

International Affairs Forum Interview:

May 10th, 2004

By **Jasen Zubcevik**



Kent Jarrell

Kent Jarrell - CBS and WUSA-TV award winning journalist and APCO Worldwide crisis communication specialist. As a CBS and WUSA-TV broadcast journalist for more than 20 years in 13 countries, Mr. Jarrell covered the famine in Ethiopia, the Persian Gulf War, terrorism in Europe, the aftermath of the United States conflict in Panama and the violence between the Palestinians and Israelis in the occupied territories.

International Affairs Forum: What are the main obstacles to fair and accurate journalism?

Kent Jarrell: Every journalist brings a certain point of view to a story and cannot be completely objective. To be completely objective means not using what you have learned prior to that moment about the story. Each journalist first has to have a mindset of what the objectivity is. The first thing the reporter does is making a judgment about what he or she is seeing. When the reporter sees something he or she first has to judge whether it is realistic, mainstream and true. The reporter is a filter of information. You cannot make a judgment in the absence of who you are, how you were brought up, your gender, race and country of origin. All those factors will play in when you make a judgment. At the same time you have to think objectively. This is a skill that the best journalists have because they will not become beholden of anyone's view.

IA-F: How can journalists stay neutral

when reporting and how can they protect themselves from ideological and commercial pressures?

Mr. Jarrell: Commercialism has entered in the process of editing and the news gathering process. One thing the journalists have to understand is that when you work for a news organization you have to know what kind of commercial and business relationships exist within the organization and what kind of commercial and business influences are pressuring your editor. What can happen is that while the journalist is reporting on a certain story one way, the news organization wants the story to turn another way. There is a top-town pressure so the journalists have to be aware of that. In regard to the ideology, the journalist has to stay or at least be perceived as neutral. The journalist has to be very careful about the words he or she says publicly and must not be identified as a part of the left or the right. Nowadays however, many news reporters are asked to pick sides either on the left or the right. This results from the marketing pressure. But even though it may be in the interest of the news

company for the journalist to be perceived as from the left or the right, in the long term, the journalist must try to stay neutral.

IA-F: What are some of the challenges journalists face while reporting from hotspots such as Iraq and Afghanistan?

Mr. Jarrell: The first thing is personal safety. The second thing, which is not usually talked about, is fear. When you are a reporter in a dangerous situation, there is a lot of adrenaline running. You have to decide what things to do in a pursuit of a story and what things not to do. This has changed tremendously in the past 25 years. In classical wars you could always put yourself in a safe place and in many cases that would be with the military. The classical wars have clear lines of demarcation between the enemies. The only thing you need to do is to make sure that you are on one side of that marker. Nowadays, you can get yourself in a dangerous situation and not know it. The war on terror is not a conventional war. You can be walking down the street thinking you are safe and all of a sudden you are in a middle of a combat zone. This was first seen in Beirut in the late 70's and early 80's. In Beirut, for the first time the reporters could see that the safety strategies that would normally protect them are not protecting them. Nowadays, the first decision the reporter has to make is when to leave the hotel. In many cases, for their safety, the reporters have to report from their hotel room. They stay in hotels for days and report from the hotel because it is too dangerous to go outside.

IA-F: During the US invasion on Iraq, many journalists were reporting while being "imbedded" with the US troops. What is your position on this practice and how does this practice affect fair and accurate journalism?

Mr. Jarrell: It is much safer for the journalist to be "imbedded" with the troops. In the first Persian Gulf War, which I covered, one of the complaints was that the military media pools were very restricted in the terms of information provided. So you either had the choice of being in the military media pool and the pool was quite restricted or you were in the front lines alone exposed to danger. That's how my colleague Bob Simon ended up in a Baghdad jail for some time.

The problem with "imbedded" journalism is that as an "imbedded" journalist you become a part of the military team and this may result in a bias reporting. It is the editor's job to make sure that the "imbedded" reporter at the end is turning out a journalistic product that is fair and balanced.

IA-F: Many media houses in the U.S. have refused to publish photos of the U.S. casualties in Iraq. In April, however, the Washington Post and the USA Today decided to publish the photos of the caskets of U.S. soldiers killed in Iraq. What is your position on this issue?

Mr. Jarrell : Once they got the pictures, the journalists had to publish them because the event really happened and this is what free press is all about. The damage for the current administration is fierce and will be fierce for a long time.

IA-F: Do you agree with the claim that the media in the US is mostly liberal?

Mr. Jarrell: Generally, reporters may tend to be more liberal socially. This is the nature of the job. The reporter sees a lot of things. As a CBS reporter I traveled to many different countries, I saw people living their lives in different cultural and religious settings. If you are injected into that, you have more understanding about different people and cultures and you are not so rigid about what is foreign to you. This tends to make you more socially liberal, but does not necessarily make your opinions right.

IA-F: How do you view the raise of the conservative media houses like the Fox News Channel and what is the conservative media effect on public policy and perception?

Mr. Jarrell: Today there are more and more conservative reporters. The conservatives have become a little bit more organized. You cannot underestimate the power of Fox and what the founder of Fox Channel, Robert Murdoch, did for the conservative media. Murdoch learned about the power of politicized media in countries that historically had a media apparatus that has crossed the ideological front and was labeled as such.

I think that in the United States we are moving towards more politicized media. One of the main reasons is that the country is becoming politically far more divisive. The middle has become smaller and the politicians are trying to reach their base which is either further to the

right of further to the left. The media is also very different now. It is not a monolithic media. Twenty-five years ago fifty percent of the country watched the network news shows every night. Now people are getting information from the Internet, small publications, and even comedy shows. All of this means that there has been a widening of voices.

IA-F: What are the differences between the European and the US journalism?

Mr. Jarrell: It is hard to generalize about European journalism because it is different in each country but the one thing you can say is that Europeans have a broader worldview. US reporting tends to be more interior and primarily concerned about the US. For instance, if you live in Europe you have a lot more sense about what's happening in Africa. In the US you rarely hear news about Africa. This is mainly because of the US geo-political position in the world. In addition, the European journalism is much more politicized.

IA-F: How do you view the American public perception of press and the European public perception of American press?

Mr. Jarrell: Generally in the US, people are very antagonistic towards the media. The US media is in the middle of one of its biggest credibility gaps in history. This is mainly because of the commercialization. People just don't trust what they see on TV or in the papers. From my experience, most Europeans believe that the US media is too Americanized. I think that this is probably true. Most American reporters are really proud to be Americans and this often reflects in their views and reports.

IA-F: Most of our readership consists of university students and young professionals. Do you have any advice for our readers who plan to pursue their career in journalism and what are the positives and the negatives of this profession?

Mr. Jarrell: Journalism gives young people a tremendous opportunity to grow as professionals. As a journalist you can go anywhere and ask any question to anybody. Journalism allows an unusual amount of intellectual freedom. If you are a good reporter, you can just follow your curiosity and be exposed to things that you would never be exposed otherwise. Also it is a tremendous amount of responsibility. Young people should be taking a lot of risk and putting themselves in a position where they may be uncomfortable but are learning many new things. Journalism is a great way to do this. In your 20's or 30's you

should be out there "rolling the dice". You don't do this when you are in your 40's or 50's because you have a family and a number of other responsibilities.

IA-F: What are some of your most memorable moments as a journalist?

Mr. Jarrell: I was standing in a field in Ethiopia during the famine of 1985 among thirty-five thousand people who were starving at the border gate and there were only four doctors to take care of them all. I will never forget that moment because it made me realize how exceptionally lucky I am to have grown up in an affluent family in the US.

Another memorable moment was the attempted assassination of President Reagan. I was only 10 feet away from the president when that happened.

As a journalist, I had the opportunity to see history up-close. It was definitely worth it.

