

PEJ Special Index Report: Anna Nicole Smith, Anatomy of a Feeding Frenzy

Shortly after 2 p.m. on February 8, news outlets began reporting that playmate/ heiress Anna Nicole Smith had been found unconscious at the Seminole Hard Rock Hotel & Casino in Hollywood Florida. What followed for the next 23 days struck many observers as a media feeding frenzy that turned a tabloid tangle into one of the nation's biggest news events.

When MSNBC's Chris Matthews on February 19 asked Iraq veteran Paul Rieckhoff whether the debate about Iraq was harming troop morale, Reickhoff told him that instead, "morale is impacted...by the fact that America is paying attention toAnna Nicole Smith . . ."

How big was the Anna Nicole Smith story? How pervasive a media phenomenon was it? Can any lessons be learned about the media from the episode?

This PEJ Index Special Report of the 23 days of the Anna Nicole story—from her death on February 8¹ to her burial on March 2—reveals that it was indeed a major story in the national press, though not equally so across outlets. Only two other stories during that time—the debate over Iraq and the 2008 Presidential race—generated more attention in than Smith's demise—and those only barely.

Yet the sense that the Smith soap opera—and the clips of her vamping in scanty attire—was a wall-to-wall event from which there was no escape in the media is something of a misimpression.

The Smith saga did not attract major coverage from all the media sectors studied, which includes 48 different outlets across five media sectors. (Please see the methodology [\(LINK\)](#) for a complete list.) Instead, it was driven largely by relentless attention from two—both television-based. One was network morning news. The other, even bigger, was cable TV news, where this story accounted for nearly a quarter of all airtime.

What's more, not all channels devoted equal time to the story. In network morning shows, the story was covered more heavily by CBS and NBC.

And on cable, the Fox News Channel fixated most on the story, followed by MSNBC.

These findings add to the evidence of cable's fixation on one big event. But they also go beyond that. The fact that for the most part, the newspapers, web sites, nightly network newscasts, and radio news outlets treated Smith's death as a blip on the radar screen speaks to cable's ability to magnify an event until it feels like the only story on the entire media agenda.

¹ The content captured for this analysis begins at 3 P.M. ET, February 8th, 2007, about the time Anna Nicole Smith's death was announced.

In reality, the media landscape is diverse with different news priorities. What consumers learn about—and what they do not learn about—can vary dramatically depending on where they go for news.

Anna, Iraq, and Presidential Politics

Overall, that extensive morning show and cable output is largely responsible for the fact that Smith’s death was the third biggest story, accounting for 8% of all the news coverage studied by PEJ in that slightly more than three-week period. It missed being No. 1 by the narrowest of margins.

The Iraq policy debate, which included a crucial House vote against the President’s surge policy, accounted for 9% of the overall coverage. The presidential race, which featured campaign announcements from Barack Obama, John McCain and Rudy Giuliani, also generated 9%.

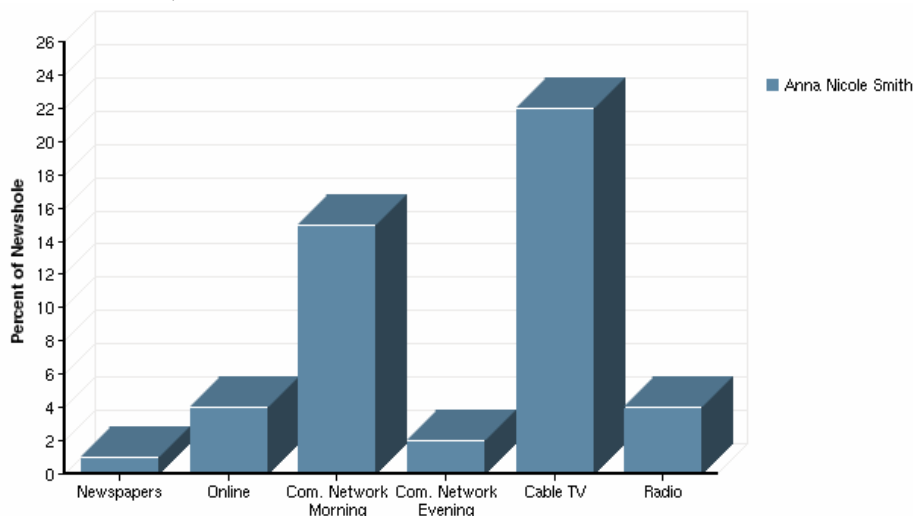
Far further down the list during this period—attracting less than half the coverage of Anna Nicole—were such potentially far-reaching events as the nuclear deal with North Korea, renewed fighting in Afghanistan, the Scooter Libby trial, and the February stock market plunge.

Those overall numbers, though, in many ways gloss over the profound differences in media sectors and don’t offer much insight into where the coverage was coming from.

For those who turned to radio, the Internet or newspaper front pages, the Anna Nicole story was a much smaller event, not even reaching five percent of the newshole in any of those media (radio and online were tied at 4%, and it was a mere 1% for the papers).

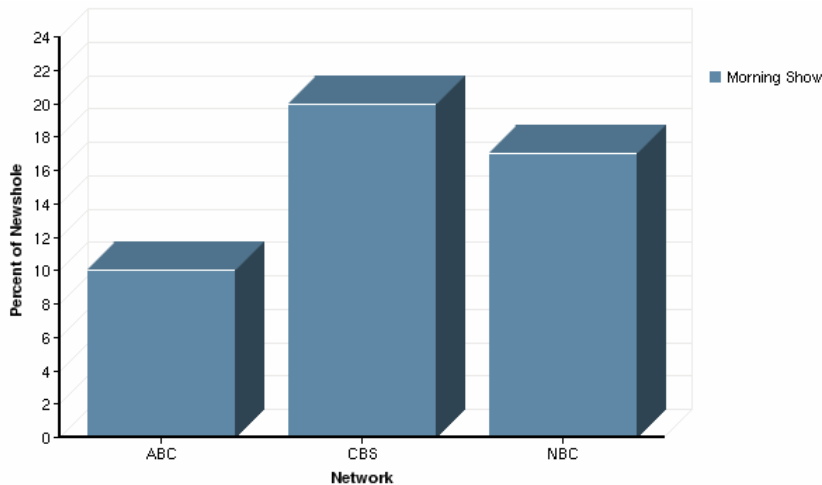
Anna Nicole Smith Coverage: By Medium

Feb 8 – March 2, 2007



Yet in morning network news, the Anna Nicole story made up far more—filling 15% of the first half hour of these programs during this period.² Within that genre, coverage was particularly heavy on CBS’s “Early Show,” which devoted 20% of its airtime to the story, and NBC’s “Today Show,” at 17%. ABC’s “Good Morning America” gave the event much less attention—just 10% in its top half-hour of programming.

Anna Nicole Smith Coverage: Network Morning News Shows
 Total Coverage by Network, Feb 8 – March 2, 2007



It was on ubiquitous cable TV news channels that the full force of the Anna Nicole story took hold, where it seemed reminiscent of such pre-9/11 marathons as the deaths of Princess Di and JFK Jr. It consumed 22% of the airtime on the cable news programs examined in this study making it far and away the biggest cable story in that period.

Even those numbers may not capture the full extent of cable’s fascination. If two programs not in PEJ’s index were included—Larry King on CNN and Greta Von Susteren on Fox—the numbers would be noticeably higher.³ CNN’s “Larry King Live” tackled the Smith case in 16 of 21 shows from February 8 through March 2. “On the Record,” hosted by Van Susteren, devoted part of 16 out of 17 shows to Smith-related coverage.

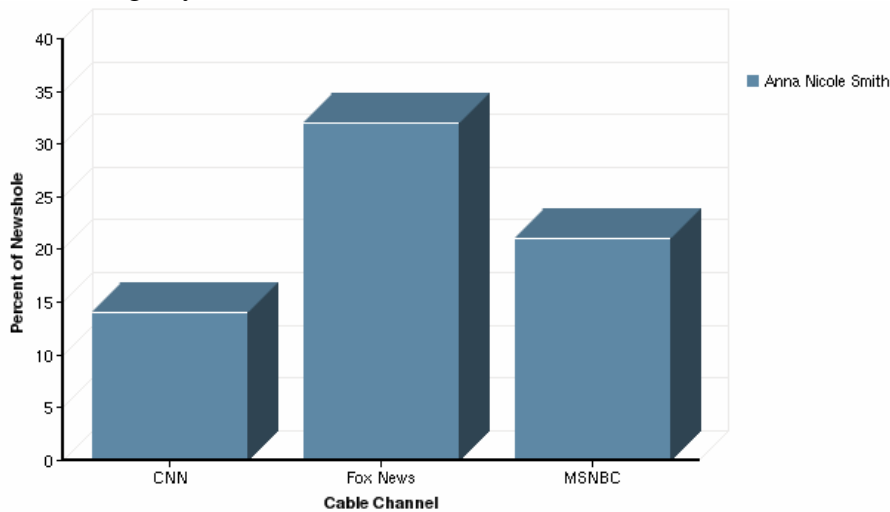
Within the cable news genre, Smith was particularly a Fox News Channel phenomenon. In the programs studied, that network devoted almost one-third of its airtime (32%) to the Smith story in all its permutations. MSNBC came next at 21%. CNN stood out for its lack of coverage—just 14% of airtime studied, less than half that of Fox. And, if anything, that gap might have been larger had Van Susteren and King both been factored in.

² For the Weekly News Index, the Project studies the 1st half hour of the morning news programs, the half hour research has shown to be most focused on news events of the day.

³ The PEJ News Index does not include Larry King Live or Greta Van Susteren’s “On the Record” because they are not general interest news programs. For this special report, we examined transcripts of those shows.

Anna Nicole Smith Coverage: Cable News

Total Coverage by Channel, Feb 8 – March 2, 2007



(It is worth noting that after disappearing from the media radar screen for several weeks, the Smith story spiked again after the March 26 autopsy report concluding she died of an accidental drug overdose. That was the tenth biggest overall story in the week of March 25-30. And not surprisingly, cable—at 5% of the newshole—gave it the most coverage.)

On his February 8 show, Fox News host Bill O'Reilly acknowledged he wasn't sure Smith merited all this interest. "I'm looking at her," he said, "and seeing a media creation."

CNN's Wolf Blitzer offered a rationale for the coverage on the February 9 edition of "Situation Room" after his sidekick Jack Cafferty had attacked the media for treating the Smith story like "tabloid gold."

"I know a lot of people are complaining about that," said Blitzer. "But a lot of people are also watching."

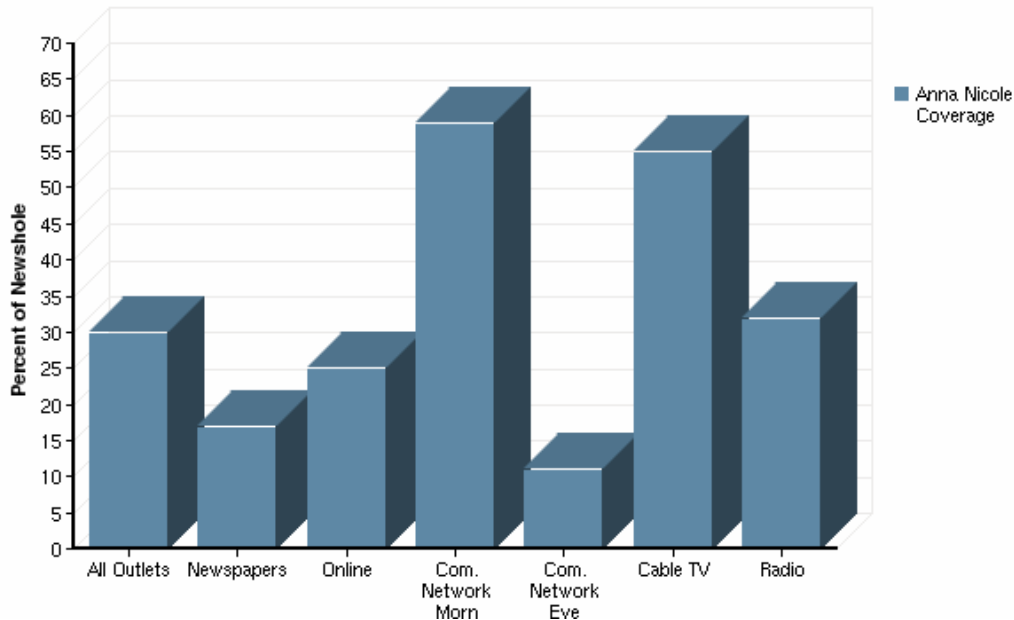
If Smith's celebrity was a media creation, the media's fixation on her death can largely be attributed to cable news's ravenous appetite for the story.

The Feverish First Few Days

Smith died on the afternoon of February 8 and events unraveled quickly. The next morning, her mother was telling "Good Morning America" that Smith had partied too heavily as she raised the specter of a drug overdose. An initial autopsy report came to no definitive conclusions about the cause of death. A judge declined to order an emergency DNA test on the deceased. And the paternity sweepstakes got more crowded when the husband of actress Zsa Zsa Gabor emerged to announce that he too might be the father.

In those first two days, cable devoted 55% of its time to the case. But for that moment in time, coverage was extensive everywhere—though still not to the extent of cable. Seventeen percent of newspapers’ February 9 front-page space, 32% of the radio airtime, and 25% of the online coverage dealt with Smith.

Anna Nicole Smith Coverage: The First Two Days
All Outlets Combined and by Medium, Feb 8 -9, 2007



Overall, across all media sectors studied, the celebrity better known for her measurements than accomplishments accounted for 30% of the coverage in those first two days. By means of comparison, the first two days of Smith coverage roughly matches the coverage of the Scooter Libby verdict the day of and day following the March 6 announcement that he was guilty of perjury and obstruction.

Some news people were quick to disparage the attention. On his February 8 nightly newscast, NBC’s Brian Williams disapprovingly noted that “This may say a lot about our current culture of celebrity and media these days, when all the major cable news networks switched over to live coverage [of Smith’s death] this afternoon...” But even the three commercial network nightly newscasts turned over 11% of their collective newshole to the story on February 8 and 9. Their morning show siblings did considerably more, spending nearly three out of every five minutes (59%) on the subject on February 9.

After those frantic first few days, however, many media outlets would dramatically reduce their interest in the story.

Who Didn't Feed the Frenzy?

Brian Williams, Katie Couric, and Charlie Gibson all talked about Anna Nicole Smith's death on their February 8 newscasts. But commercial nightly network coverage pretty much shut down after that. The NBC, CBS and ABC newscasts aired a combined total of about 18 minutes of Smith stories in the entire February 8-March 2 period. None of them were among the first three pieces in any newscast. In all, that amounted to 2% of the evening news newshole.

Network Evening News Percent of Newshole Devoted to Major Stories, Feb 8 – March 2, 2007		
Story	Commercial Networks	PBS NewsHour
Iraq Policy Debate	8%	21%
Iraq Homefront	6	17
Events in Iraq	10	6
Campaign 2008	5	3
Anna Nicole Smith	2	0

Source: PEJ News Coverage Index

And one program did not offer a single utterance on the subject. Public broadcasting's nightly "NewsHour with Jim Lehrer" spent no time covering Smith's death and the many legal battles that ensued.⁴

After their initial burst of interest, the 13 newspapers in our sample also dropped the Smith story from Page One, producing a total of only seven front-page stories and about 7,000 words on the subject throughout the more than three weeks. Constituting only 1% of the overall front page newshole, the Smith episode was the 13th biggest newspaper story in that period. It generated less coverage even than the aftermath of Hurricane Katrina or the health care debate.

Newspapers Percent of Newshole Devoted to Top 5 Stories, Feb 9 – March 2, 2007	
Story	%
Campaign 2008	8
Events in Iraq	7
Iran	6
Iraq Homefront	6
North Korea	3

Source: PEJ News Coverage Index

The top three stories in newspapers during the period were the 2008 campaign (8%), events in Iraq (7%) and tensions between the U.S. relations and Iran (6%).

Online Percent of Newshole Devoted to Top 6 Stories, Feb 9 – March 2, 2007	
Story	%
Events in Iraq	13
Iraq Policy Debate	9
Campaign 2008	9
Iran	6
Snowstorms	4
Anna Nicole Smith	4

⁴ The PEJ Index studies the first half hour of the NewsHour, but for this special report we also studied the transcripts of the second half hour. There were no mentions of Anna Nicole Smith.

Source: PEJ News Coverage Index

Online media and radio news gave the story somewhat more attention, but came nowhere near matching cable's intensity. Overall, the Web sites examined by PEJ ran 17 pieces on Smith, making it the sixth biggest online story at 4%. It lagged behind the subject of growing tension with Iran and severe winter weather and finished just ahead of U.S. relations with North Korea.

The story also filled 4% of the newshole in radio, where it was the fifth biggest topic, right behind global warming and just ahead of the conflict with Iran.

The radio sector includes a number of both conservative and liberal talkhosts (as well as NPR programming and top-of-the-hour headline reads). But even in a platform that can thrive on scandal and controversy, the events surrounding Smith's death did not gain serious traction. In the three weeks, the topic filled just 5% of the talk radio menu, getting only about 40 minutes of airtime. And when the radio talkers did address the issue, it was often to criticize what they considered excessive media attention.

Radio	
Percent of Newshole Devoted to Top 5 Stories, Feb 8 – March 2, 2007	
Story	%
Iraq Policy Debate	21
Campaign 2008	11
Events in Iraq	5
Global Warming	4
Anna Nicole Smith	4
<i>Source: PEJ News Coverage Index</i>	

“Another drugged-out starlet collapses and dies and all the news of the world stops,” bellowed conservative host Michael Savage. “Frankly, I’m sick of the news.”

“How many Americans actually know we lost four service men and women in Iraq the day that [Smith] tipped over?” asked liberal talker Ed Schultz on his show. “Where’s the fair coverage of that? Where’s our priorities?”

Anna in the Morning (Mostly on CBS)

If the signature nightly newscasts were reticent about Smith, their morning show cousins took up the slack, giving over 15% of their first half hour of programming to the story.

One way to evaluate interest in the death of Anna Nicole Smith is to compare that coverage with the two biggest ongoing stories.

Taken as a whole, the three broadcast network morning shows, CBS's “Early Show,” NBC's “Today” show and ABC's “Good Morning America” in their newsier first half-hour of

Network Morning News	
Percent of News Hole Devoted to Top 5 Stories, Feb 9 – March 2, 2007	
Story	%
Anna Nicole Smith	15
Campaign 2008	11
Snowstorms	11
Iraq War – policy debate	6
Iran	6
<i>Source: PEJ News Coverage Index</i>	

programming devoted more attention to her than to the crowded 2008 presidential race

(11%). It also exceeded their coverage of Iraq during this time. Just 6% of airtime was spent on the policy debate surrounding the war, and if you combine all three areas of Iraq coverage—policy, homefront and events in Iraq which add up to 11%—Anna Nicole still came out ahead.

Yet even these across-the-board numbers for the morning shows don't tell the whole story. Some networks were far more interested than others. From February 8 to March 2, CBS's "The Early Show," with anchors Harry Smith and Julie Chen, filled 20% of its time with Smith-related stories. That's almost double the play given to the presidential campaign (11%) and to Iraq (11%).

NBC's "Today" show was not far behind. On the program fronted by Matt Lauer and Meredith Viera, Smith coverage accounted for 17% of the newshole. That narrowly topped its coverage of the Presidential campaign (15%) and significantly exceeded the attention given to the war (10%).

ABC's "Good Morning America" hosted by Diane Sawyer and Robin Roberts evinced considerably less enthusiasm for the saga. It filled 10% of its time with news about Smith. That still represented more coverage than the 2008 campaign generated (8%), but less than the 13% devoted to all aspects of the Iraq conflict.

Cable Finds A Mega-Story (Particularly the Fox News Channel)

On her February 16 CNN show, Paula Zahn called the Smith case "America's newest guilty pleasure" and accused the public of being less than candid about its level of interest.

Brandishing a CNN online poll showing that 71% of the respondents said they were not interested in the Smith situation, Zahn responded: "Don't bother denying it. We've seen the ratings, we've watched the magazines fly off the rack. We know millions of you are out there."

Cable's news certainly seemed to operate under that assumption, both in the newsier day parts and the more opinion-driven prime-time shows. From Smith's death to her internment, the cable news programs monitored in this study spent about 775 minutes, or more than one-fifth (22%) of its total coverage, on the subject.

No other news event came close to capturing as much of cable's attention. The second biggest story in that sector was the presidential campaign at 11%, followed by the political debate over Iraq at 10%.

But within the cable universe studied, one channel—Fox News—was much more focused on the Smith drama.

Just as Zahn called the Smith story a “guilty pleasure,” Fox News Channel host John Gibson said on his radio show that the Smith contretemps “may not fit the high-minded views of a lot of news professionals, people who think that their news program is just another part of Foreign Affairs Quarterly. That only a certain kind of news is worthy of their discussing. Those people are snobs.” By his standards, then, Fox News is anything but snobby.

The Fox News Channel spent about 400 minutes or 32% of its airtime, on this case. This was 50% higher than MSNBC which devoted 21% of its airtime to the story and more than double CNN’s coverage of 14%.

How did this coverage compare with cable’s coverage of the other ongoing news events? We looked at two in particular: the race for the White House and the Iraq conflict (this included strategy debate, bloodshed inside Iraq and war-related issues at home such as substandard conditions and care at the Walter Reed Army Hospital).

All three of the cable news networks used more of their airtime to cover Smith’s demise than the race for the White House. The gap was greatest at Fox News, where the ratio of Smith to Campaign 2008 was 4 to 1.

Cable News			
Percent of News Hole Devoted to Top 5 Stories, by Channel			
Feb 8 – March 2, 2007			
Story	CNN	Fox News	MSNBC
Anna Nicole Smith	14%	32%	21%
Campaign 2008	11	8	16
Iraq Policy Debate	7	5	20
Events in Iraq	8	3	1
Iran	4	3	6

Source: PEJ News Coverage Index

When it came to coverage of Iraq, Fox again stood out. It devoted just 5% to policy debate, 3% to fighting on the ground and 2% to homefront issues. Taken together, then, all of the Iraq coverage in these weeks amounted to just a third of the Smith airtime. Both CNN and MSNBC, on the other hand, spent more time on their total war coverage (17% and 26% respectively) than on the deceased Playmate.

Why such fascination—at least in some outlets—with a woman who, as MSNBC’s Keith Olbermann put it, is “principally famous merely for being famous?” Some of those nearly 800 minutes on cable were given over to the task of trying to figure that out—or rationalize it.

A guest on Olbermann’s “Countdown” show, “Access Hollywood” correspondent Tony Potts, suggested Smith’s similarities with another ill-fated blonde bombshell, Marilyn Monroe, might be driving the interest.

On his Fox show, Bill O'Reilly asked colleague Gerald Rivera—a former daytime talk host and one of the godfathers of the tabloid media culture—to explain what made Smith worthy of such attention. Rivera thought hard before finally concluding that such celebrities “may be living train wrecks. But they are endearing in some strange, and maybe indefinable” way.

Trajectory of a Melodrama

After the first few frantic days, the Smith drama—and the accompanying media attention—took something of a roller coaster ride. After filling nearly one-third of the overall newshole on February 8 and 9, it accounted for only 6% of the coverage in the week of February 11-16. In no media sector other than cable—where 20% of the airtime was still consumed by Smith—did coverage even reach 5% of the newshole that week.

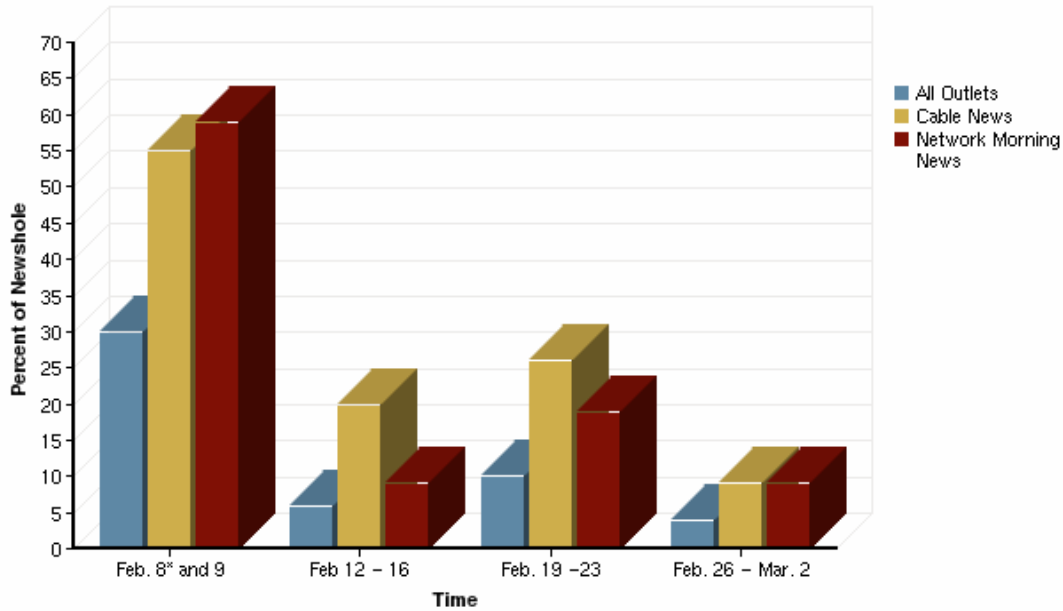
Still, the outlets most fascinated continued to pay close attention. Fully one-third of Fox News's airtime was given over to Smith. And she accounted for 18% of the content on “The Early Show.”

It was during this second week that the battle for control of Smith's remains heated up between her mother Virgie Arthur and Howard K. Stern, Smith's lawyer, companion and professed father of her infant daughter, Dannielynn. But perhaps the most newsworthy development was something that would not really capture the media's imagination until the following week.

On February 14, six days after Smith's death, a Broward County judge deferred a ruling about where Smith would be buried. In a flamboyant fashion that would soon become familiar to many Americans, Judge Larry Seidlin declared of Smith's remains: “The body belongs to me now.”

Anna Nicole Smith Coverage over Time

All Media, Cable News and Network Morning News



[click here to design your own chart](#)

The week of February 18-23 was marked by a mini-media tour from Smith’s friend Jackie Hatten, who pointed the finger of blame at Stern for the tragedy that befell the model/reality star. But the already strange proceedings were dominated by televised coverage of the “media circus” inside Judge Seidlin’s Florida courtroom. The focal point was Seidlin, an eccentric man given to talking about himself, lecturing the parties, and delivering messages like “money is the root of all evil.”

The crowning moment came as Seidlin audibly sobbed while awarding custody of Smith’s body to the guardian for her infant daughter on February 22. Suspicions about his behavior were only exacerbated by reports that he was hoping to become the male version of “Judge Judy” with his own TV show.

In this February 18-23 period, attention to the Smith story spiked again, accounting for 10% of the overall news coverage. By comparison, problems with medical care at Walter Reed, a story ignited by a February 18-19 Washington Post series, received less than half as much coverage (3%). That was true even in a week when Secretary of Defense Robert Gates visited the Army hospital and promised that people would be “held responsible.”

More than a quarter of cable’s airtime (26%) from February 18-23 was devoted to the case, with Fox News (41%) and MSNBC (31%) following the events most closely. Conversely, CNN’s coverage that week dropped down to 8%. The morning shows ratcheted their coverage back up to 19% and this time it was “Today” which spent 26% of its time on the story, leading the way.

The final week of the Smith mega-story saw some late legal skirmishing by Smith’s mother to try and get her body moved to Texas. But after a memorial service, she was finally buried in the Bahamas, next to her son, on March 2.

Overall coverage from February 25-March 2, at 4%, was the lowest of any week since Smith's death. It was the eighth biggest story of the week, and in no sector did it even reach 10% of the newshole. Even in cable, a string of deadly tornados supplanted the Smith case as the number one story that week.

Still, the burial and continuing court battles did consume 9% of the cable newshole that week, including 16% on Fox News, 10% on MSNBC, and only 1% on CNN.

The numbers were eerily similar for the morning shows, where Smith also accounted for 9% of the coverage. Again "The Early Show" was most interested at (16%) with "Today" second (10%) and "Good Morning America" a very distant third at 2%.

The basic coverage patterns, it seems, held up throughout the 23 days of this death-to-burial saga.

Anna Nicole Smith Study – Methodology

The data for this study was collected as part of PEJ's Weekly News Coverage Index ([link](#)). The Weekly Index is a thorough content analysis study of the topics that the media choose to cover every week. The universe for the Index is made up of 48 media outlets that come from newspapers, network television, cable television, online news sites, and radio ([link](#)). A team of trained coders captures and analyzes each of the outlets and the segments of those outlets we code as a purposive sample of the larger media universe. The coding for the Index follows a rigorous standard which is detailed in its methodology ([link](#)).

The unit of analysis for PEJ's coding is the "article" or "story." A story is coded as being about Anna Nicole Smith if 50% or more of that story refers to her situation.

The time period for this report begins at 3 P.M. ET, February 8, 2007, when Anna Nicole Smith's death was announced in the news, to the day of her funeral, March 2, 2007. Thus, for February 8th, the morning newspapers, morning network television shows, mid-day cable television programs, and radio programs airing before 3:00 are not included in the February 8 statistics since they were published or aired prior to the announcement of her death.

In three instances, this Special Report adds to or slightly differs from the data collected for the Weekly News Index.

1. For the television shows that were noted in this study but are not part of PEJ's regular Index, specifically CNN's Larry King Live, Fox News' On the Record with Great Van Susteren and the second half-hour of the PBS NewsHour, we conducted searches of their content using the transcripts available on the LexisNexis computer database.

2. Also special to this report, the commercial network newscasts are analyzed together as a unit and PBS is separately. This was done in order to compare the network evening and morning news coverage.

3. For tracking stories about the Iraq War, on a weekly basis we code stories for one of three storylines regarding the war: the Iraq policy debate, events on the ground in Iraq, and of the U.S. homefront relating to the Iraq War. For the statistics in this report that relate to coverage of the Iraq War as a whole, we added the total of those three storylines together to get the overall Iraq War coverage statistics.

Timeline of Anna Nicole Smith Death and Subsequent Events February 8, 2007- March 1, 2007

February 8, 2007:

Anna Nicole Smith collapses and is taken to the hospital at about 2 pm ET, according to CNN.

At 3:55 pm ET, the AP reports that Anna Nicole Smith has died.

February 9, 2007:

Smith's mother and sister speak out on several different programs.

Initial autopsy report reveals cause of death unknown.

Initial hearing on Smith's daughter leaves custody question unresolved.

Prince Von Anhalt, husband of Zsa Zsa Gabor, says he might be father of baby too.

February 12, 2007

Break-in at Smith's home in the Bahamas.

Paternity and custody battle coverage continues.

February 13, 2007

Police releases 911 tapes.

February 14, 2007

Judge Seidlin case on Smith's remains begins at 9:30 A.M. EDT.

February 15, 2007

As case over Smith's remains continues, Judge Seidlin decides a court appointed guardian of Anna Nicole's daughter should decide the solution over the body and get custody of the remains.

February 16, 2007

Smith's will is released.

Prince Von Anhalt files court papers in paternity suit.

February 19, 2007

Anna Nicole friend Jackie Hatten talks about Smith on *Hannity and Colmes* and blames Howard K. Stern for her death.

February 20, 2007

Hatten continues to speak out and place blame on Stern.

Court case continues in FL and described by press as a zoo and a circus.

February 21, 2007

Smith's mother in court room testifying in burial case.

February 22, 2007

Judge Seidlin rules that Ms. Smith is to be buried in the Bahamas and is criticized for his display of emotions.

February 23, 2007

Coverage of Judge's behavior as inappropriate continues.
Anna Nicole mother appeals Judge's ruling.

February 26, 2007

Judge Seidlin denies Smith's mother motion for stay.

Paternity suit in the Bahamas begins.

February 28, 2007

Smith's mother reported as seeing baby for the first time.

Florida court clears way for burial in Bahamas.

March 1, 2007

Anna Nicole body to be from Florida to Bahamas for funeral.

March 2, 2007

Funeral for Smith takes place in the Bahamas.

March 26, 2007

Full autopsy report reveals Smith's death was caused by a drug overdose.