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News Reporting and the Process of War

By

Andreas Pawlouschek
"NEWS REPORTING and the PROCESS of WAR"

Observations of an European journalist working and living in the Arab world.

Presented by Andreas Pawlouschek
Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung
Consultant to ASBU
Arab States Broadcasting Union
at the News & Programme Exchange Centre
Algiers / Algeria

at the Seminar on
"News and the North-South Relationship"
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at the ASIAN MASS COMMUNICATION RESEARCH AND INFORMATION CENTRE
It seems already long ago that close to here, in Vietnam, the United States of America had to go through to what one would call today the “mother of all defeats”. And it had been the media who got the blame that the American public suffered for more than fifteen years from the shock of “My Lai” because they committed what crime? They accepted their responsibilities and did their job, that is to say they gathered news.

When the White House and the Pentagon got ready for the war at the gulf, it seems that the military and strategic preparations where equal to the plans on how to get control of the media. Their strategy very obviously was successful. The media, and first of all Television, was to abused as a means of propaganda, of disinformation.

Heiko Engelkes, former editor in chief of the main bulletin of ARD, Germany’s public Television System, full of rage and disappointment called at the Toronto News Workshop the Gulf War the media’s WATERLOO. To obvious television had been deprived of it’s major function, the choice of news and images. And I agree with Heiko Engelkes as far as the media in the western world are concerned.

Let me try to balance the statement of my colleague by saying in a more or less provocative manner, that not little a TV system in the Arab and Afro-Arab world, where there hardly ever had been anything like the free choice of news and images, the Gulf War might turn out to create just the opposite effect of a Media-Waterloo.

Following the invasion of Kuwait on August the second 1990 the Arab World seemed to be paralysed. Although many a politician, journalists and the public clearly anticipated the evil to come, people seemed to have put on the blinkers, the probable became the unthinkable.
And while Eurovision headquarters at Geneva was about to install a coordination centre at Amman/Jordan, Arab TV-organizations and even the Arab States Broadcasting Union, ASBU, did not even reflect on fall back positions in case two of it’s strongest partners, Iraq and Kuwait, would get lost as a major source of news.

As if by silencing reality could be changed, ARABVISION, the regional Arab news exchange scheme, could offer almost nothing when the war broke out. I remember the first day of the war, when I was with my Algerian colleagues at the ASBU News and Programme Exchange Centre high on top of Algiers. If there does exist any stronger word than despairation it would fit here.

The mood of our colleagues had been most precisely characterized during a recent symposium organized by Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation in Bonn by Aziz Alkazaz, scientist at the German-Institute for Oriental Studies. He said, and I quote: “Following the fall of Communism in Eastern-Europe, the United States of America are strongly in need of creating a new scape-goat, a substitute to the old enemy number one, to communism. They seem to have found it in Islam.”

And while only a couple of thousands of miles away from the exchange centre at Algiers, allied forces - and this meant western and Arab forces - bombed the hell out of Iraq, not even one second could be offered to the ASBU member stations neither from Iraq, nor from Saudi-Arabia nor and understandable from our colleagues in Kuwait during the first days of the war.

It took days until the shock had been overcome and at last Iraqi-TV offered
aside the protocolish statements of Saddam Hussein the first reports on the disastrous destructions of Iraqi cities and villages. Disregarding that those reports were of inferior quality and almost never to be identified where they had been shot and when: At last there where some.

At the same time ARABVISION as a good service to its members was linking the Arab-African world via their own satellite ARABSAT with EUROVISION three times per day. EVN-Y, EVN-0 and EVN-1 had been down-linked from ECS and uplinked to ARABSAT. Without EVN’s most of the Arab TV systems would have had no chance to show to their audience what the war in their own part of the world was alike.

And I do not even want to know how often material from the agencies included in the Eurovision exchange had been used illegally, because TV stations had no bilateral agreements with Visnews and the others. Piracy the other way around that agencies or the big networks got hold of material that was originally designated for the ARABVISION news exchange seems nothing compared with this big scale theft.

It was with despair that many responsible journalist or fonctionaire within the system had to accept that once again the North, LE MONDE OCCIDENTAL, was telling the South what was going on in their part of the world.

Even to me as a European journalist who had been working with German Television for almost twenty years, it was a bitter pill to see my own colleagues and those from North-America with all there high-tech equipment and well fed cheque books move around the desert of the Arab peninsula as if it was their own playground of sensation.

Here the story might have come already to an end – a very pessimistic one for the media in the south if there had not been...
Algerian TV, a television organization whose audience rather prefers to consume via their parabolic antennas all the major French channels, then to undergo the effort of following ENTV, the national broadcasters programmes in Arabic, a language not at all understood by all the population.

Despite their desperate financial situation the authorities of ENTV decided to send teams to Iraq, Turkey and Jordan. The sympathetic, not to say supportive, attitude of the Algerian government, the press and the fundamentalist opposition, made it impossible to send a team as well to Saudi-Arabia as had been planned previously. Probably because of the above mentioned position the Algerian team in Iraq was capable of covering events at sites no other network had access to.

Because the Iraqi TV-Station and the earth station had long been demolished by the allied fighter planes and B-52 bombers there seemed no uplink possible.

It was a respectable gesture of team spirit and an excellent prove of international cooperation that CNN offered in the most unbeaurocratic manner their good services. It might not have been to their disadvantage that Algerian TV could via the CNN "fly-aways" uplink to New-York and via a second hub we at Algiers got images and reports covered by an Arab team, worthwhile to be shown around the globe.

Regrettably to be obliged to state that the usage of this unique material was by far not reflecting its value. This is to my understanding due to the fact that old prejudices dominating European newsrooms that a reliable source can only originate from the old or the new world but never from the south, has still not been
It should nevertheless be pointed out now that in general cooperation with other broadcasters was excellent. By this, the month of January symbolizes the breakthrough to an acceptance of the Arab News Exchange Scheme. The ASBU News Exchange Centre at Algiers offered on behalf of their member organizations thirty-five news-items = 35. Eurovision's newscoords accepted seventeen = 17 originating from Yemen, Egypt, Saudi-Arabia, Syria, Libya, Oman and Sudan.

It has to be stated in this context that four members of the Arab States Broadcasting Union are as well full members of Eurovision and offered and fed their news reports directly to EVN's. Unfortunately I am not yet in the position to give you exact figures on how many items originating from the above mentioned ASBU / EBU members had been accepted by Eurovision. I am sure that it sums up to quite a respectable figure.

Everyone who had a chance to work with our Jordanian colleagues will state that aside some bureaucratic hurdles, well known in the Arab world, collaboration was excellent. And it is with not too little pride that I tell you that it was Friedrich-Ebert-Foundation that already in the early seventies laid the foundation stone in the ASBU region to the professional standards and the comprehension of a news-exchange-system that is to be found nowadays in Jordan and elsewhere.

In order to get you a better idea of what kind the items fed to Eurovision had been let me get into details:

While TV organizations directly involved in the war like Syria or Saudi-Arabia exchanged mainly newscoverage of more or less official character like the visit of politicians and their reception by their counterparts of the respective host
Sudan offered lively reports on mass rallies in favour of the Iraqi people and Saddam Hussein. They not only got accepted by Eurovision but as well acceptance by European newsrooms.

What is causing headache to almost everybody engaged in a news exchange system, even at Eurovision headquarters, is the immense competition of the commercial broadcasters and the news agencies. I shall not be talking of satellite piracy, a phenomenon that surely caused some friction at the beginning of the war, I want to tell you a story instead.

It is only about a month ago when in Damascus an American hostage was freed after more than five years of captivity. ORTAS Damascus had made no offer that day but everybody knew that something was in the air. When the exchange started at 02:00 pm Greenwich mean time, Syria went on the satellite with excellent coverage on the release and a press conference by Mc Carthy. ASBU Exchange Centre immediately offered the material to Eurovision to learn, that only eight minutes before WTN had fed the same story via a prebooked satellite as a flash to Europe.

Eight minutes which made all that difference. Could ORTAS not have offered the item well in advance in order to enable ASBU and Eurovision alike to take all precautions to serve it’s members as efficiently as via WTN. And it’s not only efficiency – there is a lot of money involved. ASBU would have been able to offer the same item on the basis of reciprocity free of charge.

CNN and the AGENCIES might cause problems now and then, but the real problem lies within the lack of solidarity of members towards their own union. This is partly understandable if one takes into
amount of money agencies will pay for example to SYRIAN-TV for the use of their facilities or material, it means hard currency to a TV organization that is starving.

LET ME SUMMARIZE:

I. The gulf war was a shock to Arab broadcasters. But the lesson they learnt was to concentrate on their professional tasks. This means that the Arab States Broadcasting Union will have to look for means and ways to loosen the dependency from the Arab League in order to get a higher degree of self reliance.

II. This shock and the confrontation with western style handling of news in production, presentation and even more important, journalistic approach, forced Arab broadcasters to reflect on their own understanding of news. This reflects an imminent chance for a better flow of information within the system itself and in the South-North perspective.

III. Activities that had been established during the war turned out to become permanent.

a. Syria that played no role within the news exchange scheme before the war, has become an active and reliable partner.

b. Algerian TV did not give up its midday news bulletin that had been introduced as a special service at the beginning of the war. Better information of the public is the consequence.

c. Kuwait TV has applied at Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung to run a specialized training course for ameliorating the production and presentation of news.

d. The Arab States Broadcasting Union and Friedrich-Ebert-Stiftung are organizing in November an international symposium on the "Impact of latest technologies on broadcasting news" in an attempt to investigate why during the war the old phenomenon that the North reports on the South was even more evident then ever.

What makes this Symposium differ from many others in the past is that for the first time in the
Arab world broadcasters and their union seem to be seriously willing not to blame others for the imbalance of the flow of information but to search for home made problems.

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Getting back to Waterloo. The mother of all defeats to Napoleon meant at the same time a new start to Europe. And if I remember my lessons in school correctly, the battle of Waterloo is more correctly known as the battle of “bell alliance”. Let us get into a better alliance within our broadcaster’s unions, the agencies, CNN and all the others in order to serve our audiences better.

Thank you very much for listening.

Andreas Pawlouschek
Singapore, September 22nd 1991