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Global Information- The sources of information
in war and peace

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Tony Maddox

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First and foremost thank you very much for your constant reference to my importance at CNN, it made me feel much better. I was rather shocked when I arrived here today to be told that the good news is you are broadcasting to what is by every definition a completely bilingual community. The bad news is I don't speak either of those two languages, my apologies for that. Thank you very much for the invitation to speak here. I always find it reassuring on my travels around Europe that there are serious issues which face us all, involved in the broadcast industry, be we regulators, advertisers, programme makers, journalists, at whatever level and that certain people are prepared to take time out to discuss these issues, to get into some deep, deep detail of some of the very profound issues that we face.



Tony Maddox

I find it enormously reassuring because as an industry on occasions we can be guilty of throwing what we do out there and hoping that the audience, the market, the viewers, whoever they may be will appreciate what it is that we have done. But we have no real mechanisms for feedback and we can be guilty of lacking sufficient introspection. We don't do retrospection very well and we need to do better. So I am particularly pleased to have been invited here to speak today. There are so many issues which are covered by the title of this discussion. And I think wisely the direction I have had is if I take specifically the coverage of the war and how that feeds into this particular discussion and we can broaden it out from there.

If we are talking about global information, between the organisation that I represent and the organisations represented on this panel, I think you would find no one who had access to a radio or a TV, or an internet terminal who has not in recent weeks accessed the services provided by one of us three. Many will have in fact accessed the services provided by two out of us three and I suspect many people will have accessed the services by us all three.

Significantly with Al Jazeera, I was reading the other day that 'Al Jazeera' took over for just a couple of days on 'Google' as the most searched word, over 'free porn'. The bad news is that has now overtaken you again but for a brief spell the world has actually genuinely more interested in that than more salacious matters and that it enormously reassuring development. We have all; everybody here has just had experience of a war quite unlike any other in terms of how it addressed global audience.

CNN is widely thought to have come to prominence during the first gulf war and I think that was unquestionably true. CNN can argue there were other significant stories ahead of that which did pick up international coverage but for many people it was the first gulf war which brought CNN home to people. If you consider where the world is now, and where it is then I think the coverage from this war is far more important. The first gulf war emphasised the need for 24hour television news. It was clear that there was an enormous appetite for this, which could not be matched by the broadcasters.

At the time of the last war, the international distribution for CNN, that is the availability of CNN outside the US, was 7million television sets. 7million television sets outside the US can pick up CNN. Many of you will have seen CNN pictures broadcast on your terrestrial channel, your local channel broadcasting and licence agreement which is fine but actually finding CNN was quite difficult. There was 7million in 1991, now there are 150million television sets outside the US which broadcast CNN international. Within my territory alone there are nearly 100million people who can watch CNN. To give you some sense of perspective there are about 78million in the United States. The international business is about twice as big as the domestic business for CNN in the US.

Also worth bearing in mind are the changes in the output. Back in 1991 it was OK to feed the international community the US service. It was the only one going you wanted to see it, you had to watch it and that was it. This time has been very different. You could have had two television sets on from the beginning of this war and you would have seen completely different programming, different anchors, different locations, different pictures, different graphics, a completely bespoke service, for the international audience and for the US audience. We took a decision at the beginning of the war that there were many different interests here. For the US and the US audience, there was the US at war and they needed to reflect that and properly reflect that, and that was for them the correct thing to do. The reaction of the international community towards this war was very different to that within the US. Many people were unconvinced about it; many people were downright hostile to it. We would also be directly broadcasting to the people who were actually in the heart of this conflict and so we had to take a bigger picture as far as CNN International was concerned, and that's just ourselves.

This time out there was BBC24, there was ITN24 in the UK, there was Sky24. Most European Countries have a 24hour News channel of some description. All of those people were providing continuous news. Crucially there were also Arab networks providing a 24hour news service in Arabic, to Arabs, where a war was being fought in their Land, clearly with a very different perspective. So the access to varied media and varied reports on this war were significantly different. It's the first time there has been a war fought on that scale with that level of coverage. And we won't go back, if there is, god forbid, another major war in the next two, three, five years there will probably be even more coverage. There certainly won't be any less.

So having established that there were different people covering it with different perspectives. I also think that there are a couple of significant developments of the thought of material that we were able to see. How that will have affected us as an audience and how it will have effected us as news gatherers and news broadcasters, it is always worth putting into context. The huge level of suffering that takes place in any war and I am aware that when journalists talk about journalists safety and broadcasters' safety it has to be set against the context of many hundreds and thousands of civilians suffering appalling injuries and deaths. But lets be clear, there is a duty on journalists in a free democratic society to honestly and fairly report what goes on within a conflict and there has to an acceptance by all sides. That it is the right and proper thing for them to do and as such they have to be free from direct threat from either side.

If you go to cover a war, if you go to cover a conflict you have to accept that is a very dangerous area. To use the dreadful phrase of co-lateral damage, if you put yourself in harms way you are taking the risk. We've always recognised this, there have always been casualties and there have always been deaths amongst journalists. We regret them all. We have trained in safety training like never before, certainly the most major important news broadcasters; the BBC has a proud record in this area, so does CNN. All of our staff who went off to cover that conflict had specialised safety training, specialised safety kit. We had people on the ground whose sole responsibility was to look out for our safety and other organisations were the same. And still at the end of this conflict which was relatively short, we are looking at a rate of casualties which we have never seen before in the broadcast industry. An intolerable level of casualties, from people who are trying to tell you the full story, trying to get the story home to you, we have to consider that as broadcasters. What happened? Why did that happen? We trained them like never before; we kited them out like never before. We are trying to bring the story to the international audience, what happened?

Well, here is one of my theories, which I am happy to discuss in greater detail. Some of the coverage we have seen, I have never see before and I suspect some of you have never see before either. The technology we have now , which we didn't have in 1991 enables someone taking a bag smaller than this to have all the cameras, broadcast kits, editing kits that they need to go live from the heart of the battle. Not only did we have the kit, we also had the access. This was the war of 'embeds'. Now of course there have always been people who have been attached with military units and covering wars before but this time there was a clear policy on behalf of the Allies, the Americans and the UK in reality and their military, to allow out journalists right in to the heart of the conflict. And so we were able to see live and in real time battles being fought from the front line. Not being filed from behind time lines, not being filed a day or two later, right in the middle of the battle, right in the middle of the conflict. It was compowing coverage. If you were scanning the channels and you caught one of these embed report you just could not leave it. It wasn't the fore-story, and journalists were acutely aware of that. If I am reporting to you live with the kit I've got there, and the battle is taking place around me, all I can tell you is as far as the eye can see that way, that way, that way and that way a all these people can tell me. Now anybody could tell me that within a war, that could be a very distorted picture. It could be that around us we are in terrible trouble and elsewhere everything is going swimmingly or quite the opposite, we seem to do be doing well but everyone else are in a lot of trouble.

So embeds can not be your soulless way of reporting in a conflict. You need the ability to move outside the embed system and I think what happened in this conflict is that most of the casualties were sustained but were operating outside the embed system. I think a judgement was made that the embed were the way this war was going to be reported and anybody outside of that embed system was not going to be targeted but they were going to be getting in the way and they were going to have to take their own risk. And so I think that going forward we have to recognise as a group that embedding is certainly perceived by the military as having been a success but in reporting outside the embed system we face serious issues in regards to safety.

We want to bring you the best possible pictures, we want to bring you the pictures from the frontline but we have to bring you the wider context, we have to go outside those established lines and we will continue to do that. And for me the safety issue, which might seem to be a rather insular issue, will be a big factor. All the broadcasters met during the conflict to discuss this threat to our staff. Now we are news editors, we don't send people off to war to die. This is not something we should be planning around. We sat around the table, there wasn't anybody there who hadn't either had staff killed or injured or at least have come under fire. This will affect our report stories in the future. And I think it is a good issue for us to discuss today. I think in terms of global information potentially we have never been better served. The range is enormous. I think the quality speaks well also but in presenting that information we are facing an entirely fresh set of risks being brought about by attempts to control media and by the technology that is available to us as well. So I think as broadcasters, as advertisers, as programme makers, as licensees we will have some serious issues to face about how we develop that global information for the future. Thank you.

Casper Selg: Thank you very much. In your remarks Tony, you mentioned what the change was between the '91 Gulf War and this one here; one of the big differences evidently was the embedded journalists. The 'embeds' as you called them, the embedded journalist and you yourself pointed out what the advantages and disadvantages are of that. Many people who watched CNN in this country criticised that what we got of information through your channel was very much an image of the battle raging. Of advances being made, not being made getting stuck and that that was in a disproportionate measure compared to the fact that this was a very controversial war. That there are civilians involved; that there were a lot more important questions around than that this Unit has advanced and that Unit has advanced. How do you respond to that?

Tony Maddox: Well perhaps not surprisingly I think that it is an unfair criticism. At the outset of the conflict we took a decision as a group of editors, and we met on a daily bases in London, from Asia and from Atlanta on a conference call, that we should be free from the complacency which can grip senior editors in my business. And instead of having a meagre response to criticism that we haven't covered something sufficiently and saying "yes we did at 3 o'clock we transmitted the following" we needed to be more systematic in working with our support staff. We log what we were actually running, when we ran it and then on a day by day basis we were saying in the past 24 hours do we think we have properly reflected this aspect of the story. And on a day to day basis you would always say, no, well we could do more on this, we need to increase this bit and we need to tone it down. So at any give time there is always a room for improvement on any intelligent broadcasting, certainly in 24-hour news.

But what we actually have now that proves to be quite useful for us really is a lot of what we did broadcast and what we didn't. And now at any given hour when someone might have watched they might have felt, you know the broadcast was skewed one way or another, or wasn't particularly balanced. But we have an empirical body of evidence which showed what we covered and what we didn't. To address specifically the issues that you talk about, the controversies surrounded the war we covered in great detail. We covered it in great detail before the war, we covered it in great detail during the war and we've covered it in significant and in great detail since.

It has been a very newsworthy item. It has been particularly relevant to the international audience. It is also relevant to the US audience. There are sometimes temptations I feel to underestimate the US audience and to underestimate US broadcasters that I feel is unfair. I hear people talk about the US broadcast media. That is a mass of people and they were very interested in international reaction to there, because they might have disagreed with the international reaction doesn't really matter, there was certainly an interest there. So I am afraid it is simply isn't accurate to say that CNN did not properly reflect all those levels of debate because we did.

Casper Selg: One more question, asking you for a very brief answer. What you broadcast here in Europe, in North Africa, in the Middle East is that basically the same as what the American viewers get, many people might not know this, or do you do something completely different for the American audience? Just briefly.

Tony Maddox: No, it is a completely bespoke product for the American audience and it is a completely original product for the European audience. Some of the correspondents that we use will be the same, some of the reports that we will use will be the same but there will be an awful lot of original material, taking our own guests, doing our own specific lives and taking our own editorial direction as well. Not because we are not happy with what the US is doing but because we are a big network and we have the opportunity to be able to serve the needs of that audience, and the needs of that audience. And that is what we attempted to do, for the US audience and the International audience and that is what we did during the war.

Casper Selg: Is the language different? Is the approach different? Is the US product more 'us' verses them than the European product?

Tony Maddox: I don't know if it is. I think certainly from the US perspective there were a lot of US military involved in the war. They very much viewed it as America at war and so you are broadcasting to a country which is in itself at war. We were broadcasting to many countries, which were not at war. Many countries which as I say were very unhappy about the war and so I don't think you and so I don't think you can have a one size fits all approach there. I don't think it is wrong to broadcast a service to the Americans which recognises that they are at war and I don't think that it is wrong to broadcast a service to the International audience which recognises that most of them are not. It strikes me as quite an intelligent way of doing it.

Casper Selg: Thank you very much.....

Tony Maddox: I will be brief but I think that is an excellent question and it is something we do have to consider seriously as broadcasters. I was thinking of regards to our use of the 'embeds' as I may have mentioned earlier. Some of the images we were getting from those people were truly compowing, but in as much as they were genuinely telling me what was happening about the whole war, they

weren't. They were telling people about what was happening about a snap shot and if you were on that for a period time people might come way thinking, wow, everything is going off there, it's all happening at once. On the other hand I think that one good solution to this, and one thing that we all need to learn to do, particularly in television is knowing when to shut up. We spend a lot of time wondering about what we are going to say and how we are going to say it and actually the most eloquent we can possibly do is say nothing at all. If I take you back to the night of the so-called shock-and-all bombing, which I think most of us will remember. I know that on CNN and I suspect quite a few of the broadcasters as well, once that sequence started the best thing you could possibly do was say nothing. Let people watch the images, let people hear the hideous noises, see these truly shocking images before their own eyes and then go away and make their own conclusions about what they have just seen. You don't need to hold people's hand in those circumstances. So it is a challenge for us, the answer isn't always to try and make sure your matching the words and the images. It is sometimes to let the images do the talking and sometimes make sure the word do the talking.

Casper Selg: Thank you very much. I am very much aware that we touched on a few issues that I did not tap all of the knowledge, all of the expertise that was here, assembled in this very distinguished panel. Let me thank all of you very much for taking part here, for coming here and I hand it over to Director Furrer of the Federal Office for Communications.