

Death by Video Phone: Coverage of Saddam Hussein's Execution

It is perhaps ironic that the man who controlled the broadcast of his image with an iron grip was executed in one of the most widely watched news events of recent times.

But then you could say his last 14 months alive were one long television performance. Although Saddam Hussein's trial for killing 148 Iraqi Shi'as from the village of Dujail dragged on a grueling 14 months, it actually made for a stunning courtroom drama: a once-powerful dictator is pulled from a hole in the ground looking as dismal as can be imagined; he is interrogated, checked for fleas and bite-sized weapons of mass destruction; then spruced up for his post-captivity television debut only to be sentenced to death some months later.

Throughout the course of the trial, unique characters came and went—some of them judges and lawyers who disappeared because they were either fed up, afraid for their lives or killed; witnesses who more often than not hid behind a curtain in fear of facing the once-ruthless so-called “Butcher of Baghdad”; and alleged accomplices who shouted, boycotted and even went on hunger strikes. As for the lead character, he almost always gave a stellar performance. He would constantly threaten boycotts, hunger

strikes, not to mention retribution. On more than one occasion he even shouted defiantly that he remained the rightfully elected leader of Iraq. Occasionally, his outbursts received a tracked package on Western networks, but for the most part the day-to-day of the trial received less than a minute of coverage.

But despite his courtroom antics, Saddam Hussein's execution had the potential of being a far bigger blockbuster than his trial or sentencing. The build-up prior to the actual execution date was significant—both in America and in the Arab world. Networks on both sides of the Atlantic wrangled with questions of ethics leading up to his December 30, 2006 hanging as to what could and what could not be shown on television. The scrutiny was different for both camps. Western networks simply sought to show enough of the final moments of Saddam Hussein's life to captivate viewers without offending them. Middle Eastern networks—particularly those catering to primarily Iraqi audiences—had to prepare for repercussions of a quite different order. So they treaded carefully, attempting to show just enough footage to convince people that he was dead without further inciting sectarian tensions.

The fact is no one really knew what kind of actual footage would be released following the execution. US and Iraqi officials were assuring the media that Saddam Hussein would be executed before the New Year. However, to many that seemed unlikely. But they were wrong. It was dawn in Baghdad on the first day of the Muslim feast of Eid Al Adha, December 30 2006, and just past 10pm on the American East Coast at the heart of the New Year's weekend, when Saddam Hussein was executed. The

timing was inopportune for most Western networks and so little was afforded in coverage upon first word of the hanging. Incidentally, American networks had poured their resources into a week's worth of coverage following the death of former President Gerald Ford whose funeral had been earlier that same day.

However, in a globalized world timing matters little. Anyone with Internet access (or TiVo digital video recording) who wanted to watch the execution could take part in a global forum of opinion and could see coverage of the events. Hussein's death, as compared to the death last year of another so-called butcher Slobodan Milosevic, sparked sensationalist responses around the globe. Because Milosevic died suddenly of apparent heart failure in a Hague prison while awaiting sentencing for crimes against humanity there is no telling what level of media attention his death may have prompted had he actually been sentenced to death like Saddam Hussein.

If mainstream media were to learn one thing from the execution aftermath, it was this: they are no longer in the reporting game alone. The role of citizen journalists had never been so prominent as in the coverage of Saddam Hussein's demise. Despite efforts—or alleged efforts as the case may be—to secure the premises of the execution so as to prevent leaked footage, international audiences witnessed—many for the first time—a capital punishment online.

Certainly, the outbreak of videophone footage of Saddam Hussein's execution poses a new set of questions for reporters and Internet users alike about the ethical codes

of news dissemination and consumption. But what may be remembered longer is that from Minnesota to Manila, public opinion addressing the execution and its coverage exploded onto the World Wide Web giving anyone with Internet access the opportunity to take part in history.

“We aren’t going to get these images and just slap them on TV”

Arab networks certainly did not let this opportunity for competitive coverage pass them by. In fact almost all of them invested heavy airtime on the action in the rolling-coverage approach which has become characteristic of modern television news. The primary source about the events that took place on the morning of December 30th was to be Iraq’s state-run network, Al Iraqiya. Curiously, it was not Al Iraqiya who broke the news of the execution on the Arab end, but rather two networks—Alhurra and Al Arabiya—who were reportedly the first to officially confirm that Hussein was, in fact, dead.

This raises questions as to who was calling the shots that early morning in Baghdad since Alhurra is a US government-funded, Arabic-language network, and Al Arabiya is owned by America’s top Gulf ally—Saudi Arabia. “It is very ironic,” believes Ibrahim Saleh, a professor of Journalism at the American University in Cairo. “It is either something is wrong or it confirms the conspiracy theory. It confirms that everyone is taking sides.”

Al Arabiya's Washington Bureau Chief Hisham Milhem disagrees with this theory, saying that the two networks were one-up on their competitors simply due to a strong presence in Iraq. "We have a very large bureau in Iraq and we are the Arab satellite that is watched most by Iraqis after the local Iraqi station," he says. "We paid a heavy price for this coverage; some of our staff were deliberately killed in the violence. Alhurra also has a large bureau in Iraq [so] it's not such a surprise that we were able to break the news first."

Al Arabiya, in fact, confirmed the news via Hussein's lawyer, one of the network's many contacts in Baghdad, according to Melhem. Shortly after Alhurra and Al Arabiya reported the news, a news ticker scrolled across the bottom of the screen on Iraq's Al Iraqiya that read in Arabic: "Saddam's execution marks the end of a dark period of Iraq's history." A presenter then announced, "Criminal Saddam was hanged to death."

It took some three to four hours before official photographs were released by the Iraqi government of Hussein's corpse in a shroud. Thereafter, Arab networks began rolling video of Hussein's final moments, showing official government-supervised video of the final moments of the former dictator's life just before the trap door dropped from underneath his feet.

"It was unfortunately one of the times that the Arab media was not trying to put a slant on things," says Saleh. "It was a very provocative time for Arabs—not just Muslims—and seen as a pride issue."

“He was not trembling or in a state of panic as some Iraqi officials claimed him to be before the videos were released,” notes Melhem, adding that Hussein “became a sort of victim or martyr, appearing more dignified than his executioner.”

Meanwhile, America’s 24-hour networks—in particular CNN, FOX News Channel, and MSNBC—offered live “as it happens” coverage before and after confirming that the former Iraqi dictator had been hung. US correspondents who spend much of their time bound to the Green Zone found themselves forced to rely heavily on the Arab networks for information. Shortly after 10pm EST, CNN, FOX News Channel and MSNBC were all quoting Arabic media sources that the hanging had taken place.

None of the three major American networks—NBC, CBS or ABC—committed to the same level of coverage that they had all broadcasted on the day Baghdad fell to the Americans, for example. But then coalition forces entered Baghdad on a Wednesday afternoon in April 2003 and so newsrooms were fully staffed. Although this was just before the online video/camera-phone boom, American viewers were far more likely to watch the news that evening than they were on the late December night that Saddam Hussein was executed.

NBC was the first to break into regularly scheduled programming to announce that three “very credible” Arabic-language stations were saying Saddam Hussein’s execution had been carried out. CBS News broke in four minutes later but had

independently confirmed the news. ABC was last to break into their scheduled programming, however the network had been airing a news program and so the entire focus on the show shifted to cover the execution.

All the networks had no video upon confirming the news. CNN, for example, stressed the network's commitment to sensitive and responsible journalism. "We aren't going to get these images and just slap them on TV," said CNN's Anderson Cooper.

In fact, none of the networks knew what kind of footage to expect. Shortly after 3am EST, networks received the official feeds from Arabic network Al Arabiya. As reported in the media by a number of news executives, the decision as to what to show was made tremendously easy as they were only fed footage of Hussein being led onto the gallows, and the noose being tied around his neck, but the actual hanging was not shown. Later on, video of Hussein's broken neck following the hanging was released, but most networks opted to air a wide shot of this image so not to disturb viewers.

"When [Saddam Hussein] was arrested there was a sense of triumph—a sense of gloating by the American networks," Melhem believes. "Arab networks discussed his conditions mainly, but they believed for the most part that it was an insult. This time there was a universal revulsion as to the conditions of his execution, the timing and by those who opposed the presence of the Americans."

Death by Videophone and Blog

In these times of widening access to mobile phone technology, it should not be all that surprising that one or more individuals managed to whip their telephones out and record video images of Saddam Hussein's execution, particularly given that his execution was overseen by the very faction he was accused of oppressing. It is perhaps more surprising that individuals managed to sneak into the morgue where Hussein's body was being kept prior to burial to capture video images of his corpse. Such are the times in which we live.

Their actions made available a video which would draw the attention of millions around the world. "Anyone with access to the Internet saw the video, the gory version," Melhem notes.

The mobile video version of Saddam Hussein's execution offered viewers something that major television networks could not: a censorship-free look at the events that took place that late December morning in Baghdad. Therefore, as categorized by CNN reporter Arwa Damon, the moment the video hit the web, it triggered an unprecedented "Bluetooth Frenzy."

"We have so many surveillance cameras around the world now," notes Alan Reiter, president of Wireless Internet & Mobile Computing, an analytical firm. "People

think big brother is watching them, and we often ask ‘who is watching the watchers?’
Now the answer is ‘we are.’”

Two mobile phone videos surfaced within 48 hours of Saddam Hussein’s execution. The first is approximately two and a half minutes long. It appears to have been recorded from inside the chambers where Hussein was hung. The video quality is incredibly poor, often shaky and blurry, but it essentially picks up where the official video shown by networks worldwide left off.

The individual who shot the mobile video appears to have filmed from down below the gallows and so when Hussein falls through the trapdoor, the image becomes extremely jittery, but ends with a tight shot of his face.

Audio quality is poor on the video but there are some decipherable phrases—some of which sparked condemnation by Hussein’s supporters. Sounds of chaos blanket the first part of the clip as the executioners prepare Hussein for death. Saddam Hussein himself can be heard repeating prayer verses, of which the word “Allah” (God) is most audible. Witnesses are also heard telling Hussein to “go to hell”; the former leader responding to taunts saying his tormentors were being unmanly.

The second video to surface, a 27-second clip, was posted on an Iraq-based website believed to support the late-dictator’s Ba’ath Party. Apparently taken shortly after Hussein’s death, this video shows a hand pulling down the white shroud to expose a

close up of the former-President's face, his neck twisted at a 90 degree angle to the right, with a gaping, bloody neck wound. The clip, this time of better quality than that of the first released mobile video, also shows wounds to Hussein's face and blood stains to his white shirt.

Audio remarks are also clearer on this video. A number of male voices can be heard whispering at the beginning, then one voice says, "Hurry up, hurry up. I'm going to count from one to four. One, two...Hurry up, you're going to get us into a catastrophe (*mossiba*)."

Another voice, apparently that of the man taking the video, says, "Just one second, just one second Abu Ali, I'm almost finished." A third voice then says, "Abu Ali, you take care of this."

Days after the videos were released onto the Internet, Iraqi officials told reporters that they had made arrests in connection with the leaked mobile images. "I can officially now confirm the arrest of three individuals in the case of the execution of Saddam Hussein," Mowaffak al-Rubaie, Iraq's national security adviser told NBC News.

"You have a billion people around the world more or less who have the ability to take a photo and almost instantaneously transmit that photo around the world since a significant portion of camera phones now can take videos," explains Reiter. "This can be very scary for totalitarian regimes or less democratic regimes because you don't want people running around with the ability to document bad things."

As Saleh argues, the mobile images raise difficult questions about Internet ethics. “Even if Saddam is the worst person in the world, how can you do the media phone thing? It’s terrible,” he asks.

These questions echo the debate which followed the death of Pope John Paul II. Millions of people filed past the late Pontiff’s body taking pictures as he lay in repose in the Vatican. “A lot of people said it was sacrilegious and disrespectful and other people said it is a cultural difference,” recalls Reiter. “You might ask whether a man’s final moments should be respected. Is it better to know or not to know? Well, camera phones go where cameras cannot—for good or bad.”

Alongside the rapid dissemination of these videos was another, equally remarkable trend: the vibrant response of the global blogosphere. Rarely has the role of the so-called “online citizen journalist” been more apparent than in the days following Saddam Hussein’s execution. From Indianapolis to Islamabad, bloggers posted comments and reports in dozens of languages, providing web surfers with a wealth of opinion and insight beyond the realm of mainstream media.

And this was not just a response in writing. Some blogs provided video commentary alongside posted comments, often linking mobile video to their personal websites. Many blogs celebrated the execution, but there were also many others who condemned it. In addition, a number of blogs provided their readers with links to the websites of various media outlets, bringing them into a new globalized, interlinked media

world. In this new media world, Western field reporters had little advantage over bloggers from other regions of the world in their coverage of the historic event. In the execution of Saddam Hussein, both relied on outside news sources for their coverage.

Here is one voice from the many hundreds of thousands entering this global blogosphere. It is from an Arabic-language blog called I Miss Iraq written by an anonymous Iraqi doctor now living in Britain. As an exile, the blogger explores his own feelings upon learning of Hussein's death:

What do I feel after the announcement of this execution? Am I happy or sad? No, I do not feel anything. I feel impervious to any sensation, as if I had become a "thing." And that scares me. I should be pleased that justice has been done, Pleased that the man who made my people suffer has gone. Pleased that this coward and madman is dead. But I feel nothing. Is it the fact that I am in exile that has made me indifferent?¹

Conclusion

Saddam Hussein's execution surely ranks among the most high-profile global stories in which the Internet has taken the lead. Mainstream-media reporting soon came to focus on not the execution or the man, but the phone-recorded videos and their dissemination online. In this way Internet technology gives breathtaking power to those who routinely seek to circumvent the framing techniques of governments and big media.

¹ <http://imissiraq.blogspot.com/2006/12/blog-post.html>

At Saddam Hussein's death, not only did his controlling media tactics die with him, but a new era of media consumption was born.