

7 Humming ‘Que Sera Sera’

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JESUS!’ exclaimed Peter Arnett as the dull *whoomp* of an explosion sounded. Then, *whoomp*, again. Arnett was in the media centre at the Palestine Hotel in central Baghdad, waiting to deliver a report by satellite to someone called Eric.

I know, because he was near a live microphone that was somehow feeding through the German webcam I was watching over the Internet, late on the evening of April 7. I had watched the webcam before, seen cars and buses circling Firdus Square and smoke crowding the horizon, but it had never had sound before. I could hear horns honking from the traffic, then, at one point, the sirens of two fire engines as they rushed through.

‘I’m waiting for IFB,’ said Arnett to someone off-mic. ‘I’m waiting for IFB.’

I hooked up my minidisc recorder to the computer, hopeful that the controversial correspondent would pass the time by saying something out of order — perhaps a those-bastards-at-NBC rant.

But he didn’t. He hummed a tune. I’m pretty sure it was ‘Que Sera Sera’. He did his first piece, then hummed ‘Que Sera Sera’ again, then finished with a rap about how the media technology trained on this war was unprecedented, and how it was the job of him and other reporters to show and tell whether the US forces were conducting the fighting as they had promised, with due regard for civilian life.

And then he thanked everyone — the people at the destination broadcaster, his local crew — repeatedly. See you at this time tomorrow, he said.

An Italian TV reporter moved in range next. She talked a lot, and was possibly dissing her bosses, the war, the Iraqis, the Americans, her hotel staff, whatever. I couldn’t tell. Her cigarette lighter was almost empty — I could hear

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the wheel turn six or eight times in quick succession every time she lit up. She made the kind of noise people make to themselves when their lighters run out.

After the Italian reporter finished, the screen went black. When it came back, it wasn't the familiar picture of the plaza and the cars, but raw Reuters video, for a story about a Baghdad hospital.

A group of people pushed a gurney bearing a man with leg injuries across a courtyard and into a hospital. The video still had its incidental sound; a clatter of nervous, urgent, scared noises in the background. It struck me that we never see hospital pictures on our television without a booming voiceover steering the context. We see short, sharp edits, then it's onto the next item.

This part of the hospital was not overcrowded and seemed clean. The beds held men with fresh and grievous injuries; some apparently missing limbs, another with terribly burned hands. One man had an abdominal injury and his head forced back at an angle in some kind of neck brace. I couldn't see uniforms on any of them, but it was hard to tell.

The sound was the worst thing. Men, agitated, moaning in pain, some apparently delirious. It made it seem much more real and disturbing and I wondered who they were and whether their families knew they were in hospital. War correspondents see this all the time and presumably get used to it.

The shots for that item finished. The next batch were Baghdad street scenes, clearly from the same day. A woman in a traditional black gown was shouting something to two men, her hands raised. People milled at the side of the street, looking nervous and confused. A lot of people were armed: two teenagers stood, one of them clinging to what I took to be a grenade launcher. They weren't 'crack' Republican Guards, or Fedayeen 'death squads'. They just looked like folks, scared. Nobody should have to go through this, I thought.

The Reuters pictures were presumably widely screened over the next day; edited, voiced-over, mediated, minus their incidental sound — and, somehow stripped of their power and reality. For all the talk of unprecedented technology and omnipresent coverage, in Iraq we got little enough of what war really looks like.

Indeed, it was frequently the case that the news organisations with the most toys in Iraq were the ones that missed the best pictures, especially in the early stages of the war. While American networks flicked from embed to embed, from lacklustre interviews to ships in the Gulf, they were having to pay Arab broadcasters for pictures of Baghdad being bombed.

Even as the action came closer, it was more a matter of what television



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didn't, or couldn't show, than what it did. More times than you would care to count, CNN's soldier-correspondent, Walter Rogers, stood by — as if he were helping out — while US shells and missiles zoomed off to the middle distance. He never saw fit to ask who might be at their destination, or what might be happening there, let alone seek to show it.

Indeed our only little window on such hell was provided by the extraordinary friendly fire incident in Northern Iraq, where the BBC's John Simpson was able to report exactly what it was like to come under fire from the world's best weapons. This was what it actually looked like when 'Iraqi positions' were

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‘taken out’ or ‘shut down’ or ‘neutralised’. That week, I had the clear, and quite vicious, thought that I would like to see Rogers in a scene like that, trembling and urinating with fear.

War coverage would be different if everybody had cameras. If everybody had cameras, maybe we’d know what hideous event led to the truckload of corpses of women and children seen by a Red Cross worker in Hilla. Maybe that’s the next step in war coverage — unmediated cameras, everywhere; robots that don’t make editorial choices and can’t be intimidated by governments, or try and second-guess their viewers.

But here we reach the limits of technology — or of television itself anyway. TV encourages us to treat it as reality, to ignore the omissions and stripping of context that come with its delivery.

The pictures that, for American audiences especially, came to illustrate, to symbolise, to vindicate the war — those of the toppling of Saddam’s statue in Firdus Square — were also some of the most misleading. The tight focus obscured the small size of the crowd; the cameras engaged in the vigil while Saddam was gradually lowered couldn’t be elsewhere in the city, cataloguing the first stirrings of disorder.

The edits for subsequent news bulletins compressed time and gave the impression that the symbolic liberation was achieved smoothly and swiftly, rather than over hours. Eventually, inevitably, some TV news reports held that it was Iraqis, and not US soldiers with cables and an armoured vehicle, who had pulled down the dictator’s statue. For a medium in which you theoretically only need to point the camera to get the truth, it was a stark failure.

Television needs visual symbolism and spectacle, and the US networks, which went live from the square for a good two hours, got what they needed. And, in a way, so did we, the punters. People were looking for a tipping point, an end of sorts, and they got it. But the Brandenburg Gate, it most certainly was not.

We shouldn’t let Arab television off the hook here, either. Al-Jazeera suffered unacceptable attempts to hush its editorial voice, but its screening of pictures of dead and captive US soldiers was about naked spectacle as well as the pursuit of reality. Other Arab broadcasters seemed less than keen to depict the immediate joy and relief of most Iraqis at the sudden end of Saddam’s rule.

Yet if any strand of the media emerged well from the war, it was in some respects a new one, and in all respects a human one. It was reporters with the

passion to editorialise, like *The Independent's* Robert Fisk, columnists with the nerve to be flippant, like *New Yorker* magazine's Michael Wolff, and those with a profound gift for description, like John Lee Anderson, who wrote his amazing diary of the liberation days for the *New Yorker*.

And, for the first time, it was also the media's civilians, the bloggers — either non-professionals or, like me, journalists on a busman's holiday. Blogs — personal web journals and commentaries — gathered stories for their communities of interest, held the media of both left and right to account, and, not infrequently, tracked down the truth quicker than the pros did. The marshalling of motivation and expertise of the blog culture was permanently established by this war.

A handful of bloggers have brought us something more. The anonymous American soldier who writes, almost in a stream of consciousness, a warblog called *Turning Tables* has reminded us that there are humans under the helmets — people who are afraid and angry and immersed in a conflict to which they cannot yet see an end.

And then there was *Salam Pax*, the so-called Baghdad blogger. *Pax*, by presenting himself as a real, rounded person — one with hopes and fears, who desperately wanted Saddam gone but was appalled at what was being done to his city, who was funny, and hip to the best books and music — achieved a ring of truth that eluded most of the established media.

Along with a few million other people, I felt my heart sing when, having been forced off air when Baghdad's telecommunications were cut, *Salam Pax* reappeared on the internet after the war, his life and his sense of humour intact. Without ever meaning to, he became an immensely powerful voice, and remains so now. It took a new media genre to emphasise an ancient fact — that war is not about flags, weapons, statues or technology: it is about the people on whom it falls.

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