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AFGHANISTAN: TELLING THE STORY

Introduction

A general perception among critics is that the media thrives on disaster. Some have pointed to the media response to the events of September 11, 2001, as evidence of this, at least initially. As both print and non-print media devoted most of their resources to covering what seemed to be a single and immensely tragic story, terrifying images were replayed over and over, details of the conspiracy began to emerge, and we, the audience, remained glued to our television sets and pored over our newspapers, magazines, and the Internet. This was the first mega news story of the 21st century—or, at least, the first chapter. In a relatively short period the attack on the United States became an international “War on Terrorism,” and the first major battleground occurred half a world away, in Afghanistan. While there was criticism of the continuous media coverage, some analysts have pointed out that these events were unique and that the nature of the coverage was appropriate because they were ongoing; there was a real and possible future threat. However one assesses the media coverage, it is certainly clear that reporting and analyzing the events and subsequent events of September 11th pose a long-term and complex challenge for journalists.

Telling the follow-up and ongoing story of September 11, 2001, has not been easy for the media. After reporting the initial catastrophic events, journalists began to settle in for the long haul and to engage in a slogging pursuit of myriad stories: facts, events, issues, and analyses. Two major factors, however, began to make their work especially difficult: the tightly controlled release of information from the government of the United States, and the harsh and difficult conditions of Afghanistan itself. The latter

especially made independent reporting—the specialty of foreign correspondents—inordinately difficult.

Conducting a war unlike any it has ever undertaken, the U.S. government and the Pentagon have severely restricted access to its military tactics, operations, and results—and to the theatre of war itself. Journalists and correspondents have complained that they have been given little official information, even after military operations have been completed. The Defense Department insists that the safety of its forces makes it necessary for it to withhold both information and access to personnel. Reporters are frustrated, because the stories they are left to tell often seem of lesser consequence.

A large contingent of U.S. and international foreign correspondents have entered Afghanistan on their own. Such independent correspondents encounter great difficulty just entering the country and then moving about once they are there. Little is available in the way of food and accommodation. The new Afghan government has minimal authority outside major centres, and banditry and lawlessness are rampant. Eight journalists were killed in first three weeks of the ground war.

The conditions inside Afghanistan have become a major part of the stories that many correspondents have ended up telling. Rather than focusing on strictly military operations, of which they are allowed to know little, many seek out the stories of the people of Afghanistan who have endured years of deprivation and who have struggled to survive. These are stories that are not sanitized by a strategic release of official information.

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Many Voices, Many Stories

Correspondents go to war zones to get the story; to help their readers, listeners, and viewers understand how a war is being conducted and its effects on those caught up in the fighting, and on the world. Wars, of course, are highly complex events in human history, and different correspondents see different aspects of a war; the stories they tell often vary or describe events from different perspectives. Examining information from a variety of sources, as parts of the whole, gives us a broader understanding of events.

Process and Product

The physical, emotional, and logistical challenges that correspondents face become part of their story in that they shape what the correspondents can report and how they report it. These factors can affect the correspondents' ability to gather information. The circumstances in which they find themselves can help or hinder them in communicating effectively with those caught in the middle of war, whether combatants or civilians. Obtaining complete and accurate information, understanding and assessing the motives and historical biases of those engaged in the conflict, and empathizing with the victims of war are just some of the skills a professional journalist requires in a war zone.

- 1. In this *News in Review* report, a number of aspects of the process of telling the story in Afghanistan are presented. As you view the report for the first time, make notes under the following headings:
 - (a) What is needed to tell the story effectively (equipment, logistical considerations, conditions)?
 - (b) What can inhibit or actually prevent correspondents from telling the story?
 - (c) How do physical dangers interfere with storytelling?
 - (d) What did the CBC correspondents identify as the most important story for them to tell?
 - (e) Why do these correspondents view their reports from Afghanistan as especially successful?
- 2. During a second viewing, identify and list other stories that might be told by correspondents present in Afghanistan. Compare your list with those of your classmates.
- 3. How do these correspondents demonstrate the importance of the following: predicting and hypothesizing, empathizing and reacting emotionally versus maintaining a dispassionate and reasoned perspective, bias and nuance, the human details, historical objectivity, the mixed blessing of resources, being an eyewitness to history?

Follow-up Discussion

These CBC correspondents express pride in their ability to tell the story, and they also acknowledge that others are telling stories from different perspectives. Given that we, consumers of the media, have access to a variety of information, how do we play a role in the reporting process? How can we increase our ability to get a balanced view of events? What are our responsibilities in the news-gathering process?

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The Journalistic Conundrum

“This is the first war I can think of where there is more we don’t know than we do.” — Tom Ricks, military correspondent, *The Washington Post*

For obvious reasons, the United States and the U.S. government are at the forefront of this war. Because of its size and resources—as well as its core mandate to inform domestic viewers—the U.S. media also have a lead role in covering the conflict. However, from the very beginning of the conflict in Afghanistan, the government of the United States has been determined to carefully control the amount and kind of news stories that can be filed by news correspondents. On the other hand, some say the American people do not want to know anything “bad,” and that the U.S. media have not challenged government rhetoric of a “war on terrorism,” officially an undeclared war. It has been debated whether media personnel have become patriots as well as journalists, and has been noted that in every war journalists challenge governments over access to information.

Evidence of Managed Information?

Almost all information made available to journalists in the United States about the U.S. military conduct of the war is given to journalists in briefings by Donald Rumsfeld, the Secretary of Defense; General Richard Myers, the Chairman of the Joint Chiefs of Staff; and Rear Admiral John Stufflebeem. The Defense Department’s chief spokesperson, Victoria Clark, is respected by most reporters because of her willingness to try to obtain answers to their questions; but her effectiveness is seen to be severely hampered by the reticence of senior policy-makers.

All other knowledgeable government and military personnel have been effectively silenced. “Since the September 11 attacks,” writes Bradley Peniston in *The Washington Post*, “senior military officials have worked to prevent uniformed military personnel, Defense Department employees, and even civilian contractors from talking to the press and the public.” This reticence has made many journalists uneasy and suspicious. Roger Peterson of *USA Today* sees a lack of candour that means “we need to keep asking one question: Does the U.S. government hide bad news from us, or just not make it available?” Steve Bell, a former ABC foreign correspondent and professor at Ball State University, has commented: “I don’t agree with those who say the military always lies. But there’s no question the Pentagon is guilty of selective editing.”

Justifiable Restricted Access?

The controlled access to information from official sources is compounded by the inability of journalists to accompany and interview U.S. troops in the field. Neil Hickey, editor-at-large of the *Columbia Journalism Review*, has identified two major grievances on the part of journalists. The first of these, that they “did not have reasonable access to land and sea bases from which air attacks were launched on Taliban positions,” meant that journalists were unable to accompany crews on bombing runs or interview pilots after their missions—to engage in first-hand reporting. The second, a refusal to permit the interviewing of members of Special Op-

erations units after their missions, prevented the independent confirmation of the outcome of these missions and the extent of any casualties. Only since the end of November 2001 have media pools—with heavy restrictions imposed on them—been permitted to accompany regular forces as they enter Afghanistan. These reporters were not permitted to join units in order to cover their daily operations. They were not permitted to report much of what they observed, other than feature stories on church services and promotion ceremonies. They were given almost no access to senior officers. They were even forbidden to report details of operations at the base that had been chosen by the Pentagon.

Sandy Johnson, Washington bureau chief for the Associated Press, summed up the frustrations of the media trying to cover U.S. participation in the war. “There is a war being fought by Americans and we’re not there to chronicle it. We have access to the Northern Alliance, we have access to the Taliban, we have practically zero access to American forces in the theater.”

Journalists from around the world have all been denied access to troops stationed in countries surrounding Afghanistan, such as Pakistan, Tajikistan, and Uzbekistan. The Pentagon cites “host country sensitivity” as the main reason: the unwillingness of the host to be seen as providing significant support to the United States in a war against a culturally similar state.

Especially difficult for journalists has been the lack of any central information facility in the region around Afghanistan similar to the Joint Information Bureau that the allies maintained in Saudi Arabia to assist journalists during the Gulf War. As a result, it is almost impossible for journalists on the ground in Afghanistan and the surrounding countries to confirm rumours and basic facts.

Journalists’ limited access to battlefields and the tight control of information by the Pentagon create a number of concerns for the media in general. Roger Peterson (*USA Today*) identified three major issues:

- Only one side of the story is being told; and this is being filtered through the Pentagon.
- The “up-close-and-personal” stories of the soldiers actually fighting the war are not being told, and the heroes are not receiving proper credit and recognition.
- The public is losing its awareness of the reality of war. “War becomes abstract and sanitary.”

The third concern mentioned above is one that is frequently identified by journalists, including Neil Hickey, as a major reason why the Pentagon is intent on controlling news from the battlefield: the “images and descriptions of civilian bomb casualties—people already the victims of famine, poverty, drought, oppression, and brutality—would erode public support in the U.S. and elsewhere in the world.” Official reports of civilian casualties have been repeatedly questioned by members of the media. The Pentagon has regularly accused the Taliban of inflating the numbers of civilian casualties, but the media have been unable to independently confirm or disprove these figures. The Pentagon claims not to have kept an accounting of civilian casualties from U.S. bombing; as a rule, it has not accepted either civilian or even United Nations estimates.

John Bloom of United Press International has described the U.S. coverage of the conflict in Afghanistan as some of the most “antiseptic” ever, so antiseptic that many Americans “still believe that there’s such a thing as a pretty war.” He accuses the media of a special insensitivity to civilian casualties. “For ‘collateral damage’ to show up on the media radar, it has to be an enormous tactical and political mistake.”

A Mistaken Policy?

Commentators and journalists have identified several reasons why they believe the U.S. government’s policy of managing the news is wrong. George Wilson of the *National Journal* calls the attempt to keep reporters away from the troops counterproductive. “Reporters,” he writes, “always fall in love with the troops when they see how hard they work.” Others have called attention to the negative impact of delays in reporting on popular opinion: “Any bad news from the front that isn’t reported in a timely fashion,” says Leonard Downie of *The Washington Post*, “can create unnecessary suspicions of a cover-up.”

Two of the U.S.’s senior journalists have not hesitated to urge their government to be more open. David Halberstam, winner of the Pulitzer Prize for his coverage of the Vietnam War, sees great difficulty for the government and the media in balancing freedom and secrecy during the conflict. But, he says, “One thing the government should be very aware of is that while it has enormous control of the information, it’s very important not to abuse it. Therefore, it should try for maximum candor. That’s alien in America, where the greatest growth industry is spin.”

Dan Rather, who at the age of 70 went to Afghanistan to see conditions for himself, speaks of the need for eyewitness accounts to make military and government reports credible to the public. “Keeping unity requires this really strong bond of trust between the leadership and those of us being led. And you only get that with facts and access.”

An editorial in the November 20, 2001, issue of *The Washington Post* reflected the views of many U.S. journalists. Referring to recent television coverage of Afghans rejoicing at the defeat of the Taliban—images provided by Western media working independently, without official U.S. military assistance—the *Post* identified this as one of the great positive stories to come out of the war. It noted that this positive media coverage was totally independent of the government’s “positive diplomacy” apparatus, and of “its increasingly aggressive efforts to market and control information.” The paper recognized the need for the government to promote a positive view of its efforts in the war in Afghanistan and against terrorism. It mentioned the focus on a “message of the day” as an especially useful approach. But it also deplored the attempts to control the flow of news to U.S. journalists as a serious mistake. “Around the world, media and governments are taking note of the efforts at control, and rightly or wrongly drawing the conclusion that the U.S. government is no longer as trustworthy, nor its press as free.”

An Ongoing Media Issue

The current distrust between the U.S. Defense Department and the media dates back to the late 1960s and early 1970s, the period of the Vietnam War. At first, the military embraced the presence of the media. Reporters had full access, and were careful to report no engagements

before the enemy was fully aware of the presence of U.S. troops. Eventually, however, reporters began to call attention to the disparities between what they were observing and filming in the field, and what the military was telling them in briefings. “Vietnam,” says media analyst Robert Lichter, “poisoned relations between the media and the military for a generation.”

Essentially, the U.S. military decided that in future conflicts it would “manage” the media. When the U.S. invaded Grenada during the Reagan presidency, the media were completely kept out. The Persian Gulf War in 1991 became what CNN called “a war of briefings”—regular updates to the media, including military film footage. Many of these were televised. But it was only after the conflict had ended that information not provided in these briefings—bombs missing their targets and killing civilians, weaponry not behaving as well as anticipated—became public knowledge.

In 1992, the Pentagon and the Washington bureau chiefs of the print media and television worked out a set of principles to apply during wartime news coverage. These included the following:

- Open and independent reporting will be the principal means of coverage of U.S. military operations.
- Journalists will be provided access to all military units.
- Under conditions of open coverage, field commanders will permit journalists to ride on military vehicles and aircraft whenever feasible.

Some critics feel that the above principles have been largely ignored in Afghanistan. Others, however, suggest that the war in Afghanistan cannot be equated to Vietnam. Although some critics have suggested that the media have been kept out of military operations more than in any recent conflict (even former Canadian prime minister Kim Campbell wrote in the *Christian Science Monitor*, “[thanks to the new technologies of satellite and videophones] reporters can deliver news from war zones in real time, but have less to tell.”), others say that the real possibility of ongoing or future terrorism requires that information be carefully controlled.

Responsible Journalism

Journalists were upset by the military’s fear that their reporting might, in any way, place U.S. troops in jeopardy. Many of them say they have always carefully avoided revealing crucial secrets about specific operations, and defer to the military in deciding what is safe to publish. Stephen Hess of the Brookings Institute writes: “I really cannot remember a single case in which news reporting endangered a military operation in the 40 years I’ve been observing.” But there are those who dispute the validity of his statement.

The media have also been congratulated for the quality of domestic and international reporting during the war. Martin Sieff, an editor at United Press International, has pointed out that even the tabloid press has resisted provocation and rumour-mongering, and has avoided demonizing both Islam and Muslim-Americans, focusing instead on threats to their civil rights.

But journalists remain frustrated that there are so many questions they perceive as fundamental that remain unanswered. Even the extent and nature of the role of the U.S. military in both organizing and guiding the war in Afghanistan against the Taliban and Al-Qaeda remain unknown.

The Media, the Public, and the U.S. Government

U.S. public opinion, for the time being, is strongly on the side of the government and the military in terms of controlling access to news from the war. A November 2001 Gallup Poll reported that the public gave President Bush and Secretary of Defense Rumsfeld strong approval for their handling of the war on terrorism (89 per cent for Bush, and 80 per cent for Rumsfeld). On the other hand, only 43 per cent approved of the way the news media were reporting the war. A Pew Research Center Poll determined that 50 per cent of Americans felt that the military should control the news; only 40 per cent felt the media should be allowed to decide what to tell the public.

One reason given for this disparity is that the media are seen as bearers of bad news and thus at odds with the President and his administration. The war is seen by most Americans to have gone very well, and many are content not to see any of the negative aspects. Harry Levins of the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch* expects that this attitude—and some “press-bashing”—will continue until the war is over.

A Necessary Tension?

At the conclusion of his discussion of the restricted access being provided to the U.S. media by the Pentagon, Neil Hickey describes the two cultures from which the parties approach the issue of war coverage: “The press expects candour and co-operation from the government so that the public may be informed about a war conducted in its name; it expects officials not to impede independent, enterprising news coverage except where operational or national security unambiguously might be compromised. From the media, governments want fair, consistent, non-exploitive treatment that appreciates the complexity of prosecuting a modern war. Ideally, the good-faith tension between those two sets of aspirations serves the public best.” There is no question whatsoever that tension is currently present. What remains to be resolved is the quality and quantity of “good-faith.”

Discussion

1. At a journalism seminar Pentagon spokesperson Victoria Clark stated, “If you loved everything we [at the Pentagon] were doing, I probably wouldn’t be doing a very good job. If I loved everything you were doing, you probably wouldn’t be doing a very good job.” How does this statement relate to Neil Hickey’s description of the two cultures?
2. Commenting on the war news reported by the U.S. media, M. W. Guzy wrote in the *St. Louis Post-Dispatch*: “The Press doesn’t forfeit its objectivity by displaying patriotism on its lapel. Rather, it betrays patriotic obligation by neglecting to ask the difficult questions.” Discuss the meaning and implications of this statement.
3. What should Canadians and the Canadian media learn from the current relationship of the U.S. government and the U.S. media?

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► *Autonomous Media*

The CBC reporters and producers who tell us their stories in this report are part of a special group of journalists: those journalists who decided to enter the war zone independent of and separate from the invading U.S. military. To do so, they have faced harsh and dangerous conditions, and have taken enormous risks in order to send back independent reports.

Just reaching Afghanistan is extremely difficult. Many reporters chose to enter from Tazikistan on an ancient Soviet helicopter, on donkeys, on horseback, in truck convoys, or using rented cars that can cost as much as \$3000 for the trip. Some men and women journalists travelling on their own or as part of a small group have worn burkas in order to remain undetected by hostile forces they might meet on the way.

Once in Afghanistan, they face real physical difficulties. In many areas, especially outside the major centres, food and water are scarce. There is usually no heat, no electricity, no running water. One reporter described his quality of life as envied by many others because he and 20 other journalists shared four rooms and had a sit-down toilet (which didn't actually flush). His staple diet was onions in pita bread, with occasional pieces of roast lamb. In these (and worse) conditions, many journalists have developed food- and water-borne diseases.

Travel is extremely difficult, requiring the hiring of local drivers with four-wheel drive vehicles and hiring translators who often speak minimal English. It is also expensive. A two-day, 560-kilometre trip from Taloqan to Kabul costs \$4500.

Afghanistan and some of its surrounding countries are also very hostile for Western journalists. In 2001, more than 50 journalists were killed worldwide; eight of them were killed in Afghanistan. The war, the increase in banditry, the lawlessness as the Taliban regime collapsed, and a Taliban bounty on Western journalists all played a part in increasing the risks. Of the eight who died, three were travelling with a Northern Alliance convoy when it came under attack; four were dragged from their car in a private convoy, robbed, and shot; and one was shot during a robbery in his room in Taloqan. More than a dozen others have been robbed, arrested, kidnapped, or shot at. These include a Canadian, Ken Hechtman of the *Montreal Mirror*, who was arrested by the Taliban and later released. Daniel Pearl, a reporter for the *Wall Street Journal*, was kidnapped in Pakistan by an unidentified group who lured him with the promise of an interview with a fundamentalist Islamic leader (as of this writing his whereabouts and safety are unknown).

Because they carry expensive equipment and up to \$20 000 in cash (only U.S. dollars are accepted from foreigners by Afghans), journalists are obvious targets for bandits. "Every single Westerner in Afghanistan looks like a walking savings bank," says Georges DeKeerle of Getty Images. And the dangers increase as it becomes apparent that journalists are about to move on from one area of the country to another; people "become more aggressive about asking you for money."

Foreign correspondents and their news organizations do take precautions. Many reporters wear protective gear. (A Kevlar vest saved the life of Associated Press photographer Maro Di Lauro, who was shot nine times by a member of the Taliban.) They also try to stay out of exposed areas. They share information, travel in groups, and try to look out for one another. The British Broadcasting Corporation has hired security consultants to assist and train its crews in Afghanistan. Many other organizations encourage their reporters to hire armed escorts if they feel they need them. CNN and NBC have brought two armoured cars apiece into the country.

Some news organizations provide special training for their correspondents on surviving in a war zone. Letta Tayler, in *Newsday*, described her visit to a typical week-long training camp run by the British company Centurion Risk Assessment Services, which provides survival training for journalists, relief workers, and international business people. Among the sessions in these training camps is usually one on medical triage.

Journalists also have their own personal safety measures. One reporter carries pictures of a friend's children in his wallet (he has none of his own), in the belief that bandits are less likely to kill him if he is thought to have dependent children.

For most foreign correspondents, the ultimate defence is common sense. Although in theory reporters are allowed to decide which areas are safe, and which are not, credit is definitely given to those who do "go in," and the pressures to do so can be significant.

Why do reporters become foreign correspondents and place their lives at risk? Dan Rather, who chose to go to Afghanistan at the age of 70, says that "You need to walk the ground, be there, hear, feel, see for yourself." Pamela Constable of *The Washington Post* gives several reasons: "an addictive thrill of danger that sharpens reporters' senses and emotions, the excitement of beating others to a story, the fear that one can become complacent in a desk job." Perhaps Richard Lloyd Parry, reflecting in the *Independent on Sunday* on the deaths of four of his colleagues, sums it up best. "It is an ordeal, a privilege, and it is the experience of a lifetime."

Note: For more information on the conditions and dangers in which journalists work in Afghanistan, and throughout the world, see the Web site of the Committee to Protect Journalists at www.cpj.com.

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The Al-Jazeera Paradox

To fully understand the story of the war against terrorism, North Americans need to be aware of what the rest of the world is hearing from its media. The reporting of the news by Arabic-language news organizations is of special interest because they speak to a part of the world that the United States and its coalition partners would especially like to bring onto its side. Historically, however, distrust and hostility have marked the reaction of much of the Arabic-language press to U.S. foreign policy.

Ironically, since September 11 much media attention has focused on Al-Jazeera, a satellite television broadcaster based in Qatar, a small sheikdom on the west coast of the Persian Gulf. It has only been broadcasting since 1996, but claims an audience of 35 million Arabic-speaking viewers throughout the world. Al-Jazeera came to special prominence as the only foreign broadcaster permitted in Taliban-controlled Afghanistan. It was also the broadcaster of choice for Osama bin Laden, who in 1998 gave Al-Jazeera an exclusive interview. After September 11 he released videotaped messages to the Arab world exclusively through Al-Jazeera. The Bush administration soon pressured the ruler of Qatar to rein in Al-Jazeera's news coverage, accusing it of being anti-American and unbalanced.

Admirers and Critics

Al-Jazeera has many admirers, even though it has been taken to task by the U.S. and British governments for its reporting. Its admirers see its programming as reliable, professional, and informative, and its coverage as an attempt to present both sides of a story. Many of its reporters and program hosts were recruited from BBC Arabic and pride themselves on Al-Jazeera's professional training and reliance on field reports from reporters throughout the world for its news. In many ways Al-Jazeera is remarkable for its editorial independence. Over the five years of its existence it has received hundreds of official complaints from Arab governments because of its assessments of various leaders and its willingness to permit dissidents to air their views.

S. Abdallah Scleifer, director of the Adham Center for Television at The American University in Cairo, is especially positive in assessing Al-Jazeera's influence in the Arab world. He sees it as encouraging "a new political culture more responsive to facts than to conspiracy theories." And, he points out, Al-Jazeera interviewed Israelis when no other Arab channel would do so, and televised Arab-Israeli debates. "It has created the possibility that Arabs can shift from demonizing an entire people to discriminating between what forces in Israeli society would perpetuate occupation and injustice and what forces would seek a just peace."

The broadcaster also has its critics, who consider Al-Jazeera's programming, especially its talk shows, sensationalist and inflammatory: programming they see as causing the atmosphere in the Middle East to deteriorate. Some accuse it of simply being bin Laden's mouthpiece.

Fouad Ajami, a professor of Middle Eastern Studies at Johns Hopkins University, describes the station's reporters as either pan-Arabists (leftists committed to a single Arab nation

throughout the region) or Islamists (recognizing the primacy of Islam in political life). In either case, however, he describes them as being quite willing to challenge the wisdom of Arab rulers because their allegiance is to their fellow Muslims, not to any particular state. Ajami is blunt in describing their news coverage as “driven by pan-Arab anti-Americanism and anti-Zionism” that “deliberately, day in and day out, [fan] the flames of Muslim outrage.”

Mamoun Fandy, an Egyptian-born media analyst writing in *The Washington Post*, downplays the importance of Al-Jazeera as an influence on Arab opinion. He sees other news sources, including several Arab and non-Arab radio networks, several Arab newspapers, and other satellite networks as much more influential in the Middle East—and more trusted by the public. The U.S. and its Western allies, he feels, would be far more successful entrusting their message to these sources.

Al-Jazeera aggressively defends itself against criticism. It asserts that it covers bin Laden because he is a party to the crisis and the war; ignoring him would make the story unbalanced. It airs the views of U.S. officials (and has interviewed Secretary of State Colin Powell) and State Department briefings. It has requested more interviews with U.S. officials. Some viewers, it says, have even accused the broadcaster of pro-U.S. bias.

For the time being, the Bush administration seems to be taking the advice of those who would have it respond to Al-Jazeera as it would to any other critic. The government has given the channel access to many federal officials, and U.S. spokespersons regularly appear on some of the broadcaster’s programs. It is even considering purchasing ads on Al-Jazeera. Clearly the U.S. hopes to exploit Al-Jazeera’s ability to reach a large audience that could be persuaded to accept the U.S. government’s position.

Discussion

In your opinion, what role has Al-Jazeera played in the events that have occurred following September 11, 2001? What role do you think it plays generally as an international news broadcaster?

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Discussion, Research, and Essay Questions

- 1. In many parts of the world, journalism can be a very dangerous profession. This was very true in 2001, when more than 50 journalists were killed—not all of them in war zones. The Committee to Protect Journalists, an independent, non-profit organization, maintains a Web site where it reports on those who have been killed while attempting to do their job. Visit the Web site at www.cpj.org, and prepare a brief report on the circumstances in which these individuals were killed. Why is this such an important issue and concern to the journalism profession?
2. Commenting on the restrictions on the media’s attempts to cover the Persian Gulf War, Walter Cronkite (one of the leading American broadcast journalists) said, “As a result of the censorship in the Persian Gulf, we have lost our history.” What did he mean by this statement? Does his statement apply to the war in Afghanistan?
3. Compare Walter Cronkite’s comment with this one by Robert McCrum, literary editor of *The London Observer*. “In the wars of the 20th century, reportage was as essential as field dressings or battle plans. The absence of hard facts makes this conflict the vaguest and most remote in living memory, and has contributed to the mass of speculative commentary. We know, however, that warfare has never failed to engage the human imagination, and that literature is the means by which our imagination comes to terms with itself. When the literature of this Afghan war finally reaches the printed page, it will have to be in works of fiction.” Express in your own words what you think McCrum is saying.
4. *Washington Post* columnist E.J. Dionne has said that “the coming struggles between the government and the media over the public’s right to know will have less to do with protecting individuals and operations than officials may argue. All governments have an interest in shielding themselves from reports of failure. The easiest alibi for covering up is to claim that the truth is dangerous.” How valid do you think this statement is? Are you aware of any incidents that support or prove Dionne’s point of view?
5. Reread “Many Voices, Many Stories” on page 32 of this resource guide. Then write a one-page position paper on the issue of wartime access to information by journalists, especially as it applies to Afghanistan. Post your papers and then examine and discuss informally the viewpoints expressed by the class.
6. Journalists tell the stories that their audiences need or want to hear. As active, informed news consumers, what are our obligations in this regard? Can we influence what news stories are told or how they are told? Should we?