



## THE MEDIA'S WAR

April 15, 2003

*Eason Jordan, CNN chief news executive, and Franklin Foer, associate editor of The New Republic, discuss the recent controversy stemming from CNN's coverage of Iraq prior to the start of the war.*

*The NewsHour Media Unit is funded by a grant from the Pew Charitable Trusts*

TERENCE SMITH: CNN chief news executive Eason Jordan became part of the news himself in recent days when he revealed that he withheld information about how Saddam Hussein's regime had intimidated and tortured Iraqis who had helped the Cable News Network over the years. Jordan made his comments in an op-ed piece in the New York Times last week, two days after the fall of Baghdad. He revealed on his own network Thursday night that other CNN staffers were targeted by the Iraqi government, in particular by Saddam Hussein's information minister.

EASON JORDAN: I had a meeting in December with Minister Sahaf, and during that meeting, I asked for his permission to send a CNN team to northern Iraq, which is actually Kurd-controlled territory. When I asked him this question, he bristled and said, "Mr. Jordan, if you send a CNN team there, the severest possible consequences will come to them." When I said, "what does that mean?" He just snapped back. He said, "Don't you understand? The severest possible consequences." And to me it was clear he was talking about assassinating those journalists.

TERENCE SMITH: CNN's Baghdad coverage has been largely spearheaded by Jordan for the last 12 years, as he has been the cable network's chief emissary to Iraq, making 13 trips to Baghdad to lobby the government to keep CNN's Baghdad bureau open and to arrange interviews with Iraqi leaders. In recent days, several opinion pieces have assailed Jordan for not revealing what he knew about the threats much earlier. Rush Limbaugh took him to task on his web site, and CNN's rival, the Fox News Channel, carried extensive commentary on the story.

CHARLES KRAUTHAMMER, Syndicated Columnist: (Fox News Channel) It's a classic example of selling your soul for the story. He clearly gave up truth for access.

TERENCE SMITH: Yesterday, responding to critics, Jordan sent a memo to his staff defending his actions: "CNN kept pushing for access in Iraq, while never compromising its journalistic standards in doing so. Withholding information that would get innocent people killed was the right thing to do, not a journalistic sin."

TERENCE SMITH: And Eason Jordan joins us now, along with Franklin Foer, associate editor of the New Republic. Welcome to you both.

Franklin Foer, you wrote the op-ed page piece in the Wall Street Journal entitled "CNN's Access of Evil." Tell us what you meant by that and what your complaint is about the way CNN handled its Baghdad

situation.

## **Gaining access to Iraq**

FRANKLIN FOER: Right. Well it was certainly startling to hear Eason Jordan's admission that CNN had sat on some pretty major stories, stories of torture, murder, assassination plots, but I argued that this was merely symptomatic of a larger problem that western media has in covering dictatorships.

In a place like Iraq in order to get your cameras in central locales, in order to get your reporters on the ground, you need to make incredible compromises to the government. You need to subject yourself to constant surveillance by government minders who... you need to negotiate with the information ministry to even obtain permission to shoot your camera at a specific angle.

And I would argue that the consequences of these compromises that they made far outweighed any sort of journalistic truth that they were able to haul out of Baghdad. And, in the end, CNN didn't do much more than merely mouth the propaganda that Saddam Hussein wanted to get into western ears and eyes.

TERENCE SMITH: Eason Jordan, did you feel you had to make incredible compromises, to use Mr. Foer's words?

EASON JORDAN: Well, I felt like Iraq was certainly a very tough place to work. We had a tough, tough time there. The meetings I had in Baghdad were very contentious, oftentimes involving yelling between Iraqi officials and myself. It was a very difficult place to be as are a number of countries around the world but I think none more difficult than Iraq. I think it's clear -- the record is clear -- CNN had a very, very contentious relationship with the Iraqi regime.

CNN had more correspondents thrown out of Iraq, more correspondents banned from Iraq due to our reporting than any news organization in the world, and our one and only ever Baghdad bureau chief, Jane Arraf, was thrown out for reporting on a human rights story in Baghdad. So I felt like it was important for us to be there. And on the whole we have to look at the reporting not only from Iraq but from everywhere. When it comes to Iraq, CNN reported on the brutality of the regime a lot and CNN reported a great deal on human rights violations in Iraq.

## **Compromising journalistic standards?**

TERENCE SMITH: Franklin Foer, you're arguing essentially that CNN pulled its punches in order to maintain its....

FRANKLIN FOER: That's right. I can't disagree with Mr. Jordan that there were times in which CNN ran some tough pieces on the Iraqi regime but at very important moments when Saddam Hussein and the Iraqi information ministry put their propaganda machine in motion, that understanding of the evils of the Ba'athist regime in Iraq disappeared.

TERENCE SMITH: Give me an example.

FRANKLIN FOER: Well, one I think great example is the presidential election that Saddam Hussein held last October. This was obviously a sham event. Nobody could have reasonably gone in and tried to report this story in an honest... as an important meaningful litmus test of public opinion.

Nevertheless, when CNN did its feeds from Baghdad covering this election, they treated this vote as if it were a meaningful gauge of where the Iraqi public's mind was at. Their correspondent in Baghdad said this was a vote of defiance against the United States and that this was somehow indicative of the overwhelming amount of support that Saddam had from his people. And, obviously based on what we've learned in the last week, that was not the case.

TERENCE SMITH: Mr. Jordan?

EASON JORDAN: I take issue with that. I have with me a transcript of a report from our Baghdad bureau chief, Jane Arraf. This is on the day of the vote, October 15, this referendum. And it was a sham.

But here's what Jane Arraf said on CNN: "With the outcome already known there are no illusions that this is an authentic vote," meaning it's not, "with consequences for anyone voting no there is only one acceptable answer to the question on this ballot: Do you support President Saddam Hussein as the president of the republic of Iraq?" She put that in proper context. Nobody in the world thought this election was on the up-and-up. And people in Iraq had no choice but to vote the way they did. And she said just that.

FRANKLIN FOER: Terry, can I intervene? There were rare moments when Arraf made this admission, this concession that this was a sham, but she was doing stand-ups all day long on CNN. And if you go back and you read the transcripts of nine out of ten of these, you won't find that admission there.

And this is typical of the problem with CNN's coverage and again the problem isn't just - doesn't just lie with CNN; it lies with other American television networks as well. The problem is, is that they will occasionally mention that they have minders who are following them.

And they will occasionally mention that it's impossible to give an interview and to have an unauthorized interview with an Iraqi. But these are not admissions. These are not warnings, caveats that are placed in front of every broadcast. And I just don't think it's possible to be a good consumer of their Baghdad feeds without those caveats there all the time.

## Getting the story

TERENCE SMITH: All right. Eason Jordan, Mr. Foer and others have argued that you actually had an alternative when it came to the intimidation of your people -- there in Iraq, namely, you could have pulled them out -- the most vulnerable among them -- and gone ahead and reported on Iraq from outside the country without having to make any compromises. Was that, in fact, a viable alternative to you?

EASON JORDAN: Not at all. Not an option at all, Terry. These are Iraqi people. They live in Iraq. Their families live in Iraq. Their friends live in Iraq. First, in many cases, even if they wanted to leave, they couldn't. And in other cases where actually there were some Iraqis who wanted to leave they didn't have the

choice. The Iraqi government would have to authorize it and the Iraqi government would not allow it.

TERENCE SMITH: Now, you say --

FRANKLIN FOER: Can I just answer that?

TERENCE SMITH: Yes.

FRANKLIN FOER: That answers the specific stories that -- the specific incidents that Mr. Jordan mentions in his op-ed, but I think that there's a larger problem, that these people were at threat constantly no matter what story that they were reporting on. And so I think that it would have been possible for CNN to pull out of Baghdad without any of its correspondents or aides getting killed. So, I don't think that really answers the larger critique.

TERENCE SMITH: Mr. Jordan -

EASON JORDAN: Terry, if I could just say, if CNN hadn't been in Baghdad to report on this protest outside the information ministry that ended up getting our Baghdad bureau chief thrown out, that's a story that would never have been told on CNN so not being there was not the answer in that case.

FRANKLIN FOER: Why wouldn't it have been told on CNN? CNN could have gotten people to testify to that demonstration after the fact. It doesn't seem to me the necessity of being in Baghdad means that you would miss out on all these great stories.

EASON JORDAN: Well, because, Franklin, there were news organizations that did censor themselves. There were TV news organizations that videotaped that demonstration, and they were so fearful of the repercussions of the consequences for sharing those pictures with the world they never transmitted them to the world. So if it hadn't been for CNN being there, we never would have had those pictures; we never would have had that story.

## **CNN's responsibility to protect its journalists**

TERENCE SMITH: Eason Jordan, isn't it a fact that access is crucial for a network like yours?

EASON JORDAN: Well it's important. We're not there for pictures. We're there for reporting. If we want pictures, we can get pictures from any number of sources in most cases..

TERENCE SMITH: Well, Mr. Foer, doesn't a network such as CNN have a very serious responsibility to do everything to protect its people?

FRANKLIN FOER: Absolutely. I think the best way they could have protected their people was to pack up their Baghdad office and move out and try to do hard-hitting reporting from places like Kurdistan and Jordan and Washington and London, where there were lots of Iraqis who had fled the regime who could tell

you exactly what was happening there.

TERENCE SMITH: Eason Jordan, are there other countries where you face this problem right now? Are there situations -

EASON JORDAN: No, nothing like this. Of course there are other countries where it's tough to operate but nothing on this scale, Terry. And if I could just respond to what Terry said about Kurdistan, for example.

The minister of information of Iraq this fellow, Sahaf, who gained quite a bit of fame, notoriety over the last few days, he said that he would assassinate our people if we sent them to northern Iraq and if CNN was looking to cower or kowtow to the Iraqi government, we would not have sent people to northern Iraq but we did it again and again and again. And that government in Baghdad tried to kill our people in northern Iraq. And, we stood up to it and we went there and told those stories anyway.

FRANKLIN FOER: But you went and asked his permission to go to northern Iraq anyways, which I don't think that you needed to do. The New Yorker Magazine, to take an example, was able to end its correspondent, Jon Lee Anderson, into Baghdad even though their reporter Jeffrey Goldberg had done some exquisite reporting out of Kurdistan.

TERENCE SMITH: Eason Jordan.

EASON JORDAN: We had people in both northern Iraq and in Baghdad. We didn't pull any punches and get into northern Iraq. We did it under the threat of death. And we had people come forward later and confess on videotape that they tried to kill our people in northern Iraq, but we were there anyway. We were courageous in doing so. I'm proud of my people on the ground. And they told important stories from Halabja and other places that were very critical and very damning as far as the regime in Baghdad was concerned.

TERENCE SMITH: All right. That will have to be the last word. Thank you both, Eason Jordan, Mr. Foer, thank you both.

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