



Back in 2003, with the United States in the early months of the war in Iraq, a series of polls revealed that a surprising number of U.S. adults had the following misperceptions on aspects of the situation in Iraq:

- What's the matter with these people? Didn't they watch the news? Well, it turns out that they did: 80 percent of respondents noted that they get most of their news from TV and radio, while 20 percent cited print media as their primary news source. When researchers inquired further about viewing habits, they found the highest rates of misperceptions occurred among Fox News viewers, among whom 80 percent had at least one of the above items wrong. The most accurate perceptions were among the Public Broadcasting System (PBS) and National Public Radio (NPR) audience, in which just 23 percent had any misperceptions on the above items (see figure). Interestingly, these media source effects held up even when levels of education and partisanship were taken into account. Researchers have not been able to determine causality here. That is, while Fox News was a staunch supporter of the Bush administration's war effort, they do not know whether Fox's stance on the war effort led to the misperceptions being held, or whether supporters of the president who already held the misperceptions decided to watch Fox. Ten years later, not much has changed: Recent research shows that NPR listeners remain the best informed, while Fox News viewers are the worst-informed.<sup>1</sup>

As we have seen throughout this chapter, many forces are working to make the citizen's job difficult

## WHAT TO WATCH OUT FOR

- **Who owns the media source where you accessed the information?** Look at the page in newspapers and magazines that lists the publisher and editors. Take note of radio and television call letters. Check out *The Big Picture* on page 566 and see if the source is owned by one of the media conglomerates shown there. Look to see who takes credit for a web site. What could be this owner's agenda? Is it corporate, political, ideological? How might that agenda affect the news?
- **Where did the story originate?** In addition to considering who owns the site on which a story is posted, you should consider where the story itself came from. These days, the two can be very different, as many “news sites” are actually just news aggregators that share stories from other sites for their own readers. As a result, news reports—and in some cases, only small portions of news reports—are passed along from one source to another like a game of telephone, often with individual writers and bloggers adding their own headline and spin to the story as they repost. If the source where you find a story is not responsible for reporting the story, should you trust it? Did the source contribute to the expense of reporting the story, and can the source verify the quality of the story? What happens when a source cherry-picks snippets and reposts with its own headlines—and how

