John Hockenberry on Reporting the War at NBC

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John Hockenberry is a long-time, well-known American journalist. He's won four Emmy awards and three Peabody awards. Now that, as he puts it, "mainstream media doesn't want John Hockenberry anymore," he's become a Distinguished Fellow at the MIT Media Lab, where he recently gave a talk which commented on some of his experiences covering the Iraq war while at NBC.

Here are some excerpts:

> I was very happily employed at NBC. I wasn't like, running around, trying to stuff toilet paper into the plumbing and sabotage the place. [...] But I was interested, because we had a lot of meetings at NBC about, you know, if you're doing a story and the person you're doing the story about offers to buy you a drink, you've gotta say no. If you're doing a story and they send you, after they see the story, some napkin rings — silver napkin rings that are monogrammed "Thank you, Jon, for the story," you've got not only to return those, you've got to report those to the standards people at NBC because there's a whole ethics and conflict-of-interest thing.
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> So at one of these ethics meetings — I called them the return-the-napkin-ring kinds of meetings — I raised my hand and said "You know, isn't it a problem that the contract that GE has with the Coalition Provisional Authority [...] to rebuild the power generation system in Iraq [is] about the size of *the entire budget of NBC*? Is that kind of like the napkin rings thing?" And the standards people said "Huh. That's interesting. No one's brought that up before." Now I'm not saying that I'm smart or that I'm advanced or that I'm ahead of my colleagues or maybe I had a lot of free time to think about this or maybe I'm some pinko-proto-lefty like Richard Nixon. I don't know! But the fact that it drew a complete blank among the NBC standards people was interesting to me.
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> [Now] in fact what happens in the networks — and you can find this at ABC and other networks at well — is that this [conflict with the profit motive] manifests itself [as journalists saying] "Well, we are better reporters because we deal with these kinds of conflicts all the time. And because we deal with those and we *always* decide in favor of the audience, it sort of exercises our journalistic muscle." And this is the line you get from all of the entities.

> You may or may not be aware that there was a real strong full-court press to sell the media — and I'm not pro- or against it at this particular point, but there was a process in place where individuals in the media got access to the individuals involved in the planning of the war. There were generals who came in, there were former secretaries of defense, Schwarzkopf spent a whole lot of time giving sort of off-the-record, quiet briefings. And the generals would sort of bring in a certain group of editors and reporters and I went to all of these briefings.

At one of them, Hockenberry explains, a well-known pollster told about a briefing he gave to all the senior officials at the White House about how the polling data from the Arab world showed that America's negatives were simply off-the-charts. Everyone was quiet. Condi asked a few technical questions and then finally Karl Rove spoke up. "Well, that's just until we start throwing our weight around over there," he said.

Hockenberry was stunned and thought they should do a piece on what this revealed into the mentality of the war's planners. But NBC News didn't think this was a very good idea. America wanted the war to happen; their job was just to wait and see how it turned out. "We're not particularly interested in the story," Hockenberry explains. "We're a process that's trying to maintain people in front of the set, so in a certain sense media at that point was doing its own kind of shock-and-awe that went right along with the war's shock-and-awe [because] the business is just to grab eyeballs."

Later, his team edited together a montage of clips about what it was like for reporters who were still in Iraq to experience the shock-and-awe campaign. Vibrant images, narrated by a tense reporter who was on the ground at the time.

> We played this piece for the editors. And it was very moving, very powerful, and it was a very different perspective from what we were getting. And at the end [...] there was quiet around the table, because it was kind of an emotional piece and certainly the emotion in this reporter's voice was detectable over a satellite phone line.
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> And the standards person goes — and again, this is his job, I don't begrudge him that — he goes, "Seems like, seems like she has a point of view here."
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> The table was silent. Just dead silent. And I was infuriated. But whenever I get this sort of infuriated feeling I think "You know, this is a career-ending moment here." There is something I could say that would be right. There is something I could say that would be wrong. And there is something that I could say that would be right — and also would be wrong.

> And it was the beginning of the coverage of an event that would be extraordinary and I definitely wanted to be around to be a part of the next day's coverage, but I had to say something. And it seemed as though, if nobody said anything, people would go "well, I guess we'll have to tone her down."
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> So I said, "You mean, the war-is-bad point of view?"

The piece aired.