

The Independent

Notes from a country in collapse

Channel 4's splendid 'Algeria Daily' offers a strong antidote to the saturation coverage of Washington



GODFREY
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THE NEWS

“Some people call me a butcher,” says the young photographer, urchin-out and waif-like. People are killed, so the paper wants pictures of bodies. Today, for a break, no bodies. She is doing a story about a school. “I’d rather do that kind of picture,” she says. But most of the time, the paper wants bodies.

The next night, after the title shot of the white city shining across a blue Mediterranean, we met a writing journalist, Samiha. She likes to do taboo subjects, she explains, like fashion shows. How different from our own dear media. She interviews a model: young, beautiful. “The country is catastrophic,” the model says simply. “But I like to dance, to go out to dinner, to be elegant.” “They want to shout,” says Samiha. “They want to live.”

Not all of them get to do that. The next episode is closer to the bone. An editor, this time. Things are getting easier in some ways, he says. Now we can write about certain stories we couldn’t touch before, like the families who are looking for husbands, brothers, cousins who disappeared in 1993 and 1994. These women go out and demonstrate in the street, holding up identically cards with pictures of the ones who disappeared. “I want my brother,” says one, but she knows he is dead.

Algeria Daily, a series of brief nightly vignettes, made by Article Z for Channel 4 and shown each evening for a week, was oddly moving: an oblique, cunningly innovative way of reporting the news from a place where conventional crash-bang reporting techniques wouldn’t work. Spare and subtle, it contrasts strangely with the elephantine ultimate docusoap in Washington.

Forests of mikes, mountains of cameras, armies of reporters, standing round and repeating over and over again that they are waiting for a report whose content we all know in painful detail already. No restraints, no danger, no problem, except to know what to report. The mood is sombre, the reporters say. The President cannot be written off, they say; not for nothing is he called the Comeback Kid. His features are examined for signs of stress, his wife’s for clues to her feelings.

This has been the first major story where even live television news had to chase along behind the internet. There will be others where that cannot be true. But we should mark the milestone as we pass it. For the first time the cameras on the White House lawn, the reporters on Monica’s beach outside the Federal courthouse, will have nothing to offer



Village people: the oblique way of news reporting in Algeria contrasts strangely with the docusoap in Washington

REUTERS

as compelling or as fresh as what will be issued from four congressional websites.

It is worth reflecting on this a little. In the age of radio politics, “everyone” really did listen to Hitler and Mussolini, Churchill and Roosevelt, Nasser and De Gaulle. Those who didn’t have a radio of their own listened communally. In the television age, at least in developed countries, by the 1960s “everyone” had access to a TV set, with hundreds of millions of people watching world events.

A powerful lobby would have us believe that “everyone” has access to the internet. But they don’t – even in the United States. Perhaps half the population does. In countries like this one, or Germany, or Australia, where internet penetration is relatively high, the proportion is still much lower; and most of those with access do so at work, not at home. So, releasing a story on the internet is, for now at least, releasing it to a two-tier audience: to one audience that can read it direct, and to another that gets the news filtered through television or newspapers.

Viewers will be riveted by the soap opera in Washington. It has everything: sex, lies and tragedy, even by the classic definition as formulated by eminent Victorian AC Bradley: the fall of a man of high degree and noble character, brought low by his own flaws. True, when compared with the fall of Richard Nixon, it does suggest that other formula, of Karl Marx: that history repeats itself, the first time as tragedy, the second time as farce.

One reason why Clinton will probably have to go, however, is that there is too much other news in the world: news of crises, dramas, catastrophes that we have come to believe only the president of the United States can deal with. Floods in China and Bangladesh. Genocide in Kosovo and central Africa. Economic collapse in Japan and political collapse in Russia. Famine and war in Sudan, famine and an apparently insane regime in North Korea. Torture and massacre in Algeria, on the very fringe of Europe. The world is more dangerous than ever, but we are more interested in the tragic-comedy in Washington.

It is easy to cover the self-inflicted agony of Bill Clinton. There are quotable inter-views by the score, crew and edit suites to rent, miles of video to clip and voice-over. To shoot, to edit, to feed: these are child’s play compared with getting at the reality in the Caucasus, in Indonesia, or the Middle East. The conventional mechanisms of television news are stretched to their limits to cover these dangerous, intractable stories, and we have to acknowledge the courage with which news organisations do their best to report them just the same.

That is why the deceptively simple technique of *Algeria Daily* may be something we will be seeing more often. Better, perhaps, to find a local journalist who is covering a story, year in, year out, and let them say what they find notable. Because somehow we have got to keep explaining to viewers who are also voters and citizens as well as consumers, that the world out there is a dangerous place, and dangers to us can come from faraway places of which we know little.