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AUGUST 7, 2010

## Wolf Blitzer: CNN's 'straight-arrow' anchor stays true



WASHINGTON — When CNN hired Wolf Blitzer from The Jerusalem Post in 1990 to be its Pentagon correspondent, the first thing his new employers tried to do was "teach" him how to be a TV performer.

"They sent me to coaching and voice lessons and all sorts of stuff — it was making me crazy," Blitzer said. "And I remember saying to my wife at the time, 'I'm never going to make this. ... I think I made a huge mistake in taking this job.' "

But when Blitzer told his boss, Bill Headline, CNN's Washington bureau chief at the time, about his misgivings, Headline surprised the veteran Middle East correspondent with his answer — "Forget everything."

"Ignore it all, just be yourself," Blitzer remembers his boss saying. "He said I'm not sending you to any more of these consultants, these coaches. Just go and look into that camera and talk to whomever you want to talk to — and just tell them the truth. ... I think it worked out."

The longtime Maryland resident is celebrating 20 years at CNN this summer, and still going strong. This Sunday marks the fifth anniversary of "The Situation Room," the innovative two-hour daily newscast that he anchors from 5 p.m. to 7 p.m. weekdays.

(Karl Merton Ferron, Baltimore Sun Photo / Aug. 4, 2010)

With CNN launching a controversial overhaul of its prime-time lineup this fall, using hosts like disgraced former New York Gov. Eliot Spitzer, Blitzer and his "Situation Room" newscast seem to matter more than ever to

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some analysts as touchstones of trusted journalism on a cable "news" landscape of increasingly partisan and shrill ideologues and showbiz performers.

"Wolf Blitzer is like the last of the just on cable news," says Samuel G. Freedman, Columbia University Graduate School of Journalism professor. "At a time when even CNN has been struggling to stay true to its vision of reported news rather than opinion-tainment, if I may coin a phrase, he exudes intellectual honesty and journalistic integrity. Let's hope that's not a recipe for future unemployment."

At a time of major institutional change, with such recognizable names and faces as Christiane Amanpour, Larry King and Lou Dobbs leaving the network, Blitzer also provides the channel's most visible link to the days of the network's greatest glory in 1990 and 1991, when it dominated in coverage of the air war in Iraq and the fall of the Soviet Union — two of the biggest stories of the last 20 years.

"It was Aug. 1, 1990, when Saddam Hussein invaded Kuwait," Blitzer says when asked about his early days at what had been known to some critics as the Chicken Noodle Network. "I was the Pentagon correspondent, and all of a sudden, this is a huge story. I mean, I went to the Pentagon thinking it's the end of the Cold War, they're going to close some bases, maybe build some missile systems or whatever. But all of a sudden, for six months, it's Operation Desert Shield, the buildup to 540,000 U.S. troops in the Persian Gulf. And then in January '91, the war starts. During that whole period, I was on television 12, 14 hours a day doing my reports from the Pentagon."

At 62, Blitzer is still putting in 12-hour-plus days and expecting the nights on air to get even longer as the nation approaches a hotly contested set of midterm elections this fall.

Up in his Bethesda home early enough to catch the 7 a.m. hard-news openings of the network and cable morning shows and start sorting through BlackBerry messages and a daily sunrise batch of some 100 overnight e-mails, CNN's lead political anchor says he still reads The New York Times and The Washington Post in print form before diving into other newspapers and blogs online.

"Usually by 8 in the morning, I'm on the treadmill for one hour," the son of immigrants from Poland says. "I'm running, watching TV, flipping channels — "CNN American Morning," "Today," "Good Morning America," see what the competition has. ... In between all of that, I've already been e-mailing with the producers. They've got ideas. I got ideas. Sometimes you gotta nail down reporters, producers and guests early."

By the time Blitzer sat down for this interview last Wednesday at 3 p.m. in his office at CNN's Washington bureau, he had already been to the White House for a series of on-background interviews about a report released that day saying 75 percent of the oil spilled in the Gulf was gone. And while no one was saying "mission accomplished," the administration was trying to push the notion through reporters like Blitzer that the summerlong nightmare of oil gushing into the Gulf was essentially over.

Blitzer wasn't automatically buying it, but he wanted to hear what the people selling it had to say firsthand.

"Remember, I'm a reporter," says the University of Buffalo history major who earned an M.A. in international relations from the Johns Hopkins University. "I was our Pentagon correspondent. I was our White House correspondent. It's in my blood."

Before the interview, Blitzer had also met with a team of four producers. Each was armed with a laptop, and all five of them looked at their screens and punched keys as they discussed the lineup of that night's show. Analysts and correspondents like Gloria Borger and Jeanne Meserve walked in and out of the room, updating stories and lobbying for airtime with Blitzer even as he also kept an eye on the nine TV screens on the wall facing his desk. Every so often, he'd amp up the TV volume to catch a report on one of the news channels — and everyone would stop and listen for just a few seconds.

Two hours might seem like a lot of time, given the 20 minutes or so (after commercials) that a nightly network newscast has, but before the 45-minute budget meeting in Blitzer's office ended, the producers and anchor

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were debating where they could cut 10 seconds here or 20 seconds there out of one or another stories to make the budget work.

"I tell my staff we don't put crap on the air," Blitzer says. "If we don't have it hard, we're not going to put it on the air. And just because the competition is running with it, that doesn't mean we have to run with it. We're going to check it out, we're going to vet it. As important as it is to be first, it's more important to be right. And it makes me ill when we have to go on the air and apologize or correct."

And that might be one of the greatest contributions of Blitzer's "Situation Room" — that for all of its stylistic innovations in terms of making information the very environment of the newscast with walls of imagery and endless banks of screens, the nightly broadcast has been such a bulwark of traditional journalism that it has influenced one realm of cable news for the better — daytime.

Analysts routinely now differentiate between the more informational approach most cable channels take in daytime versus the heated, partisan opinionators of prime time. Even Fox News emphasizes that Bret Baier, its 6 p.m. anchor, presents news and information rather than opinion. (Baier does, however, follow Glenn Beck, one of cable's most extreme opinion merchants.)

"Wolf is probably the most respected straight arrow in cable news," says David Bohrman, CNN's Washington bureau chief and the primary architect of the Blitzer show. "Everyone knows they're going to get a fair shake from Wolf. ... He's the one you want to be with when news is going on. He'll help you sort it out."

While Baier's "Special Report" swamps "The Situation Room" in the U.S. Nielsen ratings, Blitzer's 6 o'clock hour is also carried on CNN International, which reaches 267.3 million homes and hotel rooms in more than 200 countries and territories. There is no way to accurately measure that international audience, because no centralized service like Nielsen serves all those countries. But it's likely that no American newscast — on cable or network — is as watched as Blitzer's when you add in the worldwide audience.

Still, with all the highly publicized audience erosion, reinvention and comings and goings at CNN these days, Freedman's concern about the future for Blitzer's brand of journalism is not unfounded.

"I'm under no pressure whatsoever to weaken our journalistic standard," Blitzer says when asked about the changes at CNN and how they might be affecting his work. "I feel no pressure to tabloid and do missing young women stories and do anything like that. They want me to do serious hard news but in a smart way — and make sure we do it in a way our viewers will appreciate."

Nor is it unreasonable to wonder about the future of Blitzer himself at a network that has hired Spitzer and is said to be on the verge of replacing Larry King with Piers Morgan.

"I'm in a long-term commitment that CNN has made to me — and that I have made to CNN," Blitzer says. "I get paid to do what I love doing. I wake up in the morning with a certain body of knowledge, and when I go to sleep at night, I'm smarter. ... I'm a news junkie. How much better does it get than to ask newsmakers tough questions — and find out what's going on, and drill and drill and drill?"

[david.zurawik@baltsun.com](mailto:david.zurawik@baltsun.com)

Posted by [David Zurawik](#) at 9:51 AM | [Permalink](#) | [Comments \(12\)](#)



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That article made my day Z. I wasn't watching as much CNN back in the early 90's. When I did start to watch CNN, Wolf Blitzer on The Situation Room was my favorite.

He is the straight arrow that you can count on. I like the way he stands at the desk and gives the news. He is like a solid rock of journalism.

I don't think Wolf Blitzer will ever have to worry. He gives credibility to the job of journalism. I love watching him on CNN.

Congratulations Wolf Blitzer on your anniversary. I will be watching. Wishing you many, many more great years.

Thanks for that great article Z.

Posted by: Sherry T. | **August 7, 2010 10:24 AM**

I've always enjoyed and relied upon CNN for factual information. The Situation Room is one of my favorite shows and Wolf Blitzer is a big part of the reason I watch. I didn't realize he was a MD resident, which makes me like him even more. Congratulations, Wolf!

Posted by: Anonymous | **August 7, 2010 11:14 AM**

Blitzer's deadpan gets a little old for me. He was on a few late night shows a while back and -still- seemed to lack any personality. It was a little off-putting, but in some ways nice to know he took his job so seriously.

But what really turned me off to him was when I noticed him dropping little 'pot-shots' in interviews. Subtle, but noticeable and unprofessional.

The example I remember best is when the Fort Hood shooter's attorney was on for an interview. The attorney, to his credit, did a great job of not trying to make the accused some kind of victim. But he (the atty) ended by saying something to the effect of "We'll have to wait for our chance in court and justice." And Blitzer, almost under his breath, tried to end the interview with "it's certainly more than the victims will get!" I was almost happy when the attorney, quite politely, called Blitzer on it. With a simple "Well, that's not what I was trying to say and I think that's unfair."

Posted by: Dan | **August 7, 2010 11:18 AM**

Wolf Blitzer. One of best stenographers for the people of power in Washington.

Blitzer is a joke. Seriously, when the was the last time Mr. Blitzer ever asked a follow up question on a topic of substance in an interview? (please provide links - given that he's so good at his job and he's on every day it should be hard Blitzer fans to find one or two)

However, because for the most part he is an equal opportunity peddler of falsehoods for Repubs and Dems it makes him a good "journalist". I guess the truth and the facts don't matter as long for the most part you are "fair and balanced" today.

*I saw him ask several follow-up questions in the one interview I watched him tape Wednesday when I was in Washington. The interview was with Sen. Lindsey Graham. Blitzer did an excellent job of pressing him to clarify his remarks about children of persons from other countries who are born in the United States. Check it out from Wednesday's show. Blitzer is one of the best TV interviewers going when it comes to asking follow-up questions. Z*

Posted by: Rook | **August 7, 2010 11:44 AM**



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I have to agree with Dan about Wolf Blitzer taking pot shots during interviews (Anderson Cooper does the same thing). He also slants the discussion to reflect his own views. In particular, I remember when he had a panel discussion about Obama's healthcare last year, and he prefaced the whole exchange with something along the lines of "Obama deserves credit for trying to make sure the uninsured receive health care." Giving credit to one side of the argument before the other can be heard is hardly a fair way to present the issue or the news in general.

Posted by: Joanna | **August 7, 2010 12:41 PM**

Hi Z,

I did not know that Wolf Blitzer was from Maryland either, like someone else said. That is nice for the Baltimore natives.

I really like his name - Wolf. Just a little thought. Not a name you hear a lot, kind of like Anderson Cooper's name.

I wish him lots more success in his career.

Posted by: Sherry T. | **August 7, 2010 12:54 PM**

I like Wolf Blitzer's show. I love when he has panels on for important events...Healthcare, Iraq, the Oil Crisis come to mind. He does allow for followup questions but he also listens and doesn't try to control the segment to a point where he is just there pushing his agenda. We got plenty of that on tv now a days.

Great for him...hope he has 20 more years!

Posted by: Irene | **August 7, 2010 6:25 PM**

He did great in the 2008 elections. Will watch him again in breaking news stories, because he is really good.

Posted by: Jace T. | **August 8, 2010 12:56 AM**

Hi Jace T.,

I wonder if others remember Wolf and the 2008 elections?

I found this link too. [http://www.usatoday.com/tech/products/2008-10-29-election-presidential-technology-cnn\\_N.htm](http://www.usatoday.com/tech/products/2008-10-29-election-presidential-technology-cnn_N.htm)

The technology is amazing. I think in the article it said Wolf watched 9 cameras at the same time. I can't wait to see what they do with the mid-term elections. I missed a lot of the 2008 elections.

Yes, Wolf and John King are good with the technology too. John King often uses the map.

Have a great day.

Posted by: Sherry T. | **August 8, 2010 1:41 PM**

Wolf Blitzer is one of my favorite journalists!

Keep up the good work Wolf Blitzer!

Yours,

James Castro

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Posted by: [James Castro](#) | August 9, 2010 4:09 PM

TV news could do without consultants and media training. Why? Wolf Blitzer is exhibit A.

But there are others. On the local level, two of Nashville's best TV investigative news reporters came from print minus any TV news experience..

Then again, one of Music City's news stations has "trained" its reporters to interact on set with the anchor team by waving their arms around and doing karate chops- evidently to punctuate their points when not mirroring the anchors' body language.

It's all very distracting- just the opposite of what is intended, no doubt..

Stacy Harris  
Publisher/Editor/Media Critic  
Stacy's Music Row Report  
<http://stacyharris.com/mediawatchdog.html>

Posted by: [Stacy Harris](#) | August 10, 2010 12:38 AM

On behalf of the University at Buffalo Alumni Association, congratulations, Wolf, we are so proud to count you as one of our favorite alums! Keep up the good work.

Posted by: [UB Alumni Association](#) | August 10, 2010 12:59 PM

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