

**9<sup>th</sup> May 2003**

## **Speech at the 2nd Biel-Bienne Communication Days**

Global Information- The sources of information  
in war and peace

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**Ibrahim Helal**

Chief Editor Al Jazeera

**Casper Selg:** I am already running behind schedule that is why I ask you Ibrahim to give us your perspective: 'War and peace- the role of the international media'. Thank you very much.



**Ibrahim Helal**

**Ibrahim Helal:** Thank you ladies and gentlemen for inviting me, giving me the chance to talk to a Switzerland audience and a Switzerland press and to share the podium with two of my colleagues in the field, from two organisations we respect. They were before Al Jazeera many years, they are much bigger than Al Jazeera and I am proud of being with them on the same podium. Let's start with raising two questions.

I think they are the most important question we need to raise before discussing anything about information. The most important question: how much can we depend on the information sources we used to depend before the bad day of the 11<sup>th</sup> September? Because I still believe that we are still living in the September 11<sup>th</sup> environment. The second one: how much can our viewers depend on us as news organisations, as sources of information like before September 11<sup>th</sup>? That's why I think we need to discuss the sources of information, that's why we need to discuss the differences between regions. I am speaking from the Arab region; I am speaking representing one of the Arab media organisations. That's why I have different point of views from others.

Let's start with talking about Al Jazeera since we started 6 years ago. We bought the freedom of information as a first priority because we are living in a place, the Arab region is a place faced and suffered for years the disinformation we faced in the Arab region a merbilation of information, the information process for years and I think still in some parts of the Arab region politically orientated and politically motivated. That's why we bought the freedom of information as a first priority for ourselves 6<sup>1</sup>/<sub>2</sub> years ago. So providing free and accurate information for our Arab viewers was not our elected aim or a complimenting element as it might be in the west, it is an essential start with a long way to democracy.

After September 11<sup>th</sup> I think we discovered that the democracy is not important as an actual thing as well. It is more important for the security of you. It is important as a security for all the people in America because the non-democratic environment in the region, in the Arab region effected and resulted in probably things in the United States and we are still living in the environment of this non-democratic environment in the Middle East. We face as Arab organisation some difficulties. As we knew about the embedded journalists in this war, in the Iraqi we got approval for four Arab journalists to be embedded with the American forces but unfortunately because of the non-democratic environment we are living in, in the Middle East, we couldn't send anyone of them until the war started because sending journalists to the American troops should go through Kuwait and Bahrain and we are facing problems with some countries in the region including Kuwait and Bahrain, Saudi Arabia, Syria, most of the countries are surrounding Iraq we have no offices in. And we couldn't send journalists in with American troops until the war started and we hardly sent one of our journalist so personally I don't believe in this process because even when we managed to send one of our people with American troops he was not cared about, he dealt as an Arab journalist, he was left behind in the backyard- the maximum place he reached was Basra and Nasirijah and it proven in the end that he hardly could send 3 or 4 reports from the unit he was living in.

We are responsible for the Arab world. We faced two problems as Arab journalists, as an Arab organisation, as an Arab TV and Iraq is an Arab country. We have to be one of the main sources of information. The second problem we face is that we are transmitting from Qatar and Qatar is the Central Command Base, the American Command Central Base which means that Qatar would be the base for the propaganda war, if we can say and the base for the actual war at the same time. There are two wars in this Iraqi war- propaganda and the actual war and both of them were managed from Qatar, from our location. And we have to be fair with our audience and we have to be fair to the American authorities as well. That is why we are putting into consideration the problem we face with embedding troops. We ended up with the dilemma of dealing only with Iraqi authorities, dealing within side Iraq. We had to have some tricks to avoid being biased to Saddam Hussein regime, and by the way, calling it the Saddam Hussein regime is an American expression just to avoid saying Iraqi regime from time to time, just reminding the audience all over the world that it is not against Iraq, it is against a person. It is another disinformation trick used by some western journalists during the war.

What we have done to avoid being with Saddam or avoid being with American troops, we had the idea of sleeping [...] it is the same idea by Al Qaeda by the way, but we put some of our people, we put some of our journalists in northern Iraq without asking them to work, just to collect information, to build relationships and we put some equipment with them. Once the war started we asked them to start work. That just avoided problems with the Saddam Hussein regime because they don't consider in Baghdad, during the Saddam's regime, they didn't consider northern Iraq part of Iraq and they didn't want anybody to start working from northern Iraq, without their consent. The problem happened to our colleagues of CNN, they started working from northern Iraq and they were asked to leave Baghdad.

So collecting information from inside Iraq for Al Jazeera was a very difficult process as well. Another thing we had to do was to spread some equipment, new kind of equipment with our reporters. We hid some Seria telephones with them; we hid some satellite techniques with them. The Iraqi authorities did not know about that, it was very risky for our reporters to deal with the Iraqi authorities and putting into

consideration that once the war is over, once Baghdad has fallen, there is another Plan. They have to show up their new equipment, they have to move differently. Once the war was over we asked our reporters from northern Iraq to be leading the coverage, to take over the coverage so they are more trustworthy by the opposition, by the Iraqi opposition.

So you ask our reporters to change the positions, to manage to deal with the new authority. I just want to explain about the problems facing an Arab organisation. That we are not trusted by the American audience 100%, but at the same time the American audience needed us. One example of that are the pictures we showed of the American and British troops killed and captured by the Iraqi people. In the beginning we faced a lot of criticism because there pictures are horrible pictures. These pictures are anti-Geneva Convention and it is another issue we need to discuss about the Geneva Convention, whether it is applied since 1993, when the western media showed pictures of Serbian people and when the Israeli forces showed pictures of Palestinian prisoners and even in 1990 when the American media showed pictures of Iraqi troops, kissing the hands and legs of the American troops in 1991. So the Geneva convention was preached by Al Jazeera and by others, not just Al Jazeera but the philosophy behind showing there pictures was collectively, as journalists all over the world we can not cover this war alone because in general any war is secret, it's a big secret.

You don't know more than maximum 10% of the reality. If we started in Al Jazeera and in BBC and CNN, if we started filtering this information by saying this is anti-Geneva convention and this is anti the Human Rights Rules and this could be very graphic scenes. This is the philosophy that we thought about. If we started doing that, the 10% we know about the war would be less than 5% and it is not good for the future of the knowledge, simply for the information process. We are now talking more and more about information. Information for us now means information and more pictures we have, the more credibility we will have. That's why we started taking this philosophy of showing whatever we have, as they are. Not because we believe in that but because we believe in the reality and it's another small point I need to emphasise. We personally believe and nobody can disagree with me that war is the worst solution for anything and everybody involved in this war is the victim, including the soldiers, the American soldiers.

That's why we had to show the pictures of American Soldiers because they are victims on the other side of the story. Not only the Iraqis are killed everyday by bombing, there are victims on the other side. At the end of the war, the American Media showed the same prisoners as we showed, but they showed them being freed, in a triumphal environment. Without have been captured on the TV before it would be very difficult to celebrate their freedom. So I think filtering the picture at the beginning was a big mistake by some American media, because they had to show the same persons and they had to take the pictures from Al Jazeera to show them free. To end up my participation in that more decisions we have taken to explain about the future of Iraq that after we lost our reporter in the bombing, the American bombing of our office, we discovered that we as Al Jazeera, we paid the highest price for collecting information inside Iraq. We paid the highest price because it took us a long time to be inside Iraq, we paid a very expensive price to be inside Iraq without being in any other country around Iraq and even inside Iraq we lost part of our office, we lost one of our reporters.

But anyway, as an Arab organisation my idea to end up with is to co-operate more and more western media organisations because if we trust each other more and

more, we can collect more information. If we co-ordinate like we are doing now and have better job regarding spreading information of the Middle East. As I mentioned in the beginning, spreading information in the Middle East is not important for the future of democracy in the Middle East. It is proven but after September 11<sup>th</sup> it is important for the security of the whole world. Thank you very much.

**Casper Selg:** Thank you very much Ibrahim, very interesting on many levels. You are getting into this business, your working in a completely different social, cultural and political environment and you are being the only ones who could report out of Iraq, in the context of embedded journalists in the beginning. One question with a brief answer if you may: You said you showed whatever you got, get the whole picture, get all the pictures on the table. You know as well as we do that certain pictures have certain effects and one effect of certain pictures, certain graphic pictures can be whipping up emotions and that's what many people who looked at Al Jazeera reproached to you. That you're basically whipping up emotions with the footage you showed, with the way you covered. What's your brief reaction?

**Ibrahim Helal:** I had an experience, a bad experience of the coverage of Afghanistan when we showed pictures of civilians being killed in Jalalabad, around 90 persons killed. And we covered their faces, we didn't show their faces because of the graphic scenes and we were accused immediately by news agencies including Reuters, including some media organisation in the way that we fabricated these pictures and they said these are the pictures which Al Jazeera claimed that they are civilians being killed in Jalalabad. So we decided immediately after that: once we have accurate information, as these are the pictures of these soldiers and these are the pictures of the civilians, we have to show them, just to avoid any suspicion from the other side because. We are in a position under suspicion all the time, I don't know why. Maybe because of the competition which started with other media organisations in our region?

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