



## War on the Web

**Internet video-sharing sites like YouTube expose the horrors of life in wartime** BY COCO MCPHERSON

THE VIDEO CLIP IS A VIOLENT BLUR OF images and sounds - a beach, a sliver of ocean, the sour, persistent drone of a siren. Rescue workers claw at a pile of blankets - one staggers through the sand dragging the lifeless body of a child by its shirt. This is the deadly aftermath of a June artillery strike, allegedly by Israeli forces, that killed seven members of a Palestinian family as they picnicked on a beach in northern Gaza. This clip will never run on the nightly news. But you can watch it - and thousands of other videos like it - on YouTube and Google Video.

While the U.S. media refuse to show graphic war footage, the sickening reality is readily available on the wildly popular video-sharing sites. A huge range of uncensored war material - from amateur clips captured on cell-phone cameras in

Beirut to full-blown satellite news programs about the Middle East - has given Americans unprecedented access to images considered too real for TV: bloody, unsanitized footage from the conflicts in Iraq,



Afghanistan, Lebanon and the West Bank. For a White House obsessed with controlling images of the war, the wheels may be coming off the bus.

‘We’re in the middle of a media revolution,’ says Democratic operative Joe Trippi, who pioneered the use of the Net as a campaign tool. ‘The filters are coming off, and it doesn’t really matter if CBS and NBC decide that they have some level of violence they won’t show you on the news because they deem it too horrific. Those editorial decisions are going to be cast aside by people. It will have a dramatic impact not only on our country’s politics but on our policies.’

Where is this stuff coming from? The Gaza footage was uploaded to YouTube by Sanah Zayed, a nineteen-year-old college student from Chicago who downloaded it from Ogrish, the notorious British gore site. Ogrish’s coy motto, ‘Uncover Reality,’ hints at both its legitimate twenty-four hour news reporting and its hideously sensational images. Material is also uploaded to YouTube from established news networks like Al Jazeera and from satellite news programs like Link TV’s Peabody Award-winning *Mosaic*.

Google’s recent \$1.65 billion purchase of YouTube has prompted speculation about how new ownership will affect content on the site, not just copyright-protected material but also any number of violent or otherwise objectionable clips. In the past several weeks, YouTube has stripped some of the most unsparing war footage, including Zayed’s. The

clips provide a long-missing layer of reality: an audio track popping with the explosions, screams and profanity excised from most mainstream coverage. “From time to time, CNN and Fox jump into a feed from an Arab network, but they still put in their own narrative,” says *Mosaic* producer Jamal Dajani.” They always kill the audio. But those sounds of people crying, mothers wailing have great impact.”

YouTube and Google officials won’t disclose what percentage of the more than 100 million videos viewed (or 70,000 new videos uploaded) daily on the site addresses America’s wars. “There’s a lot of content and we welcome it all, but what I think is really interesting is the raw; on-location footage,” says Google’s Jennifer Feikin. “We’ve got stuff from Baghdad, Lebanon, Israel, Afghanistan and the Sudan. These are from people who don’t have or want to create Web sites, host videos or pay bandwidth costs. That’s what we’re happy to host.”

For media watchers, the convergence of satellite technology and the video-sharing sites means it’s no longer necessary to have \$100 million to launch a TV network. *Mosaic* is a prime example. Produced by San Francisco-based satellite network Link TV and available online – where it’s logging more than 150,000 streams a month (Link TV itself has 5.5 million weekly viewers) – the show is archived on Google Video. *Mosaic’s* premise is brilliantly simple: National television-news reports from fifteen countries in the Middle East, including Israel, Egypt, Syria, Iraq, Iran and Yemen, are translated into English and spliced together to form a half-hour of straight, unedited news – the same news that 300 million Middle Easterners have access to each day.

“There is a difference in the culture of wartime reporting

between the U.S. and much of the world,” notes Dajani. “Here, when you watched the events of 9/11, the pictures were very sanitized. We didn’t see corpses. The coverage in the Middle East isn’t sanitized at all. The death and destruction is brought right into your living room.”

But how gruesome is *too* gruesome? “Many people think what we do is just sick,” admits Hayden Hewitt, the co-owner of Ogrish, which hosts some of the darkest material on the Web, including the videotaped beheadings of Nicholas Berg and Daniel Pearl, and workers leaping from the Twin Towers. “But the networks feed us the idea that warfare is all laser-guided precision, clean and precise. Nothing could be further from the truth. War is still a grotesque spectacle. It shows our world at its worst, and people should see that.”