

# Media coverage offers second front

*Israeli and Hezbollah commanders know that controlling the message will affect world opinion — and possibly the conflict.*

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For more than two weeks the world's media have been trained on the unfolding conflict in Lebanon, offering consumers almost unprecedented access to news and information about the hostilities.

But as news organizations scramble to keep up with events, a question emerges: Who is winning the war of images? And how are journalists, particularly those in image-dependent TV, handling the efforts to control their coverage?

"I think the Lebanese people — the (civilian) victims — are winning the image war," said Jamal Dajani, director of Middle East programming for Link TV, a satellite channel presenting programming from a global perspective. "Especially in Europe, the coverage reflects more civilian coverage and the devastation. ... I've been watching sympathy grow for the Lebanese people."

Jonathan Klein, president of CNN/U.S., said the cable news channel has placed about 100 or so staffers in the region, including anchors and reporters such as Anderson Cooper, Wolf Blitzer and John Roberts.

He said the channel's news coverage has evolved from scrambling to cover the basic facts of the early conflict to exploring the larger geopolitical questions such as Syria and Iran's influence on Hezbollah and the United Nations' role as a monitor.

"Viewers have short attention

spans. They tend to tire of a story and they tend to feel they know the story backward and forward, unless a news organization can provide a layered sense of what is behind the story," he said. "You could cover this as a series of rockets fired between one side and another ... (but) we're trying to combine visceral coverage with analysis from intelligent people and academia."

Information comes from myriad sources. While the Israeli government holds traditional news conferences and allows Western reporters to embed with their military, Hezbollah has taken journalists to neighborhoods in Beirut struck by Israeli missiles and conducted interviews with their top leaders by telephone.

The result is better access for reporters covering this conflict than many of the same reporters can get in Iraq, where insurgent attacks and sectarian violence make street-level reporting an increasingly dangerous proposition.

"All sides are very aware of the importance of world opinion," said Klein. "From what the Israeli defense forces try to limit us from showing, to what the Lebanese provide by way of pictures and access. ... Even al-Qaida, from whatever cave they're in, has produced a video with amazing production levels. Everyone wants to get their message out."

Abdallah Schleifer, Washington bureau chief for the Dubai-based, Saudi-controlled news network Al-Arabiya, said Hezbollah's media savvy is not surprising, given that it owns two TV news channels and operates in Beirut, a media center

of the Arab world.

He saw the group's media efforts as an attempt to portray Hezbollah as an organized guerrilla force comparable to the Viet Cong in Vietnam, rather than a loosely organized group of fighters like al-Qaida.

"In the past, whenever there was a conflict, the instinctive reaction among Arabs was to lock journalists up or deport them," said Schliefer, who cited as a turning point the Palestine Liberation Organization's decision to allow Western media controlled access to Beirut when Israeli soldiers fought to expel the PLO from Lebanon in 1982.

"The PLO realized the story was about suffering. ... For (PLO leader Yasser) Arafat it was the best press he got in his life," he said. "They learned the payoff of providing press facility and access, be it Western or Arab."

For Rome Hartman, executive producer of the CBS Evening News, one of the big challenges involves keeping viewers aware of how ground rules have affected reporting, while using the information provided to add context.

"The media universe is so diverse and so atomized that if you ask the question of who's winning the media war, the answer will be determined in some measure by what you're



watching,” said Hartman. “If you’re watching Al-Manar (a Lebanese news group), you’ll get a different answer than if you’re watching Israeli TV. We’re going to try and not let anybody win the media war, other than representing our viewers’ interest in the truth.”

These days, that atomized media landscape also includes video sharing Web sites such as YouTube and Google Video, where users have uploaded a range of clips for public perusal — from footage of noted leftist Noam Chomsky speaking on the historic roots of the conflict to news coverage from Israeli TV and images of shelling in Beirut captured

by cell phone cameras.

“I was not satisfied with the media coverage,” said Siham Byah, 28, a native of Morocco now living in Boston. “The media coverage was focused on damage done to Israel and not Lebanon. It’s not fair to report on one side and not the other.”

To make her point, on Thursday Byah posted a seven-minute slide show called “The Israeli Genocide in Lebanon” to Google Video, featuring photos of civilian casualties in Lebanon provided by friends.

“How many innocent civilians have to die before we stop this madness?” said Byah, a corporate operations manager who spent three

hours assembling her presentation.

But such video sites offer limited information on who has uploaded the video or where the video comes from, making it difficult to judge the material’s veracity. And just as some have criticized U.S. TV networks for generating sympathy for Israelis by covering their struggles, others have said coverage of Lebanese casualties makes Israel look brutal, Hartman said.

“That’s a real buyer-beware situation,” said CBS’s Hartman of the online videos. “And it’s a pretty good argument for a news organization that you know is trying to tell the story straight.”

