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“Cable News Wars” – March 5, 2002 -  
[http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/media/jan-june02/cable\\_3-5.html](http://www.pbs.org/newshour/bb/media/jan-june02/cable_3-5.html)

### *TRANSCRIPT:*

ANNOUNCER: Stay with MSNBC, the best news on cable.

ANNOUNCER: Fox News Channel, the network America trusts.

ANNOUNCER: You can depend on CNN.

TERENCE SMITH: It's the electronic equivalent of an old-fashioned newspaper circulation war.

AARON BROWN, CNN: In defense in the Andrea Yates trial...

TERENCE SMITH: CNN, the Fox News Channel, and MSNBC -- the nation's three all-news cable channels -- are locked in a white-hot competition for viewers, especially in prime time. And beginning in January, Fox, the scrappy upstart news channel founded just six years ago by publishing magnate Rupert Murdoch, has pulled ahead of CNN, the 22-year-old traditional leader.

BRIT HUME, Fox News Channel: The month of January, we were number one.

TERENCE SMITH: Fox Washington managing editor and chief Washington correspondent Brit Hume:

BRIT HUME: We won in ratings, we won in households, we won every which way.

### **New volleys in the ratings war**

TERENCE SMITH: In January, Fox attracted an average of 1,091,000 viewers in prime time, while CNN had 921,000. MSNBC trailed with 358,000. Small numbers compared to the broadcast networks, but influential in setting the national news agenda. And among viewers aged 25-54, much loved by advertisers, Fox again came out on top -- this, despite the fact that CNN is available in nine million more cable households than Fox.

GAIL SHISTER, *Philadelphia Inquirer*: Their news is just plain more entertaining in prime time, if you look at their lineup.

TERENCE SMITH: Gail Shister is the television columnist for the *Philadelphia Inquirer*. She thinks that Fox is attracting viewers with its high-decibel, confrontational approach to the news in the evening hours.

GAIL SHISTER: You could argue that viewers are clearly looking for an alternative to straight news, which is what CNN and also MSNBC, to a lesser degree, have been offering for years -- that viewers want more entertainment; they want more oomph in their news.

TERENCE SMITH: But are they getting something more than oomph from Fox, such as a distinctly conservative slant on the news? At the corporate level, Fox denies that it is right of center, asserting that its product is "fair and balanced."

BRIT HUME (On "Special Report"): Exclusively to Fox News.

TERENCE SMITH: But anchor Brit Hume concedes that Fox saw an opening when it looked at the other channels.

BRIT HUME: Surveys have shown, going back, you know, as far as you and I can remember, that people have perceived a leftward tilt in the basic coverage that they get on TV news from everywhere. There was therefore, we believed, a market that, if we could do a more balanced product, people would be attracted to that, if we could just let them know it's out there.

TERENCE SMITH: Walter Isaacson is chairman and CEO of CNN. He sees a real distinction between Fox's coverage and his network's.

WALTER ISAACSON, CNN: It may not be as ideological or as edgy, and sometimes it may not be as sort of exciting as some other places, but when people really need the news, and they want journalism they can count on, they'll go to CNN. Sometimes it may pale in the ratings when people are looking for something flashy or more entertaining, but don't take your eye off the ball of this core mission, which is journalism.

TERENCE SMITH: Perhaps -- but on a recent big-news night, Fox scored a triumph.

BRIT HUME: On the night of the State of the Union, among the cable news channels, we had more viewers than CNN and MSNBC combined. So it was a good night for us from 9:00 to 11:00, that was the State of the Union and its aftermath.

### **EXamining the networks' content**

TERENCE SMITH: Since all news channels covered the president's speech, why did most cable viewers turn to Fox? Was it to hear the speech, or the commentary? Is Fox's appeal explained by its programming or its politics? To find out, the NewsHour commissioned Andrew Tyndall, the publisher of *The Tyndall Report*, a newsletter that monitors television news, to do a content analysis of the evening programming on the three cable news networks. He found sharp differences.

ANDREW TYNDALL, Television News Analyst: CNN is the reporters' network; Fox News Channel is the opinion makers' network; MSNBC is the confused network.

TERENCE SMITH: For 67 hours during the week of January 21 to 25, Tyndall's company, ADT Research, recorded and analyzed the three channels' content and style.

ANDREW TYNDALL: There are two reasons why you would have a 24-hour cable news channel in the first place, why you'd invent such a thing. One of them is to cater to people who are hungry for opinionated political debate. The second is to provide a resource so that people who want in-depth coverage of a major crisis when it happens will not just check in for a half-hour newscast, but they will get in-depth coverage. Fox News clearly provides the former. CNN clearly provides the latter.

CHRIS BURNS, CNN: We're live from the land of volcanoes.

TERENCE SMITH: Tyndall found that CNN relies heavily on reports from its correspondents stationed in 42 bureaus in the U.S. and around the world...

BOB FRANKEN, CNN: News of the day from Guantanamo Bay...

TERENCE SMITH: CNN concentrates more on the top stories of the day.

LOU DOBBS, CNN: Enron collapse has ripped apart jobs, careers and lives.

TERENCE SMITH: Alone among the three, CNN's story selection largely mirrored that of the broadcast networks. It spent a total of 206 minutes during evening hours on the top ten stories of the week, versus Fox's 183 minutes and 152 for MSNBC.

AARON BROWN: Is it a real five million or is it one of those Enron five millions?

TERENCE SMITH: CNN, he found, adheres to what he called an "objective and cool interviewing style." By contrast, Tyndall found that the Fox house style is hot.

SHEPARD SMITH, Fox News Channel: Jihad Johnny is on his way back to the United States...

TERENCE SMITH: Many interviews are presented in a confrontational format...



FOX NEWS CHANNEL ANCHOR: What if your little peace experiment while you're singing Kumbaya doesn't work and innocent people die again, how would you feel?

TERENCE SMITH: ...Especially those in its talk shows ...which dominate the evening schedule and set a tone for the network. BILL O'REILLY, Fox News Channel: So what do you want to do? Declare war on every country? **Fox's heated rhetoric**

TERENCE SMITH: Fox's top draw in the evening, Bill O'Reilly, asks questions in an opinionated and combative style, Tyndall found. Fox often favors interview guests with partisan, legal, and military backgrounds. "Special Report" with Brit Hume relies on a panel of frequently conservative in-house analysts, spending five times as many minutes per broadcast on such panels as CNN.

ANDREW TYNDALL: It's interesting that of the panel of six journalists, six print journalists that we saw appearing on that panel during the week we looked at it, three were from explicitly right-wing publications and three were from mainstream publications. None was from an explicitly left-wing publication.

TERENCE SMITH: Tyndall discovered a pattern.

ANDREW TYNDALL: All through Fox's primetime programming, you can see deliberate, strategic decisions that have been made -- not the same decision in each program, but all the way through, different types of decisions which emphasize having an opinion, examining the ideology, knowing what the points of view are about news stories, rather than merely reporting the facts.

TERENCE SMITH: And you see it again and again?

ANDREW TYNDALL: Yes, again and again.

TERENCE SMITH: Tyndall believes that Fox's loud style serves as a megaphone for an underlying ideology. Brit Hume sees it differently.

You referenced polls that have shown a public perception... of a liberal or left-of-center tilt in television news. Do they then perceive a conservative or right-of-center tilt at Fox?

BRIT HUME: They may very well, but what we hear people say is, "Thank you for being fair; thank you for being balanced." So my sense of that is that within the media world, among my colleagues, the conventional wisdom is we're a right-wing network. I don't accept that view, and I don't think our viewers do either.

TERENCE SMITH: Hume says that Fox was often denied access to top officials during the Clinton years.

BRIT HUME: I think they felt if they didn't play, they could strangle us in our crib, and it didn't work.

TERENCE SMITH: The anchor raised the access issue in a conversation with President-elect Bush even before he entered the White House.

BRIT HUME: I said, I don't want any special treatment for us; I don't want us to have any more than anybody else, but I don't want us to have any less, and I'd be grateful if you'd see that that happens. So far, it has.

TERENCE SMITH: What did he say?

BRIT HUME: He said, well, you know, I don't see any reason why you shouldn't be treated fairly, and I'll say that you should.

TERENCE SMITH: In a similar pursuit of access, CNN's Isaacson trooped up to Capitol Hill early in his tenure to meet specifically with Republican leaders in Congress, some of whom had criticized the fairness of his network.

WALTER ISAACSON, CNN: There were some Republicans on the Hill who felt they weren't being listened to at CNN, they didn't have a pipeline with CNN. If you're not going to be a conceited network, you really have to make sure everybody has a pipeline to you.

TERENCE SMITH: Third-ranked MSNBC, which declined to comment for this report, benefits from the extensive resources of the NBC News division behind it. But Tyndall's survey suggested that the network does not seem to have a clear sense of itself.

ANDREW TYNDALL: I'm very confused about the sort of programming MSNBC is putting on the air. They have two hour-long interview programs, one by Chris Matthews and one by Alan Keyes, which... they're not the same as what you'd see on the Fox News Channel, but in terms of interviewing style, type of guest, subject matter, topic selection, they're very "Foxesque," you could say. In between those two hours, however, you have a very CNN-style newscast from Brian Williams, very much in the traditional mode of dependence on correspondents and traditional objective reporting.

TERENCE SMITH: MSNBC may have further blurred its image during the Olympics, when it chose to stick with curling rather than cutting away to a breaking news story, the confirmation of journalist Daniel's Pearl's death. The other two networks, CNN and Fox, are battling it out as though it were in fact a two-way race. They are competing not just for viewers, but for high-priced, high-profile talent. CNN made news recently when it spent millions to lure Connie Chung from ABC.

## Swapping talent

WALTER ISAACSON: There used to be an old saying at CNN that the news is the star, and not the personality, and I could never quite see why it had to be an either/or proposition. I felt you could have news as a star, and have strong personalities that were trusted journalists that people want to watch to bring it in.

TERENCE SMITH: In addition, CNN snared Paula Zahn from rival Fox, and Aaron Brown from ABC, and renewed the contract of their longtime ratings powerhouse, Larry King. Meanwhile, Fox has hired Greta Van Susteren from CNN and Geraldo Rivera from MSNBC. MSNBC has so far resisted the high-priced bidding war, showcasing its own stable of stars, including Brian Williams and Ashleigh Banfield. The networks have gone to great lengths and even over the top to promote their new talent.

AD ANNOUNCER: ...and just a little sexy? CNN, yeah, CNN.

TERENCE SMITH: This CNN ad about veteran newswoman Paula Zahn caused headlines and red faces at the network.

What were you trying to say with that?

WALTER ISAACSON: That was a mistake. That was the week between Christmas and New Year, and some people in the promotion department got a bit zealous.

TERENCE SMITH: Meanwhile, CNN is keeping a sharp eye on Fox, and Fox's O'Reilly enjoys needling the competition.

BILL O'REILLY: Those folks at CNN are pretty crafty. They read my book **The O'Reilly Factor**, in which I said I had a crush on Connie Chung and so they go out and hire her away from ABC and will put her up against the Factor.

PAULA ZAHN, CNN: Good morning.

TERENCE SMITH: In the morning hours, where surveys show the audience for news is growing, CNN and Fox are going head to head. Just down the street from Fox's headquarters, CNN is building a street-level studio here for "American Morning with Paula Zahn." After only a few months on the air, she has brought CNN to within striking distance of Fox's morning show. So, as they say in the television game, the battle for eyeballs is far from over.

JIM LEHRER: And the just-out new Nielsen ratings for February show Fox has increased its prime time lead over CNN; and MSNBC remains a distant third. Andrew Tyndall's study of the three networks is available, in full, [on our Web site](#).