

## **Global Journalist: The imminent war against Iraq and the media's readiness to cover it**

**Abstract:** The host and his guests discuss the U.S. and its allies' readiness to go to war against Iraq. In this Dec. 12, 2002 episode, Stuart Loory brings to the table the media's logistics and preparedness to work alongside with the military while, simultaneously, accurately and timely reporting on their actions in Baghdad.

### **Bios**

[Stuart Loory](#) was a long-time reporter and editor for the Chicago Sun-Times and CNN. He was the inaugural Lee Hills Chair in Free Press Studies at the Missouri School of Journalism. He [died in 2015](#).

[Susan Taylor Martin](#) made her career as senior foreign correspondent of the former [St. Petersburg Times](#), now Tampa Bay Times, and later became the newspaper's editor, until her [retirement in 2019](#).

[Sig Christenson](#) is a native Texan award-winning journalist, known for his military coverage for the San Antonio Express News. He co-founded the Military Reporters & Editors in 2002.

[Jim Michaels](#) is an author, and a former war reporter for the USA Today, who reported from Afghanistan and Iraq, among other warzones. He left daily journalism in 2018, to dedicate his time writing books.

[Bronwen Latimer](#) is a photojournalist based in D.C. She is the The Washington Post's Special Projects editor. Her vast career path includes being a photo editor for National Geographic's books.

[Vivienne Walt](#) is an award-winning journalist born in South Africa. A foreign correspondent, she has written for TIME and Fortune Magazine, and was the USA Today's Middle Eastern correspondent.

**Keywords:** iraq war, war coverage planning, western war correspondents, baghdad

### **Stuart Loory 00:18**

Welcome to Global Journalist on KBIA. This is the program that says mid-Missourians, indeed many Americans are interested in international news. I'm Stuart Loory of the Missouri School of Journalism. From all indications, the military of the United States, and many of its allies, are almost, if not completely, ready to go to war against Iraq. If there is a war, it will be because the Bush administration does not believe that the Iraqis have purged themselves of all weapons of mass destruction. Governments may be ready, and their fighting forces on the land, sea and air

may be ready. The questions are, first, how ready is the public? And second, how ready are journalists to report any fighting that takes place? There are many aspects to that last readiness, for one thing: How ready are reporters to work with the military, while at the same time remaining healthily skeptical about the information they're getting? For another: How safe will the journalists be in a warzone? And for another: How will they get the news and how will they get it out? Finally, why should you, the listeners to this program, care about what the news business has done to prepare. To discuss this today we have in St. Petersburg, Florida, Susan Taylor Martin, senior foreign correspondent of the St. Petersburg Times. In San Antonio, Texas, Sig Christenson, a military writer for the San Antonio Express News, and co-founder of Military Reporters & Editors, a new organization set up recently to deal on behalf of journalists with the Pentagon in Washington. Jim Michaels, deputy editor of USA Today and Bronwen Latimer, director of photography of US News and World Report. And finally, in Baghdad, Iraq, Vivienne Walt, Middle Eastern correspondent of USA Today. Let's start with Sig Christenson. Sig, tell us a little bit about this new organization, Military Reporters & Editors and what it's all about.

**Sig Christenson** 02:21

Well, we're an organization of about at least 200 members now. We formed early this year up in Maryland. And when we did that, we basically decided that an awful lot of people were very feeling very frustrated with the Pentagon, and in particular, with access issues. And it wasn't just within the Pentagon, these were reporters at smaller and larger and medium-sized markets all around the country, who were having the same problem. So, after we took a lot of feedback on it, we push forward had a convention or a conference rather, in the in November in Washington, and basically I think that since our formation, we've had a we've certainly had something to say about the issue of access, and I think the Pentagon has heard us and reacted.

**Stuart Loory** 03:01

How have they reacted? Do you think that reporters will be getting more access if war does come to the Middle East?

**Sig Christenson** 03:08

Well, Torie Clarke and her people are saying that we will "You will have access to the military", that we will be embedded with them throughout the armed services, if a war comes.

**Stuart Loory** 03:18

Sig, excuse me, that word embedded? What does that mean?

**Sig Christenson** 03:23

Yeah, yes, good question. Now, basically, that's a fancy word for assigning reporters to military units, whether they're in the Air Force or any of the other services. And, and, you know, this is something that that is really rather new in historical terms. I was talking or emailing Joe Galloway the other day, and he mentioned that, you know, embedding didn't exist in Vietnam, that reporters simply would go from one unit to the next rather freely, covering the war. And what the military is doing now is that they're going to assign reporters to units. And they've said or certainly suggested that they would be frontline units, and that we would certainly get our opportunity to detail what takes place at the front. As to why that is going on? It's a good question. Have we had an impact? I think we have.

**Stuart Loory** 04:09

I read the I read the text of the briefing that Washington bureau chiefs had with Torie Clarke and her people at the Pentagon, and they talked a great deal about pools, about training of reporters, about embedding the reporters with various units. Susan, how do you feel about all this? Do you feel that if you go off to cover that war, it's going to help you?

**Susan Taylor Martin** 04:36

We as a paper, I think have mixed feelings about about this program. We have assigned a reporter to go through the Pentagon bootcamp, which I believe about 60 reporters have already gone through. It's a week-long session where you actually go out to carry a 25 pound rucksack over a five mile hike, go through some of the physical things that you would be expected to go through if you were actually out in the field with the troops. I think our hesitation about participating in something like this, though is how much access we would have? Would we be allowed free access to the commanders? Would we be allowed to interview the troops and to quote them freely? We see it as being a very constrained sort of environment. And as a regional paper, with a limited number of people that we assign to a story like this, although we would probably up the compliment in event of war, we try to do stories that are a little bit off the beaten track and away from the herd so to speak. That's not to say that it's not very important to cover what the troops are doing. It's probably more important for papers like Sig's which have large military presence in their circulation area. Whereas for some of the rest of us, it's, it's more important to, to cover what's going on politically.

**Stuart Loory** 05:51

Well, Susan, I want to come back to that point about a large military presence in, in the St. Petersburg area. But first, I'd like to go to Vivienne Walt. Vivienne, all of this must sound very exotic to you. You're in Baghdad, You are hoping to cover the war from the other side. What is being done by Western correspondents in Baghdad to prepare for the possibility of a war?

**Vivienne Walt** 06:17

Well, we're doing quite a lot. And, you know, most of us have been in and out of here for the last three months or so it is kind of a core group of people now who have spent a lot of time here. And to fortunately, at this point, know a lot of Iraqis fairly well, and, and that, I think is probably going to help us enormously, having had, you know, recent solid, good contacts and built up some friendships on the ground, because we're sure we're gonna need them. We're just beginning to scope out the city a bit and to start thinking in terms of contingencies, like, for example, the hotel that we all stay in, sits on top of a bunker that's used by top government officials, it's clearly not the place to be if there's bombs falling. So, you have to think about where you're going to stay. We're, you know, beginning to look at small discreet hotels, you know, what happens if the government orders everybody out? Is there any way that we can stay, by just laying low for a while, getting to know the city, which is extremely important, if if, you know, it becomes very chaotic. And also thinking about who we work with, in terms of the drivers we have, the translators, are the people we trust? Are they people who would turn and run at the first sign of trouble? Because we cannot operate here alone. And we do need to form good relationships with the local population.

**Stuart Loory** 07:52

Yeah, Vivienne...

**Vivienne Walt** 07:53

So, that's a sense of it.

**Stuart Loory** 07:55

Did I hear you say that some of you may actually stay even if the Iraqi government expels you?

**Vivienne Walt** 08:02

Well, you might have to ask my editors that. I would argue probably many of us would want to stay, you know, especially having been through this phase, I would think a lot of us would want to. A lot of us are not American citizens, and what you know, that might perhaps be a slight help, although not perhaps not, you know, given that we work for the American media but, these are all very open questions right now. We're also you know, having to think about if we, if we have to get out how we get out, because it's a good 10-11 hours drive to the Jordanian border, I've done it about five times in the last three months that journey, and we don't know that it's that that road is going to be safe to travel on. So, that we, it really now is the time to start thinking about all these technical details. It's very difficult country to operate in.

**Stuart Loory** 08:59

Vivienne, you heard Sig Christenson talk about the briefing at the Pentagon, in which Washington bureau chiefs were assured that there would be trading and that there would be assignment of reporters to military units, and that the Pentagon, as it was said in that briefing would do everything to help the reporters get their stories out. Is anything similar being done by the Iraqi military?

**Vivienne Walt** 09:30

Well, the Iraqi military, we have no access to whatsoever. And in fact, it may surprise you, but there are very few soldiers on the streets of Baghdad, which is a city of 5 million people. You really don't see them around the capital. You see police, but you do not see the military. Were unlikely to get close to anywhere near to close to the military. I think what we might really wind up covering is just the civilian part of it, which could turn very ugly, under certain circumstances if there's a power vacuum or whatever. So, you know, the reporters here are really trying to figure out how they fit into all of this. We're not too sure, exactly who's going to be fighting with who on the ground, and who, as the American correspondents, we could get any kind of protection from.

**Stuart Loory** 10:25

When you say, who's going to be fighting with whom you're you're talking about civil strife or domestic strife between various units in Iraq, as well as fighting between Iraqi units, and as the Bush administration will put it, coalition units?

**Vivienne Walt** 10:45

Well, I mean, it rains, it ranges, a whole gamut and we really, I think there are just so many unknowns at the moment whether there will be a local train U.S. trains military force, or whether it'll simply be kind of a little anarchic. The Baghdad residents we've been interviewing the last week, seem to worry most that they'll just be sort of widespread looting. And a lot of schools settling among bath party people among officials that could be could be pretty bloody. Most most regular folk here have guns, and Baghdad is just you know, a wash and weapons, you don't actually need a military force to come in and give them to people. They have them at home. So everybody is somewhat edgy about the way this is going to go and how quickly a new government could be in power.

**Stuart Loory** 11:45

Yeah, Vivienne, if you don't mind, let's bring Jim Michaels into this discussion. Jim, what do you think? And how does USA Today management feel about the possibility that some of its reporters may stay there unauthorized by the Iraqi government?

**Jim Michaels** 12:02

Well, all these decisions have yet to be made. And the way USA Today is approaching any impending war is basically this way: You know, we'll certainly see what's available in terms of this embedding situation, because that'll obviously give us access to a variety of military units that may or may not be involved in campaigns in Iraq. There'll be subsequent, probably ad hoc pools that are put together, you know, in places like Bahrain, Kuwait, Qatar, and places like that, that'll be set up as campaigns develop and as a military decides to give various people access to the front.

**Stuart Loory** 12:48

Jim, if you don't mind...

**Jim Michaels** 12:50

Thirdly, the point I'd like to make, though, is that, you know, for hundreds of years, what it really boils down to is people like Vivienne Walt out there kind of, you know, using their street smarts and enterprise and initiative to get out there and cover the story. And that was true in the Spanish-American War with, you know, Richard Harding Davis as much as it is today. So, as

much as we complain about access and his an issue, it really boils down to, you know, I think it was Churchill who said the whole job of a foreign correspondent is to go as far as you can, as fast as you can.

**Stuart Loory** 13:27

Okay, we have to take a break right now. This is Global Journalist on KBIA, I'm Stuart Loory. We'll be right back. Welcome back to Global Journalist. You may listen to this program, again, ask questions or make comments by going to [www.globaljournalist.org](http://www.globaljournalist.org) or hear in mid-Missouri by calling us at 573-882-9641. Jim Michaels, you were bringing up history before the break. One of the other famous bits of journalistic lore is that "In a time of war, truth is the first casualty." What is being done to ensure that it is not going to be a big casualty this time around?

**Jim Michaels** 14:16

Well, nothing that hasn't been done in the past. After the Persian Gulf War, there was a lot of hand wringing after Grenada, there was a lot of hand wringing, it was the first time really that, since the Vietnam, that the press was was kind of involved and covering anything like a military conflict, and there was a lot of hand wringing about access. The Gulf War was a little bit better, but tightly controlled, tightly managed, for a variety of reasons. And Afghanistan, was also very tightly managed and controlled from an American military perspective. No question about it. And I think this conflict will be as well. It's great with Sig's group that, you know, he it's a great group, you know, it ought to lobby for more access. But you know, the truth is that, that the public is largely on the side of the military in situations like this. And it's very, very difficult to move them off the dime, access will be very limited, restricted. Yeah, I think there's no question about that.

**Stuart Loory** 15:30

Bronwen Latimer, is there any difference in the planning of a group of photographers and a group of reporters?

**Bronwen Latimer** 15:39

Yeah, there is actually, I was sort of struck by it while I was listening. Because we, we have a staff photographer, we have staff photographers, where we also there's a whole freelance market out there of people who have worked on stories, many photographers who spent enormous amounts of times in the north with the Kurds. So, what we do is we strategize by, we will have someone embedded with the army, and we probably will be working with someone

who has his own embedding with the Marines. And then we will have somebody maybe in Jordan, although, as Vivienne said, we're a little worried about that road. But we're talking to people who have a lot of who have done stories in the north who can come in from there. So it's, we really are thinking in terms of experience and strategy.

**Stuart Loory** 16:33

You bring up the matter of freelancers. Jim Michaels or Sig, as far as you know, is the Pentagon going to accredit freelancers and give them all of the same access that staff people have?

**Sig Christenson** 16:50

That's a good question. I don't really know that it hasn't come up between me and any of the people that depending on us I've been speaking with, Jim may have a better idea.

**Jim Michaels** 16:59

Well, you know, again, I don't have any specific knowledge. But I can say this, I mean, in general, because the military holds the cards, they are able to say we're going to provide access to a limited number of people it then becomes... I saw this in the Gulf, it becomes kind of a fighting among the press then as to who who gets what scraps? And I think it would be very, you know, for freelancers, unfortunately, it's very difficult for them to make a case that they shouldn't be brought along. And and it's again, it's because the military basically says we have a fixed number of slots, and we're going to dole them out. And, and that becomes very much sort of a political fight as much as they like to say they're being fair and equitable in distributing those slots.

**Stuart Loory** 17:42

Yeah, let's talk a little bit about communications and how you get the story out. In the old days, journalists, we're all dependent on perhaps people from Western Union or in a military situation, perhaps even the military to help get the story out. Now, things have changed. Reporters can carry their own telephones, they can send digital photographs, video, whatever. Susan Taylor Martin, what are you doing to prepare your people?

**Susan Taylor Martin** 18:14



Well, we, of course, we have satellite phones, we have the regular cell phones. One of the concerns that Vivienne probably could have talked about is that in Baghdad, where we spent considerable time a year and a half ago, she said, reporters and photographers are very closely monitored by the Iraqi Ministry of Information. And to my knowledge, still all of the dispatches, both print and photographic have to go through that Ministry of Information. And I think there is a potential boondoggle there with, you know, so many people trying to get their stuff out. Even when we were there a year and a half ago, when there were very few constraints on on the press, we still had, I still had to write out all my stories by hand, take them to a government fax office, which then fax them to my office and kept the copy. You can only imagine why it was keeping copies. So it's a very difficult country to to work from in the best of times. And I think it's going to be even obviously, even harder in war time.

**Stuart Loory** 19:15

Unfortunately, Vivienne is no longer with us, but Jim Michaels, does...

**Jim Michaels** 19:23

It's changed a little bit. I mean, I'm sure there's still there's plenty of monitoring of stuff both before it goes out and when it's in print, but there's there is internet access now, and you are able to email stuff, there's Vivienne can talk could have talked more to this point. But I mean, they do allow satellite phones and although they have to be registered with the ministry, et cetera, et cetera. So, you know, but you know, just to raise another point regarding technology and so forth, even though it's changed a lot and allowed a huge amount of access during the Persian Gulf War, those reporters on pools still had to do gives their you know, quote unquote product via video or, or, or stories to the military, which would then supposedly move it back to a rare area where it was, you know, then sent off and that could take days and sometimes even longer. So, despite all the technology, we still had to rely on a pretty archaic way of getting copy back. This time, supposedly things have changed a little bit, and there'll be some amount of access, you're allowed allowed to use satellite phones with military units. But I don't think that's been completely worked out yet.

**Stuart Loory** 20:37

Yeah, Jimmy, a pool is a sort of an ad hoc organization that is set up by the military, when they cannot take the entire press corps someplace, they take a small group of people who go and then report back to the rest of the press corps. Is there any censorship? In the situation you were just describing? Or is the military pretty honest about taking what the pool...

**Jim Michaels** 21:05

Well, Sig could probably talk to that as well, but I would say that, you know, I don't think there's any real censorship, they're pretty smart about that, astute about that. And they've been told, and even though someone may get a little carried away in a lower level, all the people in the in the upper echelons understand that, that, you don't do something like that. So it's really, more, there's no, there's no outright censorship or anything like that, by no means but you know, clearly, you can manage the message you sent out by by controlling the access, there's no question about that.

**Stuart Loory** 21:42

If I can change the subject. If this war does come, it's going to be a war between vastly different cultures and social systems and parts of the world. What are you doing, Jim and Sig and Susan and Bronwen, to prepare the people who are going to cover this war, to understand the the history and the background and the varying cultures?

**Jim Michaels** 22:09

Well, at USA Today, they're even now doing this, so we're sending a lot of journalists out into various regions that that they may be covering, when a conflict comes, just to get an understanding of, of these various areas, and as well as workout logistics and so forth. And in addition, reporters who are or may be involved in it know who they are, and so are able to start doing some, some work on the phone and, and research from here as well now, so.

**Stuart Loory** 22:43

Susan Taylor Martin.

**Susan Taylor Martin** 22:44

Well, right. I mean, our feeling is that, that any war with Iraq is going to have huge significance for that entire part of the world, which is a part of the world that most Americans still don't know much about. So the emphasis of our coverage for the last three or four years has been going into as many of those countries as possible, doing series thorough stories about the history, the culture and politics, we were in Saudi Arabia last summer, talking to military people there we were in Qatar at the Al Udeid base, when it first came out that, for example, that was going to be a big staging area, but trying to give our readers of feel for what the people in those areas are

like, what they think about, how this war is going to impact that entire region, which is so important to us.

**Stuart Loory** 23:27

Bronwen Latimer.

**Bronwen Latimer** 23:29

I'm a big believer in educating the photographers on the history and the politics and the culture of the countries that are involved. And so, I spend a lot of time sending clips and recommending books and half the time it turns out that people have already read them, which is great.

**Stuart Loory** 23:47

That's terrific.

**Bronwen Latimer** 23:48

Yeah.

**Stuart Loory** 23:49

Sig Christenson?

**Sig Christenson** 23:50

Yeah, that's a that's a good point. We're we're doing the same thing. We have a reporter on our staff, one of our most senior people, who is studying Arabic at the moment. I'm going to cover the war, from the side of the military perspective, from start to finish. And, and one thing I am doing is reading a book called the "The Saddam Hussein Reader", which is a fascinating compilation of stories that give you a pretty good insight in one book, I think, and of what what is going on in Iraq for the last 30 years or so. And, and I'm reading that in part, because I'm, I'm anticipating that the peacekeeping, a nation building part of this war that follows the war is probably going to be one of the most dynamic parts of the whole story. Rebuilding Iraq, after we

go in and break it is going to be an extraordinarily formidable task. You can wonder whether the Bush administration is really up to it because they don't have much liking for peacekeeping. And in fact, if you go on the Defense Department website, you won't find anything on it anymore. So obviously, that's going to be a dynamic element of it. I'm trying to read up a little bit about it. And I think that the other thing you do is look at as as many stories as you can, and, and of course, working in a newspaper every day, you have plenty of access to that.

**Stuart Loory** 25:14

Let's say you're talking about preparing for coverage after the shooting war is over, or the the main shooting war I should say. Susan Taylor Martin, are you doing the same thing?

**Susan Taylor Martin** 25:25

Yes, exactly. Yes. I mean, we're making plans now for how we're, we're going to cover the actual conflict. And then, as Sig said, probably probably the most important part of the story will be the aftermath, trying to piece put together a democratic country from all these various factions that for years, decades have not gotten along. And it will have a huge, a huge effect on on that region and potentially the world.

**Stuart Loory** 25:51

There are a lot of people who say that weapons of mass destruction are not the real issue here. That perhaps the real issue is oil. Jim Michaels, what do you think?

**Jim Michaels** 26:03

Well, I mean, there's, you know, I don't I don't know if it can be answered a yes or no, but clearly, there's a lot of strategic interest in that area. And, and always has been. And, you know, that's why there have been wars there over the ages. It's an extremely, it's an area of extreme strategic importance for that reason. At the same time, though, clearly, terrorism has become a central and key issue. And, and I think that's definitely a factor in the administration's decision making at this point. So, I don't think it can be simplified to the extent that there's some cobble of oil and fish that have gotten together and decided to carve up the region after after a war.

**Stuart Loory** 26:55

Okay, we have just a few seconds left. And I want to ask Susan Taylor Martin, the last question. You were talking about the military presence in San Antonio, but not, you were implying that St. Petersburg did not have it. Actually, the Central Command is right, right around the corner from you.

**Susan Taylor Martin** 27:13

Right, yeah. What I meant was we do not have tens of thousands of soldiers based in this area the way you do in Fort Bragg, or in Texas. Of course, we are the home of the U.S. Central Command, which we do cover, this is where Tommy Franks is based, obviously, it's you know, the the key, the key component of this war. But what I mean is in terms of covering the military and their what they are going through, what the the troops are going through, that is a less important story for us.

**Stuart Loory** 27:42

Okay, Susan, I'm sorry. We are out of time. Our guest today have been Vivienne Walt in Baghdad, Sig Christenson in San Antonio, Texas, Susan Taylor Martin in St. Petersburg, Florida, and in Washington, Bronwen Latimer and Jim Michaels. Our director is Pat Akers and our producer is Sarah Andrea Fajardo (ph). For all, I'm Stuart Loory, Global Journalist, we'll be back next week.