

Business Television without Qualities – An Arabian Experiment by Afshin Rattansi

“Thought about the world’s political situation...The coming epoch in cultural history. China’s possible rôle. On a smaller scale, the quarrel between Russia and the West...Even the man without qualities can’t ignore it.”

Robert Musil¹

I - Business on Television

Most of the world’s television journalists paid little attention to demonstrations that marked meetings of America’s National Association of Broadcasters (NAB) back in the mid-1990s. Yet it was the NAB’s success in fostering the revolutionary 1996 Telecommunications Act that paved the way for a round of dramatic media mergers, the impact of which was swift, international, and all-pervasive. By early 2000 Gerald Levin, chief executive of AOL-Time Warner, was telling CNN that he believed the media business would soon be more important than government or education. One does not have to go along wholly with Levin to appreciate just how critical a rôle TV news plays in our lives on earth. But what is sometimes neglected amidst analyses of the ideologies of international news reporting is the actual condition of the coal-face at which television journalists now work.

First, though, it is worth considering the audience. Recent research has questioned the notion of a ‘global village’ settling down *en masse* to watch televised news events such as the Gulf War, or the USSR coup of 1991. But then the thesis that most viewers prefer local news at the expense of international coverage is also highly disputable. American network MSNBC reaches household numbers that nudge CNN’s 77 million, and likes to attribute this success to a widespread public desire for the ‘local’. However, CNN International, broadcast outside America, is estimated to reach between 150-160 million households (and there are still no reliable estimates as to its reach in huge markets such as Africa and China). As for Western national networks, the jury is still out on whether viewing figures for news merely reflect scheduling decisions rather than public indifference to events occurring on the other side of the world. *Business* news reporting, however, is a very different case. It can never afford to be parochial because, as has been the case since the dawn of the age of capital, metropolitan exchanges are where the big bets are. The advent of a new form of monopoly capitalism means that business news must, by necessity, concentrate on the major exchanges where transnational shares—and those of governments, pension funds, and insurance companies—are traded.

The growth of investment in business television has its roots in new technologies, and in the downsizing of foreign newsgathering. Having slashed funding for foreign bureaux², news channels around the world now depend on no more than a handful of sources for their visual material. Three television news agencies (America’s Associated Press, Britain’s Reuters, and Agence France) provide about 80 per cent of the world’s

¹ Robert Musil, ‘From The Posthumous Papers’, *The Man Without Qualities*, tr. Burton Pike, 1 ed., vol. 2 (1952,1978; London: Picador, 1995) p.1769.

² For example, CBS has closed down its bureaux in Paris, Frankfurt, Cairo, Rome, Johannesburg, Nairobi, Beirut and Nicosia

news pictures³. Both Reuters and AP offer their customers standard scripts and, increasingly, ready-made packages for broadcast. Stuck with the same pictures and the same words as their competitors, TV news organisations have sought to develop distinctive brand images by casting celebrity anchorpersons, and investing in onscreen graphic design. Any expansion of news content had to be cheap; and business television happened to fit this bill. Moreover, at the turn of the last century came a decisive moment that dramatically raised the interest of both the public and of TV executives in corporate news. The uprising outside the 1999 World Trade Organisation meeting in Seattle served to stimulate increased business coverage, as the buzzword of 'globalisation' echoed everywhere from Wall Street to sweatshops in developing nations. Nor was it lost on the next hosts of the meeting of the WTO, IMF and World Bank – the oil-rich Gulf of Arabia, arguably the most strategically important region on earth.

Business news also catered to another emerging phenomenon: that of investors seeking profits from the growth in information gathering and distribution over the Internet. In the mid-1990s the Internet expanded swiftly, from a tool that the European Union once hoped to control by means of a surveillance system⁴, to a central plank of corporate strategy. Developing nations were by no means immune to the appeal of the web. As may be expected from a region that predominantly invests outside itself⁵, Gulf countries have invested heavily in the NASDAQ. The Saudi Prince Alwaleed bin Talal is reputed to have lost hundreds of millions in a portfolio including Apple, Xerox, AT&T, America Online, eBay and Amazon.com.

By the time that business television was covering what is euphemistically called the 'market correction' in dot-com stocks, the Internet's ability to offer radically diverse new global perspectives was already in question. Rather, it seemed chiefly to provide gossip for the elite classes, later to be picked up by mainstream media (as was revealingly the case with The Drudge Report website during the Monica Lewinsky affair). In time, deep pockets and subsidiary telephone and ISP companies came to hold the reins of media power on the Internet, with the world's media giants quite prepared to absorb hits of \$300m or more in their attempts to dominate information on the web. The influx of capital duly attenuated the Internet's potential as a popular medium for diverse opinion, and the alliance of ISPs to portal sites led to a drastic shrinkage in the number of media players. Far from warning the public about this new hybrid of the Dutch tulip-mania, the Internet was unable even to inform its audience accurately on the issue of its own profitability. Business pundits and journalists surely look back in shame at their analyses of dot-com flotations before the inevitable and massive losses on the NASDAQ between September 2000 and March 2001. It made for good television, though; and it helped to further news organisation expenditure on business coverage.

Corporate executives were quick to understand business television as yet another strategic marketing tool, training their chief economists in make-up techniques and building in-house studios to dominate the news agenda. Lately, business reports have dwelt upon indications of a looming recession and the collapse of confidence in the

³ Lotfi Maherzi, *The media and the challenges of the new technologies*, diss., (Paris: UNESCO, 1997)

⁴ See Cyber-Rights & Cyber-Liberties (UK), "Echelon Watch," at <http://www.cyber-rights.org/interception/echelon/>

⁵ Total overseas investment of the Gulf's richest economy, Saudi Arabia, is estimated to be between \$600bn-\$700bn⁵ with a net outflow from Gulf Co-operation countries of around \$40bn a year.

earning potential of tech stocks. It should not be overlooked that the price of stocks is critical to those companies seeking to reduce their operating costs through a strategy of mega-mergers. Coincident with the present 'talking down' of the market by journalists and pundits are ongoing merger-talks in many business sectors. For instance, the drop in 'market sentiment' for technology stocks has aided Rupert Murdoch's efforts to take over General Motors' strategic broadcasting company DirecTV—America's self-claimed number one digital satellite entertainment service, with some 225 channels.

Clearly one can question the assumptions of economics journalists about the importance of money supply indicators or the relation of GDP statistics to the sum of national happiness. But few would disagree that the Dow Jones index reflects demand for stocks in blue-chip companies; and no government seeking re-election could persuade a business editor to conceal a collapse in the Dow. Business news has not failed to alert its audience to economic downturns; but the manner in which it has been demarcated and ghettoised from main news reporting has created a kind of incoherence that assists the efforts of governments to blur differences between private and public, corporate and civic. The disarray is particularly notable in wartime. Amidst the mounting tales of human suffering in the NATO war against Yugoslavia, it was not thought prudent to report skyrocketing equity prices of German construction firms. Even if a war makes sound business sense, editors have hitherto been loath to commission business reports from correspondents in flak jackets. Pre-Seattle, they were far keener to belittle the importance of financial stories and treat business television as if it were of no more consequence than sports coverage (with its equivalent emphasis on flashy graphics and very rich people).

A typical example of how business news is unwittingly used to obscure the structures that shape world events was provided by a recent edition of the BBC's *Newsnight* (April 30 2001), covering the adoption of the US dollar by the Guatemalan government. A report by economics editor Evan Davis offered a faux-humorous account of the insignificance of the Guatemalan economy. Mentioned nowhere was the background to Guatemala's decision to abandon sovereignty over its economy to the US, having been destabilised down the years by US Government agencies at the cost of hundreds of thousands of dead and a million displaced. In Guatemala as elsewhere, the US transformed the 'liberated' Central American states into dependent banana republics, and turned to far more brutal overt repression during the Cold War, crippling economies, and deeply damaging entire societies. But the process of 'dollarisation', perhaps the final act in that tragic drama, was described to viewers by Davis with little more than a wry smile.

A glance at the website of Fairness In Accuracy and Reporting⁶ shows the routine avoidance of critical information by journalists when covering news in the US media. Most often, this is a case of journalists narrowly conceiving of their mission in terms of prevailing canons of accuracy and impartiality, rather than any ethics of responsibility and conviction. Things have gone from bad to worse in the half century since C. Wright Mills pointed out that the mass media has 'helped less to enlarge and animate the discussions of primary publics than to transform them into a set of media markets in

⁶ <http://www.fair.org>

mass-like society...on closer view they seem to compete more in terms of variation on a few standardised themes than of clashing issues.'⁷ Censorship does not always have to be imposed from above (as in the case of much UK reporting of the activities of biotechnology company Monsanto). A Western framework of journalistic ethics guarantees it. After its disastrous coverage in the run-up to the Southeast Asian crisis of 1997⁸, business television journalism proceeded to fail its audiences a second time. The dot-com bubble served to demonstrate not only that many journalists were bigoted in speaking of 'Asian Flu', but that they and their controlling companies were at the eye of an international conflict-of-interest hurricane.

II - The Arabian Context

If the transformation of paupers into dot-com millionaires seemed miraculous and dominated the conversation of would-be investors on Wall Street much of 2000, two news stories dominated mainstream news in an otherwise heterogeneous Arab World during the same period. Palestine and Iraq constitute horrifying examples of the power of the West to nurture murder and destruction in a locus of imagination stretching from the Atlantic coast of Morocco to the Indian Ocean. Much has been written about the pressure exerted on American reporters covering the continuous annexation of occupied Palestine. As for Iraq, we can't know how many artefacts from Babylon and Mosul (Nineveh) are presently being destroyed by British bombers and looters in a land hit by sanctions that kill between seven and nine children every minute⁹. The US and Britain have dropped 400 tons of bombs and missiles on Iraq since 1999.¹⁰ While UNESCO's pleas go unheeded by the UN Security Council and the Abbasid palace loses its history, Internet cafés are becoming increasingly popular in Baghdad. The germination of the world-wide-web ticks in time with the annihilation of the sites where humans first learnt to write. For that reason I would like to take the British Museum as my point of departure in describing how I came to play a part in the creation of the developing world's first global financial television channel, broadcasting from the Gulf of Arabia's business hub of Dubai.

In 1990, when Britain was a strong ally of the then US-backed regime of Saddam Hussein, I helped to make a Bandung Productions documentary for Channel 4 based on Samir Al-Khalil's book, *The Republic of Fear*¹¹. Al-Khalil naturally drew attention to the Nineveh rooms of the British Museum, which illustrated his general thesis about the functions of monumental art, and in particular the manner by which Saddam Hussein's cultural alliance with architectural firms like Ove Arup mixed a dangerous cocktail in the style of Albert Speer. Today, parties of schoolchildren who come and go through the

⁷ C. Wright Mills, "The Mass Society," *The Power Elite*, (Oxford Press, 1956)

⁸ One of the few who has consistently predicted and analysed twists in the global economy is Walden Bello whose organisation, Focus on the Global South, is perhaps the best resource for business journalists trying to decode developments on the Reuters news-wire about Asia's erstwhile tiger economies.

Walden Bello, "Asian Financial Crisis: The Movie," *Focus on The Global South* (1998)

⁹ UNICEF, "Report on Iraq," (1996)

¹⁰ Tariq Ali, "Blair's Deadly Double Standard: New Labour New Bombs," *Counterpunch* February 27th, 2001

¹¹ Kanan Makiya neé Samir Al-Khalil, *Republic of Fear: The Politics of Modern Iraq*, Updated ed., (University of California Press, June 1998)

Ashurnasirpal II galleries are scarcely aware that the British taxpayer is subsidising the archaeological defoliation of modern Iraq. While the rich of the West recently mourned the controlled explosions of Buddhist treasures in Taliban-governed Afghanistan, managing editors were dropping any mention of the almost-daily attacks on Iraq; and AOL-Time Warner's CNN was already planning a budget review of their Iraq 'office' (US sanctions are said to dictate that it not be called a 'bureau') in the heart of America's main theatre of military operations.

From Basra it takes a 48-hour ferry ride down the Gulf to reach Dubai, one of the seven groupings that make up the United Arab Emirates. Recently, archaeologists found 7000 year-old tools in the course of the digging for a new Abu Dhabi international airport. But a rich past is what one should expect of the region, given that for most of world history trade through the Indian Ocean has dominated world business¹². One Chinese government official explained to me that the reason for siting their permanent electronic tools exhibition in Sharjah emirate was that links between China and Sharjah harbour extend more than two millennia—a grim reminder of Orientalist historiography's capacity to privilege business-history in the Mediterranean over that in the Indian Ocean.

The recent past of Dubai is very recent indeed. Independence from the UK in 1971 followed the success of trade in Japanese cultured pearls which, together with a drying up of Gulf oyster-beds, put an end to that local industry. But you can still meet taxi drivers from South India, navigating through Dubai's SimCity urban planning, who were once pearl fishers. And just like elderly nationals, they store plenty of oral history about what conditions were like in the early 1970s. Immigration has always been at the heart of bustling business in the Gulf. A helpful comparison may be made with the boom in trade that enriched Italy during the Renaissance. However, whilst religion may have been a subordinate consideration to artists who painted in Venetian courts one day and Constantinople another,¹³ religion is a powerful force in 21st century Arabia. Subaltern traders and executives alike are united by faith, one that offers many believers a *gestalt* framework for understanding news, whether from Bosnia, Iraq or Chechnya.

The so-called 'dual containment' policies of superpowers have caused nearly as much havoc in the world's main oil-producing areas as did divide-and-rule in colonial Africa. Those policies have centred on the cleaving of the shared futures of oil-giants Iraq and Iran. But in consequence, the chilling figures of infant mortality in Iraq have had a unifying effect on the Muslim world, from the Atlantic to the Pacific. If Islam has as many sub-faiths as any great religion, what today unites Shia and Sunni, Gulf Islam and Taliban Islam, is anti-Americanism. The scale of US involvement in the Gulf is staggering, and forms a useful corrective for those who make 'corruption' almost wholly responsible for poor progress in the intended unification of Arab concerns. Anti-Americanism has been the consequence of 20,000 US troops 'ensuring peace' at a cost of around \$50bn a year, and this US response to its increasing reliance on oil from the Gulf may one day be seen as a gross mistake. The 1990s saw a new age in regional policy-making in the Gulf with the *de facto* Saudi leadership of Crown Prince Abdallah bin

¹² K. N. Chaudhuri, Trade and Civilisation in the Indian Ocean: An Economic History from the Rise of Islam to 1750. (London: Cambridge University Press, 1985)

¹³ Lisa Jardine, Worldly Goods: A New History of the Renaissance, 2 ed., (1996; London: Papermac, 1997) 27-30.

Abd al-Aziz since 1995 heralding a warming of relations between Saudi Arabia and Iran. As the U.S. seems unwilling to get rid of Saddam or support anyone with any chance of toppling him, local arrangements have had to be made.¹⁴

The Gulf of Arabia, as it is called in Gulf Co-operation Council States, or 'The Persian Gulf', as it is in Iran and America, is a place controlled by geology. Any battle of modes of historiography here will be won by the anti-Marxist *Annales* School. A latter day Fernand Braudel could puzzle out power structures in the Gulf much more easily than in the Mediterranean: for without oil, all power relations in the GCC would be different.

Gabriel Garcia Marquez argued for the soap opera rather than the novel as the medium to reach so-called 'underclasses' in aerial-covered shacks from Bogota to Mexico City. I would argue of the potential for news to take the world hostage, from shacks to skyscrapers. That is what Ted Turner managed in 1991 once the Gulf provided CNN with a stage. For Arab leaders, there were complex problems to be solved after Yasser Arafat sided squarely with Saddam's Iraq against Kuwait; not least the fact that their populations were not keen to pursue a US-backed war. The national television stations in the Gulf, no less than those in the UK in wartime, are not meant to question national foreign policy too closely. In this way, on-the-spot bombing coverage came to be seen as the truth, and the satellite dish turned into a tool of dissent.

What was once an 'empty quarter' for television became awash with dishes, inducing analysts to speculate on the profound cultural and political ramifications for the Middle East. By the late 1990s (once the BBC was kicked off Saudi Arabia's Orbit satellite system in suspicious circumstances), the Qatari station Al-Jazeera had beaten two other groundbreaking networks, ANN and MBC, to become the pre-eminent news channel of the Arab world. A thirst for information outside national government control, together with a Qatari economy strengthened by new finds of natural gas, secured the foreseeable future of the station. It remains continually at odds with governments and subject to harassment.¹⁵ But Saudi companies competing for advertising space found themselves sponsoring politically controversial talk-shows such as *Al-Ittijah al-Muakis* (*The Opposite Direction*). It is still too early to forecast the social shifts that might accompany widespread viewing of news that doesn't harmonise with government information frameworks. The station's management and journalists are to be applauded for their obviously deep understanding of what axes are being ground by which sources. Some commentators have gone as far as casting the Al-Aqsa intifada as the Arab world's first 'television war', much as Vietnam was America's, with the work of Al-Jazeera

¹⁴ For fears from an Israeli perspective of a new unity in the Gulf see :

Joshua Teitelbaum, "The Gulf States and the End of Dual Containment," Middle East Review of International Affairs Vol. 2 Number 3 (September 1998)

and for a completely opposite view that suggests an "integration" of the US and GCC economies is in the offing see:

Stephen Hubbell, "The Containment Myth: US-Middle East Policy in Theory and Practice," Middle East Report (Fall 1998)

¹⁵ On October 26th, Egyptian Minister of Information, Safwat al-Sharif, threatened to close down Al-Jazeera's base in Cairo after broadcasts during the Al-Aqsa intifada. He is thought to have reconsidered because of the impact the decision would have had on the credibility of Egypt's Media Free Zone initiative.

helping to create a regional movement from local protests in Jerusalem.¹⁶ It was against this broadcasting landscape that the new Business Channel in Dubai was born.

III - The Coal-face

I was appointed Business Editor for the new channel in 1999, and I considered the idea of setting up a new global business news service to be a particularly exciting prospect. After the UK Labour Party's return to office in 1997, it soon became obvious that press secretaries such as Charlie Whelan would make active attempts to knobble BBC business coverage, which New Labour were bound to regard as a sensitive issue, not least after the precedent of interest rate chaos during the Conservative Party's 'Black Wednesday' debacle.

But in Dubai I was soon struck by the odd similarities between the UK and the UAE when it comes to the modes of journalistic self-censorship. The smiles on the faces of journalists invited to parties at Buckingham Palace or Downing Street, or the summer palace of Dubai's Crown Prince, exemplify a set of conflicts with basic codes of ethics. In terms of the reporting of home news, I did get the sense that print journalists in the Gulf were continually trying to push the boundaries of a journalism acceptable to the authorities; and I daresay this is relatively rare in the supplement departments of newspapers in most developed nations. But in respect of television, home news in the Gulf is strictly controlled.

Faced with this predicament, I realised that a developing nation business channel would have to wrestle with a *quid pro quo*. Whilst we could broadcast about business in other countries without fear of Merrill Lynch PR or a White House press secretary breathing down our necks, I would have to defend my analysis of the Middle East peace process to the Palestinian project manager. Meanwhile our director, a UAE national, explained that he had little experience of television. But together these two accepted a remit document edited by myself, which was to form the basis of the new channel: one that would mark a radical departure from the conventions of business television in the West. Its overriding intent was almost real-time analysis of the interconnections of world business and the civic society of a developing nation. In practical terms, we¹⁷ dissected twelve core themes (see Fig.1) that would cover the totality of all business wire reports, newspaper stories and locally identified news.

The traditional approach to all television news revolves around the responsibilities of the 'output editor', tempered by his or her managing editors. A shift begins with an output editor receiving a 'handover' of stories to watch from the previous shift, a precis of the stories that Reuters and APTN will be following over the next twelve hours and the option of using pre-packaged reports relevant to that day's news. Financial news takes its lead from companies reporting results that day and which are being most bought and sold on the world's stock exchanges.

¹⁶ S. Abdallah Schleifer, "Egyptian Media Waxes and Wanes in its Attacks Against Al-Jazeera," Transnational Broadcasting Studies, American University in Cairo Number 5, Fall/Winter 2000

¹⁷ For the so-called Week 3 report I am indebted to the core channel team comprising ex-World In Action producer and Granada TV executive Michael Short and ex-BBC business producer, Nicola Baldwin.

In each case, the perspective of a news bulletin depends on the number of hours of broadcasting and the newsgathering potential of the broadcasting organisation. A longer bulletin will exhaust the available picture material from agencies such as Reuters and APTN, as stories are added to the running order that might not normally be seen important enough to find a place in a half hour programme.

The advent of 24-hour news, however, depleted reserves of daily pictures and stories from agencies. News-managers were faced with the option of either seeking funds to originate more stories, to rely more on pundits with fewer agendas¹⁸ or to combat the shortfall by repeating stories and bulletins. Rapidly, those networks that succeeded depended on their own corporate relationships for sourcing new and original stories. CNN International relies on its bigger brother, CNN domestic, Britain's ITN or even Time magazine. BBC World has BBC's terrestrial channels as well as BBC World Service Radio to enhance its coverage.

One problem with the traditional approach is that, at its best, it can only lead to an impoverished pick 'n' mix view of the day's events. The Business Channel's twelve themes were precisely devised as an aid to output editors to prevent bulletins from becoming a minimally-sourced series of disjointed stories. Whereas output editors at other networks might order their bulletins on an implicit template that favours news from say, the UK, or companies from California, we would not only try to emphasise the existence of the developing world, but also create programmes that were thematically linked. Using this template, we could limit the illusory chaos of news events that confront the viewers of other channels as well as promote the perspective of the developing world.

¹⁸ Statistical research on pundit-choice in the US can be found at FAIR—for instance: Michael Dolny, "What's in a Label - Right wing think tanks are often quoted, rarely labeled," Think Tank Monitor/FAIR (May 1998)

Figure 1:
The Twelve Issues

- i. 'Globalisation' - defined as the ambition for friction-free, borderless trade in capital, services, manufacturing and peoples. *Local: New UAE stock exchange, 'Cultural Globalisation', Privatisation of state-owned industries, Joint bank ventures, Intellectual property rights*
- ii. Energy - Global energy sustainability. *Local: Solar Energy Aramco project, OPEC talks, US pressure to curb oil price rises, Iraq.*
- iii. Water - Desertification, Wars for water. *Local: Agricultural self-sufficiency, Strategic geopolitical resources, The cost of infrastructural investment for growth. Travel and Tourism*
- iv. Arab Economic Unity - Islamic banking, Trade Delegations, Arab League Meetings, Defence industry, Transport policy.
- v. Privatisation - *Local : Telecoms, Arab stock markets, Crime, Healthcare provision, Housing projects, Urban planning.*
- vi. Information Technology - Long distance learning and working, the threat of Virii, Surveillance, Blockbuster films and television syndication, News organisations, newspapers, Cinemas, Sex and violence issues, advertising, corporate identity, fashion and changing attitudes to beauty, public architecture, art, literature and design.
- vii. Agriculture - Alternative Farming Methods, Health and Diet, Pesticides, GM Foods, Environmental impact, Import/Export, Labour, Food labelling,
- viii. The Markets - Macroeconomic indices, Federal Reserve, Corruption, Sentiment
Local : Overseas investment, Immunity from international crises.
- ix. Geopolitical Realignment - China, Russia and India.
- x. Hegemony - MAI, Arms trade, Interest Rates.
- xi. Europe - Prospects for the Euro.
- xii. Africa and Latin America - Wars because of debt, commodities and colonial history.
Local: UAE trade routes, Venezuelan presidency of OPEC.

Figure 2 illustrates how the 'twelve-themes' system worked in practice over a two month period in Spring 2000. It can be seen that the visits of travelling world leaders were often used to 'peg' analyses of the opportunities and dangers of investment potential around the world. In addition, there was almost constant coverage of the movements of individuals such as Alan Greenspan of the Federal Reserve, given the global reach of American interest rate policy. Another feature of this period was the daily reporting of the business backgrounds to violent conflict in Congo, Chechnya, Colombia, Indonesia, Palestine and by the US and Britain against Iraq. Picture material from international agencies was particularly lacking in Congo, Chechnya and Iraq, whereupon library footage was used for reports.

Figure 2:
Leading business stories selected in Spring 2000

Week 1: Prospects for EU-China trade deal before Senate vote/Gulf Management Excellence Forum/ EU bank job losses/EU iX Superbourse/ Joschka Fischer in India and the Bangalore renaissance/US policy in Africa policy and the business of the Ethiopia-Eritrea War/Rape seed genetic modification/ Intifada.

Week 2: Permanent Normal Trading Status for China/Military business budget for Colombia and the FARC's destruction of the Occidental-Shell pipeline/Falsification of Japanese GDP statistics/Interview: CEO, Emirates Bank International - Capital flight after the Gulf War/First Tuesday dot-com meeting Vs Arabian souk trade/ Profile: McKinsey&Co./New stock laws at Shenzhen and Shanghai exchanges/The Pullout from Lebanon.

Week 3: Differing trade agendas as President Clinton arrives in Lisbon for the EU summit Vs President Narayanan's team arrives in Beijing/Advanta seeds: maize contamination in Europe/The Sierra Leone diamond business—British troops arrive/Interview: Steve Forbes and the radical right/Interview: Orin Smith, president of Starbucks/Structural adjustment in Argentina/US Chamber of Commerce visit to Cuba/Gold prices up as Rupee falls.

Week 4: Syria's President Assad dies: regional implications/Interview: Patrick Sayle, Middle East specialist/Oryx share issue on London's Alternative Investment Market - The Congo war (2,600 dying each day) and the Israel connection./Latest oil implications of the war in Chechnya /China's Li Peng arrives in Belgrade/Proposals for a Latin American IMF/Latin America Survey: Fund management and US interference/President Putin in Germany /Prospects for the Korean summit/Visa+Mastercard credit card monopoly court case/Chen sui-bian election in Taiwan.

Week 5. Triple Witching: monthly expiry of US options/Corruption investigation at the World Bank/Latest from Chechnya-oil pipeline implications/Al Gore and Occidental Oil/William Cohen in Vietnam and volatility on Taiwan's exchanges/Russian exports to China as Albright brings Kissinger to bat for PNTR status for China/The Japanese recession - low inflation and the rising yen, consolidation at Asahi Bank/The biotech collapse/Malaysian responses to the Southeast Asian crisis: The Anwar case and capital flight/ Interview: Southeast Asian Ministers in Dubai/Zimbabwe-IMF policy/President Clinton in Pakistan: Business and joining the nuclear club.

Week 6. Auction of Chinese art in New York/Warming of relations between Taiwan and China/President Clinton in India /Chinese government investment in corporate global energy/Economic sanctions against Burma/Goldman Sachs controversy over Chinese privatisations/Islamic banking/Job discrimination cases in the US/First anniversary of the war in Europe/BP Amoco in China/Prospects for the the Tomsk-Beijing pipeline.

Week 7: 16m suffer the risk of famine/Taiwan defence contract leak/'Dubai Millennium' wins the richest horserace in the world/OPEC in Vienna/Transparency: Japanese exhibition in NYC, the Yamaichi bank scandal, the Microsoft anti-trust case, the Bloody Sunday inquiry, the latest bombing of Iraq/The rise of the Yen/Economic policy in Russia after the Putin victory/Andrzej Wajda wins at the Oscars/Pascal Lamy's EU negotiations in China/Chinese trade in UAE/Interview with China's Trade Minister.

Week 8: IMF-Russia talks/Pakistan's business deals with China, Iran and Indonesia/Microsoft shares fall by \$80bn on the antitrust verdict/Beginnings of a collapse in the NASDAQ/Japanese political-economic uncertainty/Dresdner-Deutsche bank merger failure/US U-turn on genetic code patenting/EU-Africa summit, Cairo/Lebanon water industry/Spyplanes to China/South Summit, Havana Declaration/The World Bank-IMF meetings in Washington DC-Asset Management boycott involving Salomon Smith Barney and Citigroup bonds/Trade and Industry secrets, interview: Stephen Byers, UK Trade Minister on Iraq/Rover/A3XX Airbus.

Once the pre-launch period was over, the director would call me almost every day to ask why our coverage was not more similar to that on CNN and Bloomberg. Eventually, our meetings would be held off the premises, as he believed his office to be under surveillance (a suspicion I had no evidence to support). He was most vocal over our coverage of a summit held in Dubai on the critical concern of 'desertification', in which we raised questions about the relation between corporate finance and environmental threats. By the summer, he stopped coming in to the channel altogether and, instead, I received weekday phonecalls offering guidance on how to access prominent government departments. Indeed, the channel soon gained a niche audience and secured interviews with the country's leaders—a sign of its acceptance. The more relaxed attitude of Dubai's government was in sharp contrast to how a Western government views an important strategic sector such as the media. (Just compare our director's professed lack of understanding of television with the sorts of highly politicised appointments made at the BBC.)

In our coverage of local news, the difficulty of strict government control had to be evaluated in context with the overwhelming condescension of Western television networks in their coverage of developing nations. I felt that any reporting of the Gulf within a Gulf country was liable to give a more accurate picture of news in the region than the bigoted and Orientalist reporting typical of many Western sources. On the night of the 1995 Oklahoma bombing, it was a salutary experience for me to have to explain to a BBC editor why it was hazardous to run speculation on 'extremist Islam' solely because a 'man with a beard' was caught running from the carnage. The prevalent attitude among many British expatriates in our newsroom, as elsewhere in Dubai, was one of pleasure in not paying tax, combined with one of loathing that Britain no longer ruled the waves. Younger Arab journalists, particularly women nationals from the UAE, were quick to understand the absurdity of using a single wire as a basis for a story and were rightly reluctant to copy the usual BBC World / CNN approach of merely *précis*-ing two or three such wires. However, older Arab journalists from Morocco or Jordan were uniformly Soviet in their style. In the end, they would become little more than glorified translators of the English material.

But the new channel's hardest task was to 'unlearn' the skills of recruits from Europe and America. The UK expatriates, as in many a Western newsroom, viewed television journalism as little more than the exercise of vocal chords and secretarial skills. Reduced budgets for newsgathering have created an entire Western television journalist class whose defiance of management is confined to reading verbatim wire

stories onto digital voice-tracks, as agency pictures are pasted onto video-tracks by editors. The result is that international TV news reports tend to differ from one another only in the nuances of the voices that deliver them. This must partly explain the sharp world-wide declines in news viewing figures. The power of APTN and Reuters, as those writing scripts for the leading wire agencies will confirm, is global and near-total.

Teaching journalism to our new recruits in the midst of the 1999 launch, let alone amidst the spin emanating from a ferocious war in the heart of Europe, proved a hard task for me. Amidst the daily propaganda battle, it was difficult to grasp the day-to-day situation, let alone the murky business background or recent history, such as the genocidal ambitions of NATO-backed Croatia. Some of our journalists, weaned out of the habit of amalgamating wires, simply resorted thereafter to replacing a view from Reuters with a view from a highly partisan magazine such as *Foreign Affairs*, and pasting it over the latest wire-pictures. Others on our team, suddenly freed from self-imposed Reuters and APTN bondage, adopted cynicism as an alternative approach. It may be no accident that H.L. Mencken, the guru of confrontational journalism, was a conservative. At first glance, the interviewing maxim of *Newsnight*'s Jeremy Paxman – echoing Mencken in asking himself, 'Why is this bastard lying to me?' – is a thoroughly commendable rough guide to the art. However, exchanging a total faith in a single source for a belief in nothing at all led not only to a loss of moral focus, but also to a predilection for seeing limitless and more mysterious powers at work. Some staff understood a news of interconnections to be a news of conspiracy, and some of the theories that went around our newsroom were fit to compete with the best of those brought to screen by Oliver Stone. If leeway for conspiracy theory could be forgiven in the case of the US airforce attack on China's embassy in Belgrade, surely a little time could be spent speculating on the death of John F. Kennedy Junior? In this way, original journalism came to be seen as something covert and exciting, even somehow unprofessional

There was fear, too – an often all-pervasive fear of getting into trouble, not with the government, but with public relations companies. One producer, who had worked at Financial Times Television, argued strenuously against the use of pictures of a polo-ground where procurers for the world's largest arms exhibition would be gathering after a hard day's dealing. The Gulf is the world's leading arms purchaser, Saudi Arabia alone buying US weapons systems worth \$36.4 billion between 1994 and 1997.¹⁹ Covering these US-bank-financed purchases was considered a step too close to engaging with some nebulous concept of a conspiratorial military-industrial complex. Business-journalism, by its very nature metropolitan and at the core of power-relations between people and peoples, was decreed to be an unfit place to investigate such connections. In this way, our early attempts to meet our self-appointed remit relapsed somewhat into the familiar procedures of interviewing CEOs and inserting graphics into video packages.

Business news shares attributes with 'generic' news: so conversations in the newsroom would occasionally turn to the questions of how much money could be earned from selling 'media training' to corporation executives, and how best to promote the

¹⁹ Tim Weiner, "Russia and France Gain on US Lead in Arms Sales, Study Says," "The New York Times August 4, 1998

products of our guests. Even though all these nefarious practices contravene recognised international codes of journalistic ethics, many in the 'business' will recognise this banter as being par for the course²⁰. (And yet in the UK, news control is arguably much worse, as seminal struggles have been doctored by journalists without any money changing hands. For instance BBC Radio's Nicholas Jones has admitted that during the 1984 Miners' Strike, stories that gave prominence to the position of the NUM were simply 'omitted, shortened or submerged into another report'.²¹)

The decision was made to output the station to air on five satellites from a barely organised gallery in November, 1999. When the day at last arrived to formally launch The Business Channel, the scenes were almost as farcical as those commemorated in anecdotes of CNN's loss-making years before the launch of its international service. Though none of our reporters' trousers caught fire (as during one celebrated early report on what was then known as the 'Chicken Noodle Network'), there was a fair degree of hysteria. Eventually, half-witted chains of command led to the commissioning of a 500-page inquiry into the practices of certain journalists. At best, this was symptomatic of the bad management going around. Instead of our sending a crew to the WTO meeting in Seattle, the Business Channel budget was diverted into travel programmes in an attempt to copy CNN's oft-repeated travel segments. Our funding was secure, and our little box-like office structure was filled with the latest Quantel editing equipment, and as such we were aware that the grind of routine office politics might prove a graver danger to the existence of the channel than the usual considerations about the freedom of the press.

Within our first month on air, the world was changing. The Seattle uprising was being imitated around the globe, from Buenos Aires to Washington DC, London to Prague, Davos to Seoul and Tokyo. Business television news, always on the lookout for 'exciting' pictures other than that of the closing toll of the Wall Street bell, had at last got ordinary people in its sights. And very soon VIP visitors to the Gulf were being introduced to the Business Channel's preferred style of questioning. US Secretary of State for Defence William Cohen frowned, and his minder panicked, over a question about growing ties between Russia, China and India. UK Trade secretary Stephen Byers, no doubt imagining he had escaped the Rover fiasco back home, found it difficult to answer questions about what similar mass action in South Korea might say for the international nature of the trade unions' case. On the subject of defence trade secrets, Jiang Zemin's deals with Israel, and how these were exercising minds in the Gulf, Byers simply looked dazed. He even risked patronising Dubai's Crown Prince by expressing surprise at the very existence of television cameras in the desert.

Some of Byers' colleagues resorted to stronger language before our cameras. The UK defence secretary Geoff Hoon offered a tirade of abuse against UAE policy on Iraq

²⁰ Andrew Kohut, "Self-Censorship, Counting The Ways," *Columbia Journalism Review* (May/June 2000) In a survey by the Pew Research Centre, nearly 25 percent "of the local and national journalists say they have purposely avoided newsworthy stories, while nearly as many acknowledge they have softened the tone of stories to benefit the interests of their news organisations." Forty-one percent "admit they have engaged in either or both of these practices." A key category of the unreported included "stories that could damage the news organisation's parent company, advertisers or friends."

²¹ Negrine R, *Politics and the Mass Media in Britain* (2nd edn.) p.66 London: Routledge (1994)

as he defended Tony Blair's policy of aerial bombardment. British minister Peter Hain²² derided John Pilger as Saddam's apologist before attacking France's position on Iraq²³. Gradually we began to meet our remit. Australian officials were questioned on East Timor, Malaysians on the connection of the Anwar case to currency controls, Venezuelans on a new global oil realignment under Hugo Chavez, World Bank economists on the disaster that was their Russian policy. Our guests included future US State Department advisers, talking about what really lay beneath the headlines on the world's business pages. All of this was the real stuff of The Business Channel. Dr. Klaus Schwab, in Dubai to invite the Crown Prince to the World Economic Forum in Switzerland, did not receive an easy ride over questions of development policy. Nor did Nelson Mandela. Our day-to-day news was revolutionised by the Internet as a judiciously-used research tool. Battles in Chechnya, Ethiopia, Eritrea and Democratic Republic of Congo could be set in their business context, all illustrated with Reuters and AP pictures – but with original scripts.

Still, despite our initial success, the project manager and some members of staff grew increasingly agitated over why our business news failed to resemble Bloomberg, the excellent up-to-the-minute news resource that supplies one niche market. If, by this definition, business news was about streams of numbers and executives talking coldly about reducing staff, then what were *we* doing? And yet the daily news itself, by now concerning the IMF/World Bank meeting in Prague and the tottering NASDAQ, was out of step with their desires to ape other business channels. Indeed, other channels began to delve into deeper issues about the impact of fast global transfers of currency. But despite our increasing volume of e-mails, journalists were feeling the strain and lacked the confidence to originate material day in and day out. The director now advised me that he saw the channel mainly as a public relations vehicle for different companies. The journalists, by now sensing petty management troubles, were as quickly won over to the Mephistopholean lure of shallow imitation as they had been to the idea of generating more original work.

Specific events at the Business Channel led to an inquiry and a cover-up resulting in varying financial settlements for the core team. In time, the director's orders to churn out agency material verbatim sat happily with the interest of some journalists in producing showreels that could win them positions at other networks. Their initial enthusiasm lost, they resorted once more to the Microsoft Windows cut-and-paste treatment of agency wires, like so many around the world. Whilst some among our network of correspondents continued to deliver original material, the independent remit finally perished.

²²Some months later, Hain emphasised with respect to television and its impact on the Gulf populace, "In the past it was possible to filter their access to what was happening, and therefore to an extent control their reaction. This is no longer the case." Peter Hain, FCO Minister of State, "Britain and the Gulf 2000," Royal Institute of International Affairs, Chatham House, November 7th, 2000.

²³ On the subject of Iraq, Peter Hain would later have to apologise for calling French policy on Iraq "contemptible" see Richard Beeston, "Hain apologises for calling Paris contemptible," The Times November 9th, 2000

IV - 'Non-ideological Liberalism'

It is interesting that the most famous Palestinian academic in the world has an abiding belief in the idea of 'disinterested intelligence.' As the Indian scholar Aijaz Ahmad has noted,²⁴ Edward Said reveres the work of Julien Benda, whose concept of impartiality has much in common with the ideals laid out in journalists' codes of ethics. For Benda, art was about art and not about taking sides; so Michelangelo, for instance, was making a big mistake when he tried to get Leonardo da Vinci to think a bit more about the plight of ordinary Florentines.²⁵ Ahmad attacks Said for simultaneously shedding light on the complex colonial structures at play in the West's cultural canon even as he erases the political ideologies of authors (such as Gramsci) whom he favours. At the core of the ethical paradigm within which most international news journalists find themselves working is the essentially Manichean view that there is either dogma or not-dogma, ideology or non-ideology. Wherever the notion of 'impartiality' comes from, it deserves closer scrutiny; but instead it remains a sacred obligation for journalists, like the Hippocratic oath for physicians. It is arguable as to whether there is another occupation wherein the quest for definitions and concepts is seen to be sacrilegious. There is, however, an exception to the impartiality rule for journalists.

Since The Business Channel enlisted its correspondents from across the Arab World, it was obvious that, like other Arab satellite news stations, we would not be broadcasting news of the situation in Palestine in the manner of the BBC or CNN. As millions in the region would agree, the reporting of events in Palestine has been the most distorted foreign news story for half a century. When the station, like all channels around the Muslim world, broadcast a trailer of pictures laid under a defiant soundtrack, it provoked sneering from one of our ex-BBC presenters. But most had been so appalled by coverage on the world's main networks that few thought to question our coverage's impartiality. For most, the Western habit of privileging statements made by Israeli spokesmen, while running down stories from the other side or reporting perfunctorily on the expansion of settlements in the occupied territories, was emblematic of Western hypocrisy when it came to impartiality. One can catch something of the strangeness of prevalent liberal orthodoxy from the timbre of Avishai Margalit in a recent edition of the *New York Review of Books*²⁶. He accepts that Israel controls 25,500 square kilometres of land to the 1,500 of the Palestinian 'bantustans'. And yet speaking of the outbreak of the Al-Aqsa intifada, he remarks that 'The Palestinians... wanted to extract all the sympathy they could get from press and television.'

Seemingly it is only in the course of violent conflicts that respected journalists can say they begin to feel moral urges to support one side or another. In business terms, the equivalent of an escorted TV pool journalist decrying Yugoslav nationhood at a mass grave would be akin to a reporter on Wall Street breaking down and supporting one company during a takeover – thousands of lives are at risk in both situations. In the aftermath of the horrifying pictures of the killing of 12-year-old Mohammed Al-Durrah

²⁴ Aijaz Ahmad, "Orientalism and After," *In Theory*, (London: Verso, 1992) p169.

²⁵ Julien Benda, *Treason of the Intellectuals*, Richard Aldington, (1928; Norton, 1969) 67.

²⁶ Avishai Margalit, "The Middle East: Snakes & Ladders," *The New York Review of Books* XLVIII, Number 8 (May 17th, 2001)

at his father's side in the Gaza Strip, the 45-year-old cameraman Talal Abu Rahma's eyewitness account was soon being trashed by pro-Israeli sources. In the newsroom in Dubai there was no doubt about the context of another killing. There was widespread belief that any wire promoting America as an 'honest peacebroker', whilst adding even more to the estimated \$85 billion²⁷ investment in setting up Israel, was not one to be cut and pasted.

Newsroom fervour at the partiality of other networks proved the maxim demonstrated by the history of war-reporting: only when face to face with casualties do journalists seem to feel they have moral responsibilities to explain cause and effect. Any dissent centred on general gossip about rampant corruption amongst the PLO leadership. When Hisham Mikki, head of Palestinian Broadcasting Corporation²⁸ and a man with whom we dealt over satellite feeds, was gunned down, experienced Palestinian journalists explained that endemic corruption had resulted from the earnings potential of supplying the world with pictures from the occupied territories. It was said that the smiles of the PLO's leader at negotiations in Maryland was certainly at odds with Israeli acts of terror reported by our correspondents. Corruption was seen as the reason why the PLO continued to talk in the middle of escalating Israeli terrorism. The fact that journalism in a flak jacket belongs outside international journalism guidelines illuminates the central problem with 'impartiality.'

Business journalism sits at the nexus of two historical trends in philosophy, that of the enlightenment and that of postmodernism. In this way it inherits all the bad-faith beliefs about impartiality²⁹ with its discounting of value-laden selectivity as well as an abiding faith in there being no such thing as progress. C.P. Scott's famous dictum 'Facts are sacred, comment is free,' came in the aftermath of a war rallied to by newspaper proprietors. A good many journalists would later think they had been duped into supporting a war that merely made money for elites. It is ironic that that belief in 'big' impartiality, originally set against corporate power, now serves to support it, but with the added efficiency of new technologies.

Both the quasi-religious value of 'impartiality' and the exhortation to its achievement have failed a greater part of humanity. Despite a growing literature on the subject, academic courses have not fostered newsroom debate on what is at stake in covering a story, though government education funding in the UK may play its part³⁰.

²⁷ Danny Schechter, "Middle East Media Biases: Which Side Am I On?," Media Channel (November 3rd, 2000)

²⁸ PBC was set up in 1994 when the Palestinian Authority was established and Israel handed over parts of the Gaza Strip and the West Bank city of Jericho to Palestinian rule

²⁹ The very idea of what is selected as 'news', let alone running orders or page layouts, gives the lie to impartiality, something that was put into great relief in the choice title for Britain's most recently established broadsheet, 'The Independent'.

³⁰ One of Britain's most successful journalism schools is at City University with a reputed 95% employment take-up. This success was coincident with a Quality Assessment Report on its Communications and Media Studies department that commented "while noting strengths in journalism assessments, the assessors found areas of uncertainty and inconsistency in all levels: in particular, they found it difficult to understand how marks were arrived at; what kind of feedback was given to students; and how the overall assessment strategy impacts on the student experience...In journalism, however, while

What is interesting is that the battles to start a new type of business channel in the Middle East were much the same as they would have been in Britain. As Susan George has noted, when it comes to the so-called 'Third World', the West relies on myth, propaganda and unswerving cruelty. The Arab world's new stations, even those that are privately owned and which reflect their proprietor's slants, will one day soon shock the world with their perspectives, thanks to the region's history and its strategic power. At the same time, the consolidation of media power in the West, along with its never-resolved journalistic issues about its own independence of prevailing power and security structures, may well presage ever-greater if unrecognised curbs on 'press freedom'. In this way, and like the protagonist in Robert Musil's novel, charting the run up to one of abstract individualism's worst hours, there are grave dangers of a Western journalism without qualities.

ENDS

(approximately 6560 words)

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there is a comprehensive course handbook, information to students on the content and teaching of individual units is variable and sometimes inconsistent."

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