

CNN to Al Jazeera: why report civilian deaths?

By Julie Hollar

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As the casualties mount in the besieged Iraqi city of Fallujah, Qatar-based Al Jazeera has been one of the only news networks broadcasting from the inside, relaying images of destruction and civilian victims – including women and children. But when CNN anchor Daryn Kagan interviewed the network's editor-in-chief, Ahmed Al-Sheik, on Monday (4/12/04) – a rare opportunity to get independent information about events in Fallujah – she used the occasion to badger Al-Sheik about whether the civilian deaths were really “the story” in Fallujah.

Al Jazeera has recently come under sharp criticism from U.S. officials, who claim the Iraqi casualties are 95 percent “military-age males” (AP, 4/12/04). “We have reason to believe that several news organizations do not engage in truthful reporting,” CPA spokesman Dan Senior said (Atlanta Journal-Constitution, 4/14/04). “In fact it is no reporting.” Senior military spokesman Mark Kimmitt had a suggestion for Iraqis who saw civilian deaths on Al Jazeera (New York Times, 4/12/04): “Change the channel to a legitimate, authoritative, honest news station. The stations that are showing Americans intentionally killing women and children are not legitimate news sources. That is propaganda, and that is lies.”

Acting as the substitute anchor on CNN's Wolf Blitzer Reports, Kagan began the interview by asking Al-Sheik to respond to those accusations, citing U.S. officials “saying the pictures and the reporting that Al Jazeera put on the air only adds to the sense of frustration and anger and adds to the problems in Iraq, rather than helping to solve them.” After Al-Sheik defended Al Jazeera's work as “accurate” and the images as representative of “what takes place on the ground,” Kagan pressed on:

“Isn't the story, though, bigger than just the simple numbers, with all due respect to the Iraqi civilians who have lost their lives – the story bigger than just the numbers of people who were killed or the fact that they might have been killed by the U.S. military, that the insurgents, the people trying to cause problems within Fallujah, are mixing in among the civilians, making it actually possibly that even more civilians would be killed, that the story

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is what the Iraqi insurgents are doing, in addition to what is the response from the U.S. military?”

CNN’s argument that a bigger story than civilian deaths is “what the Iraqi insurgents are doing” to provoke a U.S. “response” is startling. Especially in light of official U.S. denials of civilian deaths, video footage of women and children killed by the U.S. military is evidence that needs to be seen.

And Al Jazeera is not alone in reporting a reality very different from the one U.S. officials describe. Authorities have been able to keep a tight rein on the information flow from Fallujah, with only one small television network pool in the city that “travels and operates” under the watch of the Marines (Television Week, 4/12/04). (It’s noteworthy that the U.S. has reportedly demanded, as a condition for lifting the siege of Fallujah, that Al Jazeera cameras be removed from the city – IslamOnline.net, 4/9/04.)

But independent journalists reporting from Fallujah have described a scene consistent with the one broadcast by Al Jazeera. Rahul Mahajan, a U.S. journalist in Fallujah, estimated that of the 600 Iraqis killed in Fallujah, 200 were women and 100 young children, with many of the adult male casualties also non-combatants. He reported witnessing “a young woman, 18 years old, shot in the head” and “a young boy with massive internal bleeding” at a clinic (CommonDreams.org, 4/12/04). Mahajan recounted that during the “cease-fire,” “Americans were attacking with heavy artillery but primarily with snipers” – with ambulances among the targets. The sniper activity was also reported by U.S. journalist Dahr Jamail (NewStandardNews.net, 4/11/04): “Fallujah residents say Marines are opening fire randomly on unarmed civilians and have attacked clearly marked ambulances.”

When reports from the ground are describing hundreds of civilians being killed by U.S. forces, CNN should be looking to Al Jazeera’s footage to see if it corroborates those accounts – not badgering Al Jazeera’s editor about why he doesn’t suppress that footage.

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