The media and Terri Schiavo: the case of Fox News

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Billionaire Rupert Murdoch's Fox News Network's coverage of the Terri Schiavo autopsy report last week illustrated what its motto "fair and balanced" means in practice. A review of Fox's coverage during the two-day period after the autopsy results were released Wednesday offers a spectacular contrast with the virtually non-stop coverage of the Schiavo affair during March.

Then, as right-wing Christian fundamentalist and Catholic organizations, allied with the Bush administration and congressional Republicans, mounted a hysterical campaign to intervene—ostensibly on Schiavo's behalf—the Fox's line-up of right-wing pundits acted as both conduit and cheerleader for a virtual tsunami of reaction, lies and stupidity.

Given the blanket "news coverage" Fox gave the subject, one might assume that the release of the autopsy on the morning of Wednesday, June 15, would have offered an opportunity to crank up the propaganda machine once again. Instead, Fox offered only a few perfunctory reports, then silence.

There would have been plenty of shouting and screaming if the autopsy results, announced at a press conference by Pinellas-Pasco (Florida) Medical Examiner Jon Thogmartin, had offered anything to support the groundless assertions made earlier this year by the likes of Republican Senate Majority Leader Bill Frist, House Majority Leader Tom DeLay, right-wing pundit Sean Hannity, and the rest.

Thogmartin's scientific findings, however, confirmed the diagnosis that Schiavo had suffered from massive and irreversible brain damage and that she was in a persistent vegetative state. It thus echoed precisely what had been said all along by independent doctors who had been involved in her case and by Schiavo's husband Michael.

The Fox Network broadcasts 24 hours a day, drawing on the resources of hundreds of reporters, staffers, producers and no shortage of news commentators. How did this giant news-gathering organization respond to this important, breaking news story?

It barely responded at all. Here's what our analysis showed, based upon a Lexis-Nexis database search of Fox News transcripts for June 15-16 that was conducted mid-day on Friday, June 17. The times given are Eastern Standard Time.

The Schiavo autopsy was the subject of reports and interviews Wednesday on four Fox News programs: Fox Special Report with Brit Hume during the 6 p.m. hour; "The O'Reilly Factor" during the 8 p.m. hour; "Hannity & Colmes" during the 9 p.m. hour; and finally, "On the Record with Greta Van Susteren" during the 10 p.m. hour.

Hume's program, which is Fox's principal dinner-time news broadcast, carried a report comprising all of four sentences, delivered by Fox News anchor Shepard Smith, an excerpt short enough to include here in full:

"Terri Schiavo had massive brain damage. Autopsy results released today support her husband's belief that she was, in fact, in a persistent vegetative state, could communicate with no one, and would never have recovered. Her parents disagreed, sparking a heated right-to-die battle, and they say they still don't believe it. The autopsy showed no evidence that she had an eating disorder before her collapse 15 years ago."

"The O'Reilly Factor" that followed featured the Schiavo autopsy more than 20 minutes into the program. The guest was Dr. Eric Braverman, the author of a book entitled "The Edge Effect: Achieve Total Health and Longevity with the Balanced Brain Advantage."

Braverman was virtually the only guest who appeared on any of the four programs who affirmed the autopsy's most damning findings: that "[S]he had no brain activity. She had no brain ability left. She had lost half her brain. In fact, her eyes were so damaged that she couldn't see." Asked by O'Reilly whether Thogmartin's assessment was "absolutely right," Braverman said, "That's correct."

Braverman responded to a few more questions before O'Reilly wrapped up the interview and encouraged his audience to "think about what you heard and who said it and now what we know," before moving on to a report on how California. Gov. Arnold Schwarzenegger was "treated disrespectfully" at a California college.

"We have video of it," O'Reilly promised. No video of Dr. Thogmartin's comments was broadcast by Fox News on June 15-16.

The next hour, on Hannity & Colmes, right-wing commentator Sean Hannity and his "liberal" co-host Alan Colmes introduced Bobby Schindler and Suzanne Vitadamo, Terri Schiavo's brother and sister, halfway through the

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program. The siblings disputed and mischaracterized the medical examiner's findings.

Thogmartin had been joined at his press conference Wednesday by Polk County-based Medical Examiner Stephen Nelson, who is an expert in neuropathology. Both concluded that the autopsy findings were "very consistent" with the diagnosis of Schiavo being in a persistent vegetative state and that she had no awareness of her surroundings.

According to a report in the *Tampa Tribune*, Dr. Nelson offered clarification: He said that there "is no way for an autopsy to confirm a diagnosis that a living person was in a persistent vegetative state rather than in a minimally conscious state." Nelson added: `"[T]here is nothing in her autopsy report ... that is inconsistent with persistent vegetative state. She was very definitely blind and would not be able to register any type of thought or cognitive awareness of what was going on."

With that in mind, here is an exchange between Colmes and Schindler:

Colmes: [The medical examiners] "described the condition as very consistent with a persistent vegetative state. Are you willing to acknowledge that you were wrong about that?"

Schindler: "No, not at all."

Then:

Colmes: "You don't believe the autopsy report?"

Schindler: "The M.E. did not come to a conclusion if Terry was in a PVS."

Colmes: "That's exactly what he said today..."

Schindler: "No, he did—he did not say that."

Colmes: "That's exactly what he said."

A few minutes later:

Colmes: "You've been bad-mouthing Michael Schiavo, yet the medical examiner concluded that there was no evidence of strangulation or other trauma leading to the collapse. Are you willing to acknowledge that you were wrong in that instance?"

Schindler: "No, not at all."

Neither Colmes nor Hannity said the obvious: the Schindler family and their right-wing fundamentalist backers simply reject science when it conflicts with their beliefs, which are based on a combination of wishful thinking and superstition.

Greta Van Susteren's guest on her late-evening program was David Gibbs, the attorney representing the Schindler family. He acknowledged that the medical examiner's report found that Schiavo's brain was "injured."

"The real question as the Schindlers look forward is how do they take Terri's legacy and make sure that no family has to watch their loved ones be starved to death?"

With 45 seconds left, Van Susteren followed up with a question for clarification: "I use the term brain damaged. You use the term brain injured. Am I using the wrong term?"

"No," Gibbs replied. "Damage and injury I think could be used simultaneously."

He continued: "No, the core—the core term is that Terri was not brain dead. She was brain injured and would have lived for quite a long time if given proper care."

"All right, I appreciate it and I always like to learn to use the right words," Van Susteren said. "Thank you, David."

Van Susteren's passion for using "the right words" did not compel her, oddly enough, to point out that Thogmartin determined that Schiavo did not, in fact, "starve to death," but that she had died from dehydration and would not have felt any pain. Some words, apparently, are less important than others.

This is what viewers of "fair and balanced" Fox News saw Wednesday evening on the Schiavo autopsy. What they did not see was any on-camera comments from anyone on the side of the case opposed by the Republican Party and the Christian Right: nothing from Michael Schiavo, his attorney George J. Felos, or from Thogmartin himself. There was no indication that any of them had been invited to appear for an interview but turned down the opportunity—if one can call it that.

Viewers tuning in Thursday did not hear anything more about Schiavo. They did, however, hear a great deal about the ruling in the Michael Jackson sex abuse trial, which—three days after the jury acquitted the musician on all counts—was still providing much grist for Fox News commentators.

Counting Monday, when the verdict was announced shortly after 2 p.m. Pacific Time, through Thursday, a Lexis-Nexis search shows that the Jackson verdict and aftermath was featured on 11 separate episodes of five Fox News programs. It was a subject on Brit Hume's program June 13-14 and 16; O'Reilly kicked it around June 13-15; Van Susteren featured it June 13-14, and it was the subject of "The Big Story with John Gibson" June 14.

In its cavalier dismissal of the Schiavo autopsy findings, Fox is the most obvious propagandist for the extreme right among the major television networks. But it is hardly alone. None of its supposedly liberal rivals, CBS, NBC and ABC, followed the story for more than a day. None of them discussed the autopsy findings in their Sunday talk shows, which generally review the most important political events of the preceding week.

Nothing here to see, move along.

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