

Thursday, April 10, 2003

# War rooms: How the cable news networks get real time on the air

By Stephen Battaglio  
KRT CAMPUS

NEW YORK — Fox News Channel producer Catherine Brosseau looked like an air-traffic controller on speed.

It was midmorning last Friday and she had already spent hours lining up segments and live shots for the 10 a.m. slot. But as she scrolled down a screen in the control room, she scuttled those plans: Embedded reporters were calling in from Iraq and Kuwait.

"Terry, I'm sorry — you're dead," Brosseau said into her headset, informing business news correspondent Terry Keenan that her stock report wouldn't be coming up. Remotes from the White House were also dumped for live pictures from the front.

Welcome to the fast-moving conveyor belt that brought the Iraq war to 76 million viewers over the first week of the war. To satisfy them, producers at Fox, CNN and MSNBC have been cranking it out 24 hours a day, seven days a week. And while the pictures from the front have been dazzling, getting them onscreen is not as easy as pointing a camera.

Here are some behind-the-scenes glimpses at how it's all pulled together:

It's 11:30 on a morning last week, when several MSNBC producers, retired Army Gen. Bernard Trainor and anchor Lester Holt crowd into the office of Mark Efron, the executive in charge of MSNBC's live news coverage, at the One MSNBC Plaza complex in Secaucus, N.J. They're making plans for the next five hours on the air.

Trainor, one of the many ex-generals becoming familiar to TV viewers, discusses how Iraqi paramilitary groups are causing problems for U.S. supply lines to Baghdad — a development that becomes a major part of the war story in the days ahead.

"Is there any parallel to make with the Viet Cong?" Efron asks.

"Yes, very much so," Trainor



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Phil Melito works in the satellite operations room at MSNBC headquarters in Secaucus, N.J., on March 26.

says. "The Iraqis studied warfare — disperse and deceive. Mislead. And they are doing that very successfully to maintain ironclad control of the population centers. So far they've been able to do that."

Efron asks the general to write up those points and moves on to Holt, who has a suggestion.

"I received an e-mail from a woman who made a really good point," he says. "She said sometimes you get going with your military-ese, I don't know what a brigade or a company is. Maybe we should keep that in mind."

On to chief booker Mike Tanaka. His job is to line up the never-ending stream of talking heads who provide analysis when the live action lags. But with coverage not letting up for a moment, he's worried about burning out his military experts.

"We need to give these guys some time off," he says.

"What, are they wusses?"

Efron replies with mock anger. "Time off? I don't get time off!"

But war coverage strained the supply of TV-ready military analysts. Efron notes that reinforcements are on the way: MSNBC's parent, NBC News, had signed up a few more.

Later, Holt grabs a quick lunch with Trainor in the MSNBC commissary. The channel has picked up the tab

for food since the war started (though employees note it hasn't made it any better).

Holt says he's been putting in 10- to 11-hour days anchoring, which leaves little time for preparation.

"The advantage of being on the air that long is you are absorbing information all along," he says. "When I talk to (NBC correspondent) David Bloom, I catalogue what he's told me about the weather."

Since MSNBC headquarters also serves much of NBC News, its satellite operations room looks like NASA's mission control. Just coming in that day was Peter Arnett's exclusive interview with Iraq's Tariq Aziz.

For the moment, Arnett's performance is a source of pride. But the war can shift fortunes quickly: Five days later, Arnett was fired from the network for giving an unapproved interview to Iraqi television.

Arnett sent the interview through his videophone. The technology has leveled the playing field in covering the war. But the phones often have producers scrambling to put the uplinks on the air.

"The embedded reporters come up when they come up," says Fox News executive producer Brian Gaffney. "We can't schedule someone at 10:41 and expect him to be there five minutes early and ready to go. We have to move stuff around."

# Attorneys say document in rubble of nightclub overstated capacity

By Brooke Donald  
THE ASSOCIATED PRESS

PROVIDENCE, R.I. — Private attorneys say their investigators found a partly burned document in the rubble of a nightclub that suggests owners overstated the building's capacity for the concert being held when the club erupted in flames, killing 99 people.

The document, an unsigned contract between the band Great White and the owners of The Station, shows the owners promoted the club's capacity as 550 for the band's Feb. 20 concert, say the attorneys, who represent survivors and victims' families. West Warwick town officials have said the maximum capacity was 404, if all the furniture was removed.

Authorities have not determined how many people were in the building when the band's pyrotechnics started the fire, which also injured nearly 200 people. The blaze melted the hand clicker that kept track of patrons.

Jeffrey Pine, an attorney for club co-owner Jeffrey Derderian, said clubs often inflate capacity numbers to attract big-name bands.

But Kathleen Hagerty, attorney for the other co-owner, Michael Derderian, said neither of the brothers drew up the contract. She said the 550 number was generated by Pollstar Talent Buyer Directory, a national guide for booking agents.

"My understanding is that the Derderians never supplied that number. More importantly, they never had 550 people at the club," she said.

Gary Bongiovanni, Pollstar's editor in chief, said clubs provide the information listed in the directory, but added that The Station's capacity had been listed as 550 since before the Derderians bought the club in 2000.

Bongiovanni said his researchers talked to someone at The Station in November to update the guide, but the only change made was the phone number.

Hagerty said it was unnerving that private investigators, not state investigators, found the document.

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