

# The first casualty of war: Study finds news reports match misperception of civilian deaths

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Researchers reporting in BioMed Central's open access journal *Conflict and Health* found that the discrepancy in media reporting of casualty numbers in the Iraq conflict can potentially misinform the public and contribute to distorted perceptions and gross underestimates of the number of civilians killed in the armed conflict.

In February of 2007 Associated Press conducted a survey of 1,002 adults across the United States about their perceptions of the [war](#) in Iraq. Whilst the respondents accurately estimated the [death toll](#) of U.S. soldiers (the median estimate was 2,974 while the actual toll at the time was 3,100), they grossly underestimated the number of Iraqi civilian casualties (the median answer was 9,890 at a time when several estimates put the toll at least 10 times that number and some as high as 50 times that number).

To assess the potential reasons for this discrepancy, Schuyler W. Henderson and colleagues at Columbia University examined 11 U.S. newspapers and 5 non-U.S. newspapers to collate the number of Coalition and Iraqi fatalities reported in the media between March 2003 and March 2008. They specifically looked at tallies (numbers of death over a period of time) and the descriptions of specific casualty events.

The results of their study showed U.S. newspapers reported more events and tallies related to Coalition deaths than Iraqi civilian deaths, although

there were substantially different proportions amongst the different U.S. newspapers. In four of the five non-US newspapers, the pattern was reversed.

The authors of the study suggest that as newspapers reflect the interests of their readers, it is not surprising that U.S. newspapers describe more casualties related to Coalition deaths than Iraqi civilians, however they go on to question whether this is consistent with the goals and tenets of ethical and accurate journalism.

"We feel that this study casts an important light on the role of the media in covering armed conflict and communicating the human costs of war to the public" said Schuyler. "Our paper calls into question the role of the media in providing a tool for civilians to accurately gauge the true effects and outcomes of military action and ongoing warfare."

More information: Reporting Iraqi civilian fatalities in a time of war, Schuyler W Henderson, William E Olander and Les Roberts, *Conflict and Health* (in press), [www.conflictandhealth.com/](http://www.conflictandhealth.com/)

Source: BioMed Central ([news](#) : [web](#))

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