

**9th May 2003**

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

Global Information- The sources of information  
in war and peace

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**Nik Gowing**

Presenter BBC World

**Casper Selg:** Are you ready? Thank you very much. Then we turn to NikGowing of the BBC. He represents the mother of them all if you will. He represents the organisation that three of the panellists come from, the organisation that we all draw from to a certain extend and that is why we gave him a bigger timeslot for his presentation and he will not concentrate on the Iraq war but more generally on the issues of global information.



**Nik Gowing**

**Nik Gowing:** Thank you Casper very much indeed and thank you as with Tony, Ibrahim and Nick, thank you indeed for inviting us here because there are some very, very complicated issues which have now arisen, not just because of the war. I am not actually going to give you a speech; I am going to give you a presentation. There is something of a difference there because I am actually taking a risk. I am just presenter but in front of me I also have a laptop which I am going to show you some of the new technology which is really, I think going to be troubling us and you may see a television presenter fall flat on his face technically in the next few minutes. But what did I do, what did I do in the war?

Well, just so you know what a presenter does on location. In the country that Ibrahim lives in this is what a BBC outside broadcast area looks like, it is under an [...] and the temperature is about 40° and we can work out there for about ten hours but there are the kind of conditions that we were providing coverage for and with, from central command in Qatar, areas we can perhaps get into. You might ask who are the audience, who are out there watching now? And we heard what Tony said from the CNN point of view, it is very difficult to give figures. We can all give figures and we can have a battle up on the platform about those figures. So if I say that when I was in San Paolo recently we were meeting someone in one of the large hotels near the airport and I walked in to meet a delegation who was being met by the BBC delegation. There was a lady who was waiting to receive us, who looked up at me and said: "oh my god, you are the man I spent most of my nights with in hotel rooms." We'd never met before.

Essentially I want to move it on from the Gulf, from this war. It is the truth of the movie. I think it has been done and dusted and that probably, ultimately 5<sup>1/2</sup> or 6 of the main war aims set by the United States have now been achieved, which raises a

number of questions about what next, particularly for the information business. I am very conscious of the preparations you are involved in for this Summit towards the end of the year in Geneva, then in Tunis in 2005. And really that is what I would like to zero in on because it really isn't about just the issue of us now the first time ever wearing gas masks in a war; the kind of things you have heard other journalists talk about. It's also the issue of new technology sitting just out here alongside the military. It's about what is now happening with this information.

From the BBC's point of view let me just report to you what my director of news, Richard Sandbrook made very clear before the war began. He said: "we've been told that if you are in an unrecognised vehicle, it will be shoot first and ask questions later." So you can see just how dangerous we knew it was going to be.

These are really three symbols I think of problems in the war but let's not get hung up on war itself because war is right at the end of a spectrum of tension, and emergencies, and times of difficulty; and we are in the business not just reporting on a massive war which we just have seen, and that's why it's a coincidence that we are talking about it here. But there are many, many other issues which have come out of areas of reporting like the interfada in the Middle East, like in southern Africa, like in Zimbabwe and in Afghanistan as well.

In other words, a whole spectrum of emergencies which I would like to share with you in the next 20 or so minutes. For me they are summarised by a picture like this: which is an IDF soldier, an Israeli Defence Force Soldier, challenging a Vehicle clearly marked as Television. We have now entered, as we have been discussing over lunch and I think Tony and Ibrahim have already signalled to you, we are now in a time of potentially acute tension when it comes to information. When it comes to dealing with governments, in particularly the military in simple, if you like intellectual, academic terms our rhythms and our signals are completely out of sync. The way the government works, the way the military works is not the way we are working in real time. We are working in a 24hour business; the rhythm of war is very different to that, you can have long periods where nothing takes place. In other words out of synchronisation. Here is also the problem that, I would like to come to it, that I think governments by and large are now being challenged on what they assume will be their domination of information. And as a result this is what we are seeing. We are seeing governments and those in power who and it's difficult to prove this but there is growing evidence, who believe that they now have the right to shut us up and if necessary to kill us. That's why Tony I think said we facing a fresh set of risks.

Our duty as journalists and all of us as journalists is to bear witness. My job sitting in a presentation chair either in Qatar or in London is to question on behalf of the public; my job is not to become a deceiver or an echo of the government. That's very clear BBC policy. My job is therefore is to find out what is going on when governments don't want it necessarily told on our terms, they want it to be told on their terms. That is why we are in a period of friction, particularly the problem of real-time. We are undermining I think the governments assumption of power, which I think is an interesting reflection of one paragraph which I see here in Summit intentions for later this year. "The Information Society should promote development, democracy, transparency and good governance." I put to you that there are now big tensions that are challenging now even that assumption.

We are now really acting against the big stuff and I am using symbols here to make a point. This is the way the Americans believe that in a war or anything short of war they will be able to command information using this massive UAV, the Unmanned

Aerial reconnaissance Vehicle, the Global Hawk. It has more bandwidth than most of the European Countries put together. It is a fantastic machine but it can see all over the battlefield, yet something like this which you can buy in a store for something like \$300, a digital camera with movie capabilities can completely undermine this network-centric-capability which the Americans believe certainly it is theirs as of right to dominate information in a time of crisis and emergency. The words they use there are information superiority, they use it liberally and that is the kind of thing that comes through in Britain, the government and the military have now adopted a different version of that, network-enabled-capability.

But there is a fundamental disconnect here which is well summarised by what a US Intelligence Officer said to me when we were talking about this a few weeks ago. He said: „Nik, you are absolutely right. We as [...] in the Military, we have 30 Billion Dollars worth of ears, the trouble is it is operated by the ten-dollar-brains.” It was an American who said that to me. So essentially we are talking about information in conflicts and emergencies and we are really talking about who is really talking about the high grounds out there in a time of tension. That is the fundamental question in my view. There are two areas which I think you need to focus on. What really is the media, you've got three of the largest media organisations in the world represented here on this platform but there are many out there which perhaps you are not even considering as you prepare paperwork and so on. What about the 'Cybermonk' of Kosovo? He was a member of the media because, and he's there on the left of course, he in a monastery was providing real-time information on a Website of the war going on outside his monastery in 1999. You won't read any of this but he was providing press releases. He was providing information in a small area but he was providing that information.

And what about the electronic-interfada in the Middle East? I put that up for one particular reason, because if you look very closely at what it says on its Homepage, it says the electronic-interfada will equip you to challenge myth, distortion and spin in the media in an informed way, enabling you to assess positive changes in media coverage of the Palestinians and Israeli/Palestinian conflict. In simple language a Website like that is challenging us in the BBC, CNN and even Al Jazeera because it is quite possible that they would put up post materials that haven't been filtered, haven't been checked, yet making a very clear impression up there on the high ground which I mentioned at the beginning. In other words it's not only challenging us, it is challenging governments as well, who believe they will be able to provide the overall accurate picture.

The second critical word I think is 'transparency'. This plan of technology is now creating a fantastic transparency. Forget about embedding I think that this is irrelevant to the many the emergencies we're talking about. 'Operation short of war' or massive overwhelming force as we saw in Iraq. What we are seeing is a proliferation of lightweight, go-anywhere mobile technology to cover anything, anywhere regardless of the risk. When Tony picked up that walking bag of mine, that could have a satellite outblink in it, it hasn't, it's got my overnight material but it could and you would know whether I am carrying it or not, if you were a member of a government or a member of a military.

We are therefore dealing with a complication here, that the real-time technology is giving us a first and second and third version. That's what I deal with when I'm up there sitting in the studio, vulnerable not knowing really what is happening on 9/11. What has happened when Princess Diana, in a car is in the underpass in Paris? We know something has taken place, we know there are rumours, we are trying to

substantiate them. But in this real-time environment as we saw in Iraq as well, we're getting these short cut versions; we are getting these snap shot of what is going on. It doesn't necessarily mean we know precisely what is happening, yet we all want to deal in news, so does the government. The trouble is quite often now it's the rumours that are taking hold. I use the phrase and I predicted in my Harvard-Study, which Casper was mentioning earlier that it's not just about real-time; it's now about the tyranny of real-time. And that was eight year ago and I was predicting that this was what would happen, now I think it has arrived with a vengeance, in this relationship between us, in the media whoever we are and those out there in government and military and the humanitarian organisations who believe that they want to secure the high-ground in anyway possible and tyranny means it happens in cruel and arbitrary way.

I think there is another great phrase for this which is loosely: 'a race for space', because if we don't fill it some one else will fill it. If you as government people don't fill it, we will fill it. If we don't fill it, or you don't fill it the Websites and others may fill it, or other people in the matrix-providers. That is now where I think we got to and there is a sort of practised way which I have developed to highlight this for you. If you think of a moment of crisis like this that kind of hits you out of the blue and we create a timeline of some kind, of maybe 24 or 36 hours. I just want to get to the point of where you understand where this crisis of news versus rumours, of information versus versions of news, of information versus versions of what is happening. Why there is this tension because when you try and measure the impacts, say up the left hand side, on a time scale along the bottom say 36 hours your mindset may say well this is the way it works; it will be three, four or five hours before the information edge will hit you. In other words it could be time; you've got time to consider what has happened, to report back what has happened, to find out from your people what has happened.

I would say this was the position three or four years ago, it may be two or three years ago, now it's changed dramatically. This is the kind of profile of information in a crisis, much greater impact over a much greater timeframe, and if you look up in the top left hand corner with that green arrow, that's where we are in tension now, I think with governments and the military because, forget about Iraq again, in times of tension and emergency there are people out there who are doing information, who are providing information in a real-time way, quite often it can't be checked, that is causing trouble and I think difficulty for the governments who believe they will automatically as of right control information particularly if they are democratically elected. Let me underline why I think a lot of us feel and I am reflecting very much a feeling not a Gowing-feeling but a feeling that was expressed last Friday at the opening meeting of the International News Safety Institute in Brussels, chaired by Chris Cramer, who is Tony Maddox's boss, who is head of CNN International, all of us are signing up to it, including Al Jazeera who are on the platform. This is the kind of thing that is now proving to us in our view that there is a case to answer with governments not prepared to discipline or there those to prepared to actually target us, to shut us up.

This is James Miller, an award winning cameraman who last Friday, a week ago today was shot in the neck by the Israeli Army and died immediately. A forensic examination yesterday proved that he was shot in the front rather in the back, proving that he wasn't shot by the Palestinians and the reason I am showing you this is because he was visible and holding a white flag. And this picture is not very good quality, its important because this picture was taken just before he was shot and on

the back of all their flat-jackets, their Kevlar jackets is very clear marking saying 'TV', television. Now this is part of a pattern, sadly, and that's why I am highlighting it to you because just two weeks earlier another cameraman from AP Television was shot as well. Someone well known to the Israelis: Nasser Dawazzer of APTN, he was shot dead as well. Now, I am not making a political point here but we are now beginning to see this happen more and more. This violates humanitarian law; it violates the Geneva Convention which stipulates that attacks shall be limited strictly to military objectives. The BBC has been involved in a case for three years, trying to bring to justice those who were seen on video actually targeting a taxi driver who was working for the BBC in South Lebanon and it has been an uphill job, we have yet to bring this to a satisfactory conclusion.

What I want to do is show you the emotion in a time of crisis, which can lead to fears on our side about where this is leading, in terms of the tension in a time of crisis. I've got a little bit of video here which actually comes from German television ARD. Armin Stauf, one their leading correspondent who was in Mazar-i Sharif during the problems up in Northern Afghanistan and listen very carefully to what happened in this tie of tension between the cameraman and a member of the British military, who happens to be from the special forces. It's rough language but it shows how there are those who want to shut us down.

*... video playing ...*

This is about our capacity and our job which is to bare witness in a free environment, however tense it is but I hope it doesn't have to be translated but the language from that special forces officer was particularly abrupt: 'Put that camera down or I am going to shoot you.'

Now the International Criminal Court, the new legislation is designed to stop this kind of thing happening but it doesn't seem to be stopping the kind of problems that we are seeing. And I will defer to Ibrahim on this if there are any further details but I'm sharing with you details which are in the public domain of what happened to the Al Jazeera bureau back in November, 18 months ago. And the reason I am showing it, and Ibrahim and I have talked about this quite a lot in the last year and a half since the accident happened, but I want to show you what happened when the Al Jazeera office was bombed because there's a letter which was received by Al Jazeera in response and there were two very important phrases here, which I am now seeing used time and time again. First of all that when this office was bombed they claimed it was something completely different and not the Al Jazeera office. There were no indications that this facility was used by Al Jazeera but more important for our business and what we are seeing time and again now is that locations have military significance. The same thing was said about the Palestine Hotel in Iraq, the same things were said about other targets which were hit, involving the media during the war in Iraq.

Time and time again we are seeing this used as the legal explanation, as to why something has take place militarily. Even though there appears to be a suspicion that something doesn't add up, particularly in this case when they claimed they didn't know that it was a media office in Kabul but it had been there for at least 20 months as a clear bureau. Now we are seeing this more and more and you begin to add up the signals and you can see where this might be leading. I would like to show you one or two other elements which I think are troubling us now; particularly on the business of the battle for credibility in real-time. I have no idea where this is going to but it is a deeply worrying development I think, about how images can now be

doctored, I could doctor them on this laptop in front of me, very easily. They could appear in this top left hand corner on the crisis management timeline and you wouldn't be able to check very easily where this has come from and who has sent it, or whatever.

So we are facing a difficult problem of finding out what we see, is it what we think it is or is it something different? This is a marvellous pull-together of Schroeder and Fisher in Germany. It's a great [...] picture, very easy to do and it actually can steal the limelight on the Front-page very quickly, but look what really did happen during the Iraq war, two pictures taken by a photographer who was hired by the Los Angeles Times. Put that one together with this one and you get this. Now in the end something like this wasn't that important but there was a principle at stake here, the credibility and the accuracy of what we are seeing. The result of that was the Los Angeles Times fired the photographer over the fake shot because he edited together two photos of a British Soldier and a crowd of people outside the Iraqi city of Basra, but everyone is doing this now, this is the problem and it is not just damn photographers or damn media, look at what is happening on the internet.

That kind of David Beckham problem out there, of some of the allegations against him out there on the internet, widely used and widely quoted by people. As you can see they are blacked out here fortunately, I won't hopefully get sued for repeating it but there is a principle here for who is out there, who can you believe, of personal echoes, personal whispers around the globe, which are transmitted in seconds not hours, in seconds and we're seeing to more and more recently and any nonentity with a modem can now challenge this. Sometimes the allegations are true, sometimes not.

Look what we went through in the build up to the Iraq war. Again, who do we believe in this situation, with a dossier which was produced, was it intelligence or plagiarism by the British government? We get it handed to us by Downing Street, yet we now know that this was not what they claimed it was, even though it was a dossier, it was a dossier which had been pieced together even though it claimed to be intelligence, it was actually plagiarism. It talked about a huge infrastructure of deception and concealment. But in the end what it was an internet cut and paste exercise from someone's dissertation considerably earlier, from the timeline we were being told it did represent.

And so it goes on, look at what happened in Macedonia two years ago. This is a very good example of three pictures which emerged from a gun fight which took place in the high street in Macedonia, in Tetovo and these two men were shot dead. You can see in the middle of the picture there a grenade, which was the reason these two men were shot dead. They were about to throw it, but look what can happen in a newspaper. One Newspaper used these Reuters pictures quite correctly and talked about these two men being killed because they were about to throw a grenade. Another more radical Albanian newspaper used the picture in a rather different way and there was a significant bit which was missing, the grenade itself. That in its own way in those first two or three, or four hours can have a massive impact on perceptions and that is a critical word, which leads me, I hope to my final example of who can you trust, who can you not trust because there are so many people out there now and I am only showing you, giving you examples here of a principle. Remember this picture after 9/11, which apparently showed the plane, one of the planes heading towards the World Trade Centre. This guy is now known as 'the journalist from hell' because this plane was supposed to crash just after 9 o'clock, the trouble is, it wasn't for a few days until someone discovered and worked out that the

viewing platform didn't open until 9.30, but by that time this picture had been around the world on the internet. What about something like this? The adoring crowds for Milosevic, except look very closely and you see the same man appears three times.

It's not just the journalists, it's also people like the British Royal Family, who at the royal wedding four years ago, there were twelve pictures of the Royal family there who the Royal photographer decided were not happy enough, so he changed twelve of the faces to make them look happier, including that of the Queen. You may laugh but for us in a Newsroom and for the government crisis centre what kind of judgments do they make?

And I leave you with this example from Australia, from October 2001 to show its governments who can do this as well. This is a refugee crisis, the tamper crisis, when large numbers of refugees were trying to get to Australia during the re-election campaign of John Howard. And there is one celebrated photo that showed this young child being picked up by two naval ratings from one of the Australian ships. The trouble is this was cited many times as the refugees jumping in the water to be rescued, three months later it was revealed that actually this picture was only 15% of the original, these were the original pictures which showed the boats sinking, which under maritime law means those refugees have to be rescued as a point of humanitarian principle. Now the Prime Minister, the Australian Prime Minister when he was confronted with this in February last year said he'd never heard before of any suggestion that the photo had been trimmed to obliterate the sinking ship and he was asked what he would have thought if he had known at the time, during his re-election campaign and he said: 'well, if I had know I mean, that would have been quite 'shunky', what ever 'shunky' means, but I think you can work that out. But my final point to you is what it meant politically. The price of what the Australian Navy tried to do was that the Prime Ministers ratings slid dramatically in February last year, well after he was re-elected. The children-overboard had taken its toll, and what we saw is a political reputation damaged by false reports and 'photographs which had been doctored, produced by a government'. Not me saying that: it is the defence minister Robert Hill who confirmed that very openly, once this had been confronted, once the ministry of defence had been confronted as so did the defence chief Admiral Chris Barry.

I have given you a very sharp and very rapid swim through a large number of issues here but I think you can see from these examples or I hope you can, why we have now entered very difficult times which effect the credibility of the media, whether the BBC, CNN, Al Jazeera or that little website somewhere in the Middle East but also have a dramatic impact and implications for governments any of whom don't seem yet to have confronted this real-time challenge.

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