

CNN Gives U.S., World Viewers Pictures That Are Often Different

By Joe Flint, Charles Goldsmith and Gabriel Kahn

The daily 9:30 a.m. EDT conference call among the top executives of CNN International in London, Hong Kong and Atlanta couldn't have been better timed on Wednesday. Dramatic pictures of a rope being slung over the head of a statue of Saddam Hussein were pouring in.

But Chris Cramer, the president of CNNI Networks, was also keen on another image that had just come in via the Al-Arabiya television network. "This is what I wanted to get on the screen," he said in Atlanta as shots of Iraqi hospital casualties appeared in a quarter of the CNNI screen through split-screen technology. "It's important that we get the comparison and contrast."

The split screen on CNNI -- which is comprised of several services reaching more than 170 million households in more than 200 countries -- didn't make it onto CNN's U.S. network. The domestic service stuck, instead, to a full-screen shot of the street scene in Baghdad. But then, non-U. S. viewers of CNN have seen scant reportage in the past week of two stories that have captivated U.S. viewers: the rescue of prisoner Jessica Lynch and the death of NBC reporter David Bloom.

War in Iraq has highlighted the differences between the U.S. and international channels of CNN, a unit of AOL Time Warner Inc. During the Gulf War in 1991, the network presented a uniform global feed that showed the war largely through American eyes. Since then, CNN has developed several overseas networks that increasingly cater their programming to regional audiences and advertisers.

As a result, viewers outside the U.S. now see a far more global view of the current conflict, often anchored from Kuwait and London by Britons, Australians and other nationalities -- and frequently reflecting the opposition toward American policy felt by much of the world.

"Different publics have different urgent questions they want answered by news," says Jay Rosen, chairman of New York University's journalism department. "I don't think of journalism as a universal practice."

Along with a greater emphasis on the casualties of war on CNN International (including frequent interviews with aid agencies on the "dire situation" at Iraqi hospitals), there is also more coverage of how Arab nations view both the war in Iraq and broader Middle East issues -- particularly the conflict between Israelis and Palestinians. In the past few weeks, CNNI usually covered live from start to finish the news conferences held by the likes of the Iraqi information minister, while the U.S. CNN showed only excerpts.

There was also far more extensive coverage on CNNI of the bitter diplomatic wrangling in Europe among Britain, France, Germany and Russia.

Even the CNN Web sites vary. Thursday, CNN's U.S. site had a big picture of Iraqis defacing a mural of Saddam Hussein, while the CNN Europe site had a picture of a distraught Iraqi being comforted.

"Viewers see and use CNN differently overseas. They don't want to feel that they are getting a classically American sound and presentation," says Frank Sesno, a former CNN Washington bureau chief who is now a professor of public policy and communications at George Mason University.

Specifically, the gore of war is less likely to pop up in the U.S. than it is abroad. CNNI showed far more of Al-Jazeera's footage of U.S. prisoners of war being interrogated than the

U.S. CNN did. "All the American channels are less bloody than most European, Asian and Arabic channels," says Mr. Sesno.

Rather than politics, the difference in approach between CNNI and the U.S. CNN reflects the practical and commercial need to cater to different audiences, says Mr. Cramer, a Briton who spent 26 years with the British Broadcasting Corp. CNNI has four major international outlets: Asia-Pacific, Europe and the Middle East, Latin America, and South Asia.

CNNI tailors the services to their respective markets, although it has mostly run a single global feed during the conflict in Iraq. CNN also operates several non-English language networks, including CNNTurk and CNNEspanol.

"Expatriate Americans are only 1.5% of our audience," Mr. Cramer says of CNN International. "The other 98.5% of our audience around the world require us to be relevant to their lives.

Like the U.S. CNN, CNNI relies heavily on print reporters to provide perspectives on policy. But the foreign journalists' views are often at odds with the U.S. perspective. A frequent guest, for example, is the editor of an Arabic-language newspaper based in London.

Thursday morning, CNNI displayed excerpts from an article in the French left-wing newspaper Liberation that read, "The successful military campaign in Iraq can only reassure the powerful U.S. that its vision of the world must be the right one. But its pretext for invading Iraq is being proved wrong. For where are the weapons of mass destruction"

Even the staff of CNN's overseas operations look and sound different. They "project a deliberately international face," Mr. Sesno says. If the international operations were staffed with Americans, the perception might be that the service was nothing more than another Voice of America outlet.

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