The story is that "we were all wrong," but this is not the impression if one just reads the headline. Besides the headline and story discrepancy another major flaw with this story was to not provide other perspectives on David Kay's revelation. Here are two examples that appeared around the same time as this article from former CIA analyst Ray McGovern www.veteransforcommonsense.org/article.asp?id=538 and Professor Rahul Mahajan www.empirenotes.org/intelligence.html. Not only do these two examples give readers a different opinion, but it serves the larger function in journalism that says you must find independent sources, particularly when reporting of what goes on in the corridors of power.



Example #2 comes from a January 13 story that ran on WOOD TV 8 (5:30 pm). The story goes "attacks against the US have dropped since Saddam was dragged out of his hole and the number of troops killed and wounded has plummeted as well." The newsreader then gives numbers with this graphic headlined the "Saddam Effect." It was a 58 second story that

led viewers to believe that US troop deaths were down due to Saddam Hussein's capture. The problem is, that channel 8 does not provide viewers with information to support that claim. In addition, as of this writing (May 1, 2004) more US soldiers are being killed and attacks against the US and coalition forces have increased, making the claim that there was a "Saddam effect" untrue.

The *third example* deals with the issue of military contracts. The *GR Press* reported on the contracts given to Halliburton in 2 articles; *Army changes story on Halliburton award* (2/10/04), and *Halliburton nets \$85 million in Iraq* (3/09/04). In the first story the Army Corps of Engineers acknowledges that it did not allow other agencies to be involved in decision making over the contract bidding process. The article then mentions that Vice President Cheney's office "says he severed relations with Halliburton when he ran for vice president in 2000," but provides no counter point that might contest this reality. According to the website War Profiteers (<http://www.warprofiteers.com/article.php?list=type&type=15>) Cheney still owns "\$433,000 unexercised Halliburton stock options." The story also includes concerns from the Kuwaiti, French and Nigerian officials on Halliburton's financial practices. Again the *Press* article simply states "The company said it had no knowledge of wrong doing in the joint venture." Readers would have been served well with more context to these claims, especially since there is substantial documentation that Halliburton has a history of illegal financial dealings. (<http://www.citizenworks.org/corp/warcontracts/halliburton.php>)

A second article on Halliburton appeared on March 9 entitled *Halliburton nets \$85 million in Iraq*. Buried at the bottom of page A5, this 2 inch column is nothing more than a reporting of Halliburton's filings with the Securities and Exchange Commission. It states that "The US government has become a major customer of ours." See Citizen Works online story "Dick Cheney and Halliburton" at <http://www.citizenworks.org/corp/warcontracts/cheney-halliburton.pdf> for details that the *Press* failed to provide.



The last story which aired on WXMI 17 was about the US military claim that foreign terrorists would be in Iraq. The story presents the Pentagon's position that "foreign terrorists and Islamic extremists from Syria and Iran" were entering Iraq. The only voice we heard in this story was that of a US General testifying before Congress. This is a claim that was made numerous times throughout the study by various local news agencies; *Arrest seen as*

evidence al-Qaida 'trying to gain foothold' in Iraq (GR Press 1/30/04), and all three TV stations reported multiple times that either foreign terrorists or al-Qaida had infiltrated Iraq. In all of these stories only the US military perspective is provided, with no sourcing that the claims were true. Many independent news sources make the claim that the insurgent forces fighting against the US-led occupation are Iraqis. (See stories at <http://www.occupationwatch.org/article.php?list=type&type=16>)

US vs Iraq Deaths

There was more disparity on local TV news than the *GR Press* when it came to reporting on US Troop vs. Iraqi civilian deaths. All three TV stations had numerous stories that focused on US Troop deaths (WOOD TV 8 - 10, WZZM 13 - 11, and WXMI 17 - 7), but fewer on Iraqi civilian deaths (WOOD TV 8 - 4, WZZM 13 - 5, and WXMI 17 - 2). Most of the Iraq civilian deaths were in the latter part of the study period and were connected to the larger bombings at the Shiite shrine. The TV coverage gives no impression that civilian deaths are ongoing and widespread throughout the country. A detailed chronology of Iraqi civilian deaths can be found online at <http://www.iraqbodycount.net/bodycount.htm>.

Channel 8 and 13 did report on the abuse of Iraqi POWs in late January but only mentioned that the US was “investigating these allegations.” Unfortunately no details were provided about these allegations, despite the well documented reports from Amnesty International <http://web.amnesty.org/library/Index/ENGMDE140062004?open&of=ENG-IRQ>.

In addition images of the cost of war were hard to find on the local TV news. A short clip on Fox 17 showed a man on a stretcher and WOOD TV 8 also ran a 2 second image of a young boy wounded, but provided no context or commentary on his situation.



The *Grand Rapids Press* covered US Troop and Iraqi civilian casualties on a more regular basis. In tracking their reporting we documented 41 US Troop deaths, 23 wounded, and 3 missing US Troops. There were a larger number of Iraqi casualties, with 347 deaths and 388 wounded Iraqis reported. Despite the larger number of Iraqi civilian deaths being reported in the *Press*, US troop deaths were still in twice as many headlines and only once did the *Press* run a photo of a wounded Iraqi civilian (1/19/04). Like the TV stories, the *Press* coverage of Iraqi deaths were related to suicide bombings and other attacks that were mostly attributed to insurgents or existing tensions between the various

factions within Iraq.

The Local Impact

When it came to the local angle on the US military presence in Iraq all of the reporting dealt with military families and US troops from this area. There were several stories about a US soldier from Kalamazoo who was killed in Iraq, otherwise stories tended to focus on soldiers coming home on leave. Many of the TV stories were emotionally driven, but were not as frequent or as long as our study of last year shows.



Even WZZM 13 has discontinued its segment called Home Front Families, which at one level seems strange since the stress for military families is equally high now as it was when the war started. Even though it was outside the timeframe of this study the *GR Press* did run a story in late April on the growing number of military families in this area who were opposed to the US occupation of Iraq and the risks their family members faced. This seems to be happening across the country with organizations like Bring The Home Now <http://www.bringthemhomenow.org/> growing in numbers.

There were no local anti-war stories or voices during the entire study period, despite the fact that groups are still meeting, having regular forums and vigils throughout West Michigan. This absence of a dissenting voice gives the impression that anti-war voices don't exist or are not relevant. There was coverage of an anti-war demonstration on the 1-year anniversary of the war in Iraq on March 21, but this was a week after our study period ended.

In addition to pro and anti-war stories there are certainly many other issues that could be reported on. Again as a comparison to our study from 2003 there could have been an ongoing look at the faith community's response to the war or the impact of the war on the local economy. Again, outside the timeframe of our study there was a *GR Press* story on local companies who have won contracts with the government ("The War's Collateral Benefits" 03/14/04). But beyond companies that benefited from the war one might think that the cost of the war to taxpayers, in light of the all the school closings and job losses would lead to a story that explored that element. Information provided by the National Priorities Project might be useful to news consumers in Michigan <http://www.nationalpriorities.org/issues/military/iraq/factsheet03/mi.pdf>. One fact from their research shows that of the

original \$87 billion in projected costs, about \$2.6 billion would be from Michigan taxpayers. This is just one example of the more substantive reporting that could take place with an issue that is either very emotional for people or too big to wrap your arms around.

Conclusion

As was shown in last year's study, the local coverage of the war in Iraq during this year's study presents a limited scope of what is happening. The perspective is overwhelmingly from either the government or US military, the human and economic costs of the war are marginal, and the local angle is exclusively from that of military families.

What is different about this year's study is only in quantity. There was a significant decrease in the amount of coverage in both the *GR Press* and the 3 TV stations monitored. In last year's study there was a front page story on the war in Iraq every day of the study http://www.griid.org/gallery/view_album.php?set_albumName=album02, but only 3 times did the war merit front page coverage in the *Press* (1/30/04, 2/02/04 and 3/08/04).

As was mentioned in the introduction since many Americans are still misinformed about basic aspects of the US war in Iraq it is our recommendation that major improvements be made on future reporting.

Here are the GRIID recommendations:

- *Provide independent perspectives on the war—both local and international*
- *Substantiate US government and military claims, don't report them as fact*
- *Provide more historical context to the current conflict*
- *Report on the human cost of the war, both US troop and Iraqi civilian deaths*
- *Don't report on Iraq only when there is a "crisis," the ongoing war and the future of Iraq deserve equal attention that was given during the early weeks of the war.*

Local News Coverage of Iraq Data

January 12 – March 12, 2004

GR Press Headlines:

Top Iraqi ayatollah raps US power handover plan, AP, 1/12/04, A5
Another helicopter downed, AP, 1/13/04, A3
Troops nab four nephews of most-wanted Iraqi, AP, 1/14/04, A3
UN return to Baghdad in works, LA Times, 1/14/04, A8
Rebuilding relationships, AP, 1/14/04, A8
Document: Saddam wary of foreign Arab fighters, NY Times NS, 1/14/04, A8
Shiites clamor for early vote, Press Wire Services, 1/15/05, A2
Kennedy slams Bush war politics, Washington Post, 1/15/04, A8
Pentagon concerned about GI suicides, Washington Post, 1/15/04, A8
Bremer's return signals changes to Iraq plan, LA Times, 1/16/04, A3
Many US deaths not a result of combat, AP, 1/16/04, A12
Annan rethinks UN in Iraq, AP, 1/19/04, A3
Iraqi official ups casualty count from Sunday's blast, AP, 1/19/04, A3
Annan says UN may consider direct Iraqi elections' feasibility, AP, 1/20/04, A5
Compromise plan would hand control to Iraqi council, AP, 1/21/04, A3
Whose serve? Tennis can be tenuous for Iraqis, AP, 1/21/04, A9
Troops staying Power?, Washington Post, 1/21/04, A9
Mortar fire kills two GIs in Iraq, Press Wire Service, 1/22/04, A2
Shiite cleric softens stance on elections, AP, 1/22/04, A12
US seeks UN help, AP, 1/23/04, A3
Iraqi scientists lied to Saddam about weapons, Kay says, NY Times News Service, 1/26/04, A3
3 missing after copter goes down, AP, 1/26/04, A7
Iraq about ready to pump oil from northern fields to Turkey, AP, 1/26/04, A7
Witnesses say double explosion kills three Americans, two Iraqis, AP, 1/27/04, A3
Roadside bombs raise US toll in Iraq by six, Press Wire Service, 1/28/04, A2
Bush defends war in Iraq, but not initial weapons claims, LA Times, 1/28/04, A3
Saddam intended to develop weapons, Kay tells Senate committee, Baltimore Sun, 1/29/04, A3
Army will add 30,000 troops, Washington Post, 1/29/04, A9
More bombs, protests; but Olympics offer hope, AP, 1/29/04, A9
Arrest seen as evidence al-Qaida 'trying to gain foothold' in Iraq, LA Times, 1/30/04, A1
Iraq gets ready for Olympics, AP, 1/30/04, A12
US razing five palaces in Saddam's birth village, AP, 1/30/04, A12
White House will promise all the access for inquiry into war, LA Times, 2/02/04, A3
Kurds say attacks strengthen their resolve, AP, 2/02/04, A3
Blair gives nod to probe on Iraq war, AP, 2/03/04, A3
Capitol Hill wary of intelligence probe, AP, 2/03/04, A6
Michigan soldier dies in roadside bombing, AP, 2/03/04, A6
More Japanese head to Iraq, AP, 2/03/04, A6
Bomber caught on tape, AP, 2/03/04, A6
Video grabs image of suicide bomber, AP, 2/04/05, A3
CIA never claimed Iraq was a threat, Tenet says, AP, 2/05/05, A1
Attacks seek political leverage later, US general says, AP, 2/05/05, A9
US troops arrest relative of top fugitive, AP, 2/05/05, A9
Sticking with July plan for self-rule, US says, AP, 2/05/05, A9
Were designs for bomb sold to Iraq? Washington Post, 2/05/05, A9

GR Press Headlines continued

CIA gets lukewarm support, AP, 2/06/04, A3
US captures suspects in attacks on troops, AP, 2/06/04, A3
Bush says he 'expected to find the weapons', Washington Post, 2/09/04, A3
Blast accident kills 2 US soldiers, AP, 2/09/04, A5
Al-Qaida urged to foster civil war: US, AP, 2/09/04, A5
Bomb kills, injures dozens at station, AP, 2/10/04, A6
Army changes story on Halliburton award, AP, 2/10/04, A6
War operations forecast to go broke in fall, LA Times, 2/11/04, A3
Suicide bomber kills dozens at Iraqi army recruiting depot, AP, 2/12/04, A8
US may delay transfer of power, LA Times, 2/12/04, A3
Saddam thought he would prevail, NY Times News Service, 2/12/04, A3
UN team, top cleric don't resolve differences over vote, AP, 2/12/04
Two soldiers killed by roadside bombs, AP, 2/16/04, A3
Bremer hints at limits to Islamic law, AP, 2/17/04, A3
Husband accused of hoax; wife found alive in Iraq, NY Times NS, 2/17/04, A3
Suicide bombers attack Polish base, AP, 2/18/04, A3
US issues list of bad guys in Iraq, AP, 2/18/04, A4
US considers switch in Iraqi handover, AP, 2/19/04, A2
Iraqi reaction mixed to UN election stance, AP, 2/20/04, A3
US troops say hello, goodbye to year in Iraq, AP, 2/23/04, A3
Suicide bomb kills at least 7, AP, 2/23/04, A8
Rumsfeld arrives, praises Iraq forces, AP, 2/23/04, A8
Iraq leaders demand start of planning for elections, AP, 2/24/04, A5
Insurgents kill cop, rocket holy place, Press Wire Service, 2/25/04, A2
Picking strong evidence is president's job, Kay says, AP, 2/26/04, A7
Britain spied on UN Annan: ex-official, AP, 2/27/04, A6
5 arrested following roadside bombing, AP, 2/27/04, A6
A more perfect union?, AP, 3/01/04, A3
Explosions shake Shiite shrines, AP, 3/02/04, A3
Last month had lowest US death toll, Scripps Howard News Service, 3/02/04, A3
Mourning, anger follow holy-day attacks on Shiite pilgrims, AP, 3/03/04, A2
Show of Unity, AP, 3/04/04, A11
Suspect in Attacks reportedly killed, AP, 3/04/04, A11
US troops expected to leave palaces and Baghdad airport, LA Times, 3/04/04, A11
Bombs explode as Iraqis prepare to sign constitution, AP, 3/05/04, A2
Iraqis set aside doubts, sign interim constitution, AP, 3/08/04, A1
Constitution still lacks legitimacy, leaders say, AP, 3/09/04, A5
Halliburton nets \$85 million in Iraq, Washington Post, 3/09/04, A5
Latest Developments, AP, 3/10/04, A3
CIA chief says he corrected Cheney, Bush on intelligence, NY Times, 3/10/04, A3
Sisters working for US shot dead, AP, 3/11/04, A10
Bomb kills 2 soldiers, AP, 3/12/04, A2
Ex-US journalist accused of working as agent for Iraq, AP, 3/12/04, A14

Total number of *Grand Rapids Press* stories – 88

News Sources

Associated Press – 62

Los Angeles Times – 8

Washington Post – 7

New York Times News Service – 5

Press Wire Service – 4

Baltimore Sun – 1

Scripps Howard News Service - 1

Total number of TV stories

WOOD TV8 – 27 WZZM 13 – 3 WXMI 17 – 22

Stories that focused on wounded or killed US soldiers

WOOD TV8 – 10 WZZM 13 – 11 WXMI 17 – 7

Stories that focused on wounded, arrested or killed Iraqis

WOOD TV8 – 4 WZZM 13 – 5 WXMI 17 – 2

Stories that focused on WMD investigation & US Pre-war intelligence

WOOD TV8 – 9 WZZM 13 – 6 WXMI 17 – 4

Stories that focused on Rebels/insurgents

WOOD TV8 – 5 WZZM 13 – 13 WXMI 17 – 9

Stories that focused on Iraqi reconstruction

WOOD TV8 – 4 WZZM 13 – 5 WXMI 17 – 2

Stories with a local angle

WOOD TV8 – 5 WZZM 13 – 5 WXMI 17 – 3

Stories that focused on the United Nations

WOOD TV8 – 2 WZZM 13 – 1 WXMI 17 – 0

Stories that focused on US soldier abuse of Iraqi POWs

WOOD TV8 – 1 WZZM 13 – 1 WXMI 17 – 0