

## CNN and the business of state-sponsored TV news | Glenn Greenwald | Comment is free



CNN's state-sponsored program on Kazakhstan. Photograph: via CNN



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- [Glenn Greenwald](#)
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Today I reported on the refusal of CNN International (CNNi) to broadcast an award-winning documentary, "iRevolution", that was produced in early 2011 as the Arab Spring engulfed the region and which was highly critical of the regime in [Bahrain](#). The documentary, featuring CNN's on-air correspondent Amber Lyon, viscerally documented the brutality and violence the regime was using against its own citizens who were peacefully protesting for democracy. Commenting on why the documentary did not air on CNNi, CNN's spokesman cited "purely editorial reasons".

Even so, the network's relationships with governments must bear closer examination. CNNi has aggressively pursued a business strategy of extensive, multifaceted financial arrangements between the network and several of the most repressive regimes around the world which the network purports to cover. Its financial dealings with Bahrain are deep and longstanding.

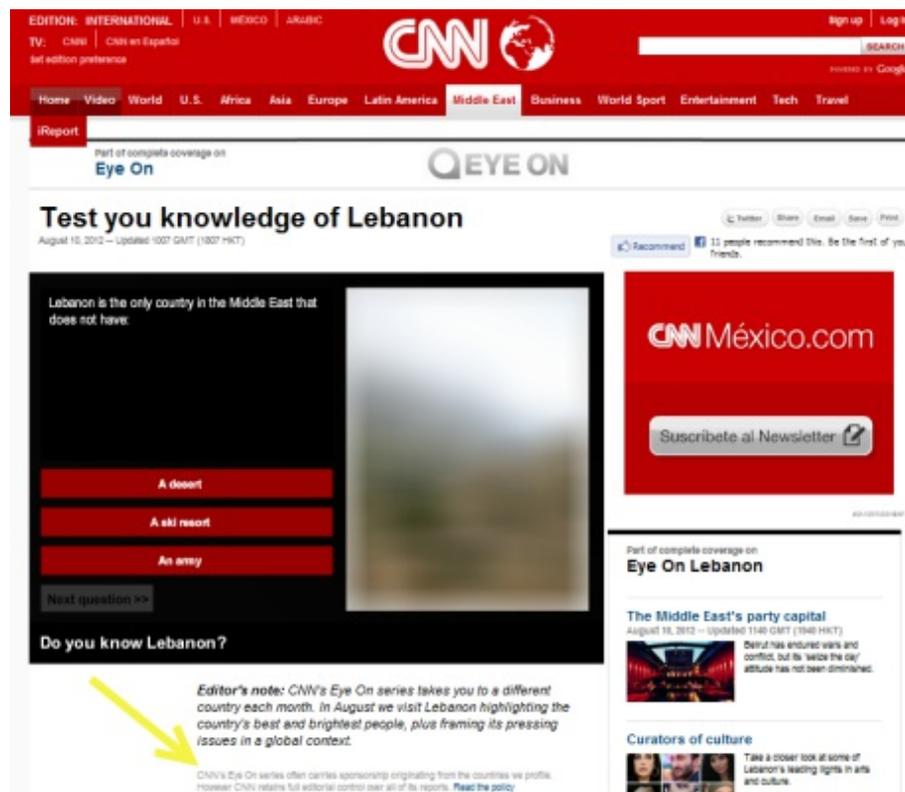
### CNNi's pursuit of sponsorship revenue from the world's regimes

CNNi's pursuit of and reliance on revenue from Middle East regimes increased significantly after the 2008 financial crisis, which caused the network to suffer significant losses in corporate sponsorships. It thus pursued all-new, journalistically dubious ways to earn revenue from governments around the world. Bahrain has been one of the most aggressive government exploiters of the opportunities presented by CNNi.

These arrangements extend far beyond standard sponsorship agreements for advertising of the type most major media outlets feature. CNNi produces those programs in an arrangement [it describes](#) as "in association with" the government of a country, and offers regimes the ability to pay for specific programs about their country. These programs are then featured as part of CNNi's so-called "Eye on" series ("[Eye on Georgia](#)", "[Eye on the Phillipines](#)", "[Eye on Poland](#)"), or "[Marketplace Middle East](#)", all of which is designed to tout the positive economic, social and political features of that country.

The disclosure for such arrangements is often barely visible. This year, for instance, CNNi produced an "Eye on Lebanon" series, which that [nation's tourist minister boasted](#) was intended "to market Lebanon as a tourism destination". He said "his ministry was planning a large promotional campaign dubbed 'Eye on Lebanon' to feature on CNN network."

Yet one strains to find the faded, small disclosure print on [this "Eye on Lebanon" page](#), even if one is specifically searching for it. To the average viewer unaware of these government sponsorships, it appears to be standard "reporting" from the network.



That tiny disclosure provides that "CNN's Eye On series often carries sponsorship originating from the countries we profile." In other instances, such as its [online promotion for "Eye on Georgia"](#), no such disclaimer is provided.

A [recent critique](#) from the Atlantic's website of the network's "Eye on Kazakhstan" series noted that "there are some unusual things going on with CNN International's Kazakhstan series" but "you'd have to know the country pretty well to spot them."

Specifically, as Myles Smith, a Central Asia-based consultant, [reported](#) in a piece entitled "Kazakhstan: CNN Blurs Line Between News and Advertising", the program ends with an "in association" disclosure that merely shows two unnamed corporate logos: as it turns out, those logos are of agencies of the Kazakh government, though the average viewer would have no way of knowing this. The program also features an expert guest who, undisclosed to the Eye on viewer, is an employee of the Kazakh government. As Smith commented:

*"[T]elevision and internet viewers are left with little indication that the programing isn't news, but rather a flashy infomercial exploiting CNN's waning credibility."*

CNN's "[sponsorship policy](#)", which bears a date after this controversy arose over its rosy-eyed "Eye On" program about Kazakhstan, states that:

*"[P]arts of CNN's coverage beyond the daily news are produced as Special Reports, which attract sponsors who pay to associate their products or services with the editorial content,' but claims that 'at no stage do the sponsors have a say in which stories CNN covers.'"*

Even so, CNNi's editorial conduct toward Bahrain, combined with its aggressive pursuit of money from the regime, raises serious questions about its ability, or desire, to maintain journalistic independence.

## CNNi's financial dealings with the regime in Bahrain

At the same time as CNN was covering the regime, Bahrain was an aggressive participant in CNN's various "sponsorship" opportunities, with official agencies of the regime often boasting of how their extensive involvement with CNN was improving the nation's image around the world. Beyond that, there are multiple examples of CNN International producing plainly propagandistic coverage of the regime, often without any minimal disclosure of the vested interests of its sources.

The primary regime agency exploiting these opportunities at CNNi is the Bahrain Economic Development Board (BEDB). It [describes itself](#) as "responsible for marketing the Kingdom of Bahrain abroad". The agency is chaired by "His Royal Highness Prince Salman bin Hamad Al Khalifa, the Crown Prince".

In its [2010 annual report](#), the BEDB – in the section entitled "Spreading the Word – at Home and Abroad" – proudly touted its extensive involvement with CNN:

The BEDB also featured an extensive, image-improving advertising campaign on CNN:

This extensive relationship had been building for many years. A [2008 article](#) in a journal devoted to media advertisement in the Middle East trumpeted:

*"CNN International announced that its coverage of the 2008 World Economic Forum in Davos is being exclusively sponsored by the Bahrain Economic Development Board (BEDB) for the second year running."*

It quoted Rani R Raad, CNNi's advertising head:

*"Bahrain is one of the fastest growing economies in the Middle East and World*

### Promotional Campaign

#### ▪ CNN Coverage during DAVOS 2011 – EDB Comprehensive Sponsorship

In addition to spots around CNN's daily television coverage from Davos, the EDB sponsored a series of vignettes entitled 'The Agenda' and 'Davos Debrief' which aired throughout CNN's coverage, offering viewers insights into the Davos programme and quick turnaround reactions to meetings. The advertising campaign spanned the event, offering EDB exposure to CNN audiences – both on air and online – which were available in over 200 million households worldwide. As one of the fastest growing economies in the Middle East, the World Economic Forum was a natural fit for the EDB to reach its audience of global opinion formers and influencers. A high level delegation from Bahrain was part of the important global economic forum at Davos, and the EDB's association with CNN, one of the world's most influential news broadcasters, helped in making a strong case for future investment and partnerships.

#### ▪ CNN 'Eye on Bahrain'

CNN's "Eye on Bahrain" examined the characteristics and future of a country that is becoming a location of choice for businesses looking to access the trillion dollar Gulf market and wider Middle East. The network's flagship business

*Economic Forum is a natural fit for the BEDB to reach our audience of global opinion formers and influencers."*

In a [2010 announcement](#) heralding more BEDB sponsorship of CNN's Davos coverage, including "exclusive BEDB branding" on CNN.com's World Economic Forum microsite, Rand stated:

*"We're delighted that our partnership with the BEDB remains an enduring and successful one."*

programme "Quest Means Business", presented by Richard Quest, and "Marketplace Middle East", presented by award winning journalist John Defterios, featured Bahrain and its open and liberal business environment. The show, broadcast live from Bahrain, was a joint cooperation between CNN and the EDB. A comprehensive review of Bahrain's economy, tourism, lifestyle and future direction was presented through a series of interviews with various ministers, sector

#### ■ Advertising

EDB's 2010 advertising featured a multi-message campaign on a phased rotation in key markets such as Europe, Asia, GCC and the USA, following a comprehensive wave of research conducted in those markets. A total of eight television commercials were produced in English, which ran on CNN and CNBC. The campaign featured the use of a "Fact Device" which resulted in sharper and clearer articulation of the EDB's key messages.

As negative news stories of its brutal repression grew in the wake of the Arab Spring, the regime undertook a massive, very well-funded PR campaign to improve its image. Central to that campaign was CNN International.

One large contract was [with the advertising giant M&C Saatchi](#). As Bahrain Watch documents, "around the same time that the Arab Spring protests began in Bahrain in February 2011, M&C Saatchi was awarded a contract by the Bahrain International Circuit to advertise the 2011 Formula 1 race," and was then "awarded a five-year contract worth BD 5.5m (US\$14,575,000) by the Economic Development Board" to "develop and implement a comprehensive media and promotional plan" for Bahrain. As Bahrain Watch notes, a new contract with Bahrain's ministry of culture resulted in this:

Then again in November 2011, the Ministry of Culture hired M&C Saatchi to plan and implement a tourism campaign for Bahrain in a contract worth BD 196,747 (US\$ 521,380). It is probably under this contract that these two TV commercials were commissioned, to be played on CNN and at the World Economic Forum in Davos.

And as noted in the accompanying article on Lyon and CNNi's refusal to broadcast the "iRevolution" documentary, at least one of the largest PR firms working for the regime, Qorvis Communications, voiced complaints to CNNi about its negative coverage of the regime.

## CNNi's merger of advertisement and news for Bahrain

The regime in Bahrain often openly trumpets the hagiographical treatment it receives from CNNi. In 2010, BEDB's [website gushed](#) about CNNi's "Eye on Bahrain" series, which had been re-branded as CNN i-List Bahrain. "Between the 8th and the 12th of March 2010, CNN's Richard Quest with John Defterios – Quest Means Business show was broadcast live from Bahrain," the BEDB wrote. The regime agency described the CNNi show as thus:

*"[A] comprehensive review of Bahrain's economy and future direction was presented through a series of interviews with various ministers, sector specialists and more."*

The BEDB page touting the show features several incredibly supine interviews by CNNi of various Bahraini officials, [including its crown prince](#). It features a CNNi segment on the [status of Bahrain as a close and loyal US ally](#). Still [another segment](#) hailed the kindgom's "established legal framework" as the key to avoiding the worst damage of the financial crisis.

To describe the entire program as a massive, blatant propaganda show for the regime is to understate the case. Indeed, as noted above, the BEDB itself described the program as "a joint cooperation between CNN and" itself. CNN's promotion of the program, which contains no disclosure whatsoever of the involvement of the regime in its funding and sponsorship, conveys exactly the tone and substance of this "reporting":

This type of fawning coverage of the regime has been standard course for CNN for years. In 2008, CNN's John Defterios, [on his "Marketplace Middle East" blog](#), heaped praise on the crown prince. Of his first time in the prince's presence, he wrote:

*"A big smile and warm greeting clearly mask the undertaking within the court of the crown prince to complete an economic and political reform process."*

Defterios hailed the Bahraini prince as a reformer who believes "there was too much resistance to change." His Marketplace show has featured [wholly sycophantic interviews](#) with the CEO of the BEDB.

CNN's efforts on behalf of the regime often violate the most basic precepts of journalistic disclosure obligations, sometimes in ways that are shocking even to the cynical eye. Just two weeks ago, on the website for Fareed Zakaria's program, CNN [featured an article](#) by Rob Sobhani touting all of the "innovative" green energy policies Bahrain is pursuing. This is all designed, Sobhani wrote, "to make Bahrain a global leader in combating climate change and global warming". Indeed, he said, "both issues are personally important to King Hamad."

Who is Sobhani? The most recent CNN article heralding Bahrain's energy policies identifies him only as "president of Caspian Group Holdings, which has interests in green energy and infrastructure projects, and author of 'King Abdullah of Saudi Arabia: A Leader of Consequence'". (His book on the House of Saud is every bit as sycophantic as the title suggests. Sobhani's own company [itself says](#) the book "should be of value to those seeking to learn more about Saudi Arabia and its visionary king"; unsurprisingly, in his CNN article on Bahrain, he managed to work in praise for Saudi energy policies as well).

But there is much more to Sobhani than that. In [a 2011 article](#) also published by CNN on Zakaria's site, Sobhani purported to describe "what the Kings of Saudi Arabia and Bahrain are thinking".

Roughly two weeks after Lyon and her crew returned from Bahrain having witnessed pervasive brutality from the regime, Sobhani assured CNN readers in that article:

*"I've met with the King of Bahrain on numerous occasions. This is a man who wants reform ... When he talks about reform, he really means it."*

As usual, he also had very kind words for the Saudi rulers:

*"The King is an environmentalist. If I was President Obama, I would say, 'King Abdullah, let's partner together on the environment.'"*

The disclosure line about Sobhani on that 2011 article is telling. After noting that his company is "a group with interests in energy and infrastructure projects", it added that "he engages extensively with the Kings of Bahrain and Saudi Arabia for work." In other words, CNN's 2011 expert on what the Saudi and Bahraini regimes are thinking is someone who has extensive business interests with those two regimes.

But at least, in 2011, it disclosed this glaring conflict of interest. By contrast, in 2012, when it gave Sobhani a platform to hype the deep and profound concern for global warming on the part of the Bahraini King, there was no such disclosure. One would have thought that Sobhani was simply an objective expert in the region who happened to be deeply impressed with the sensitive energy policies of these Gulf regimes.

At times, CNN International does not even bother with any pretense. In 2010, it [directly broadcast a report](#) straight from Bahraini state television glorifying a military parade held in the Kingdom. Although a quick disclaimer at the start of the segment indicated that the report was "not prepared by CNN journalists", it bore the CNN logo the entire time it was shown, and had no critical commentary or challenge from anyone. It simply heralded the greatness and nobility of the Bahrain military and the regime that operates it.

For programs CNNi produces in "association with" these regimes, even the minimal disclosure it provides often ends up omitted. As one former CNN producer explained, budget pressures mean that segments from the "paid for" programs about these countries sometimes end up being spliced into news reports with no disclosure that the regimes sponsored their production. The line at CNNi between news and advertising is severely blurred by these arrangements, but the line only gets blurrier as its executives expand the scope of these income-generating opportunities in partnership with the world's most repressive regimes.

## **CNNi's corporate template of 'beige safety'**

When it comes to CNNi's reporting on the region, it seems that there are more than just financial arrangements creating serious conflicts of interest. That Bahrain and Saudi Arabia are very close allies of the US government seems to ensure that their regime's complaints about news coverage are – as noted in the accompanying article – given far more deference than, say, complaints from US enemies in the region such as Iran or Syria.

Then, there's CNN's corporate disposition to avoid reporting that would be deemed controversial, especially among the world's key power centers. In an interview this week about CNNi, NYU journalism Professor Jay Rosen said:

*"When people think about CNN as a news operation, they naturally start with the CNN that they see. But if you want to understand CNN as a force in news and the global flow of the news, you have to start with what CNN is – not on your television set, but on all the sets on the world where it plays, because that's the economic logic of the network ..."*

*"What CNN as a company, or as a media empire is, is this international network that somehow gets accepted as this sort of professional, neutral, standard, baseline news service in a wide variety of markets from ruling family transactions to signing up cable partners and airports and hotel chains."*

*"So the real business is in that: making CNN this kind of colorless brand of news, that every hotel chain, cable provider, and government around the world can see as safe ... The logic of the company is to be a consensus news product in the broadest sense of the term, so that I always compare it to the use of beige in offices and airport terminals. It's that kind of logic. So Beige News is its own genre. 'Safety First' is their key test."*

But "beige safety", though masquerading as a neutrality, is anything but. "Stability is its own perspective on international events," said Professor Rosen. "If your primary goal is stability, that's like an ideology. It's the same thing." In the case of CNNi, that ideology, grounded in business imperatives, can manifest in support even for the most repressive regimes, simply by shying away from truly cutting-edge and significant reporting.

Moreover, CNN's business template, says Professor Rosen, creates multiple serious conflicts for an ostensible news outlet in its coverage:

*"The value of what CNN is trying to do to be this consensus news product around the world – not just in the western economic club but around the world – has many serious consequences. One of the consequences is that it puts you into business with ruling regimes in order to get on the air. Of course, there's a relationship between what you broadcast, what you put out as news, and the likelihood of getting accepted by regimes.*

*"The nature of this business leads directly to harmlessness in news. That's the way to understand CNN."*

CNN rejects the charge that its journalism is being corrupted. As its spokesman stated to me:

*"CNN International has a proud record of courageous, independent and honest reporting from around the world. Any suggestion that the network's relationship with any country has influenced our reporting is wholly and demonstrably wrong."*

For her part, Amber Lyon insists that CNN journalists and producers complained relentlessly about the type of business-driven censorship she now vocally claims was prevalent at CNN. Back in 2004, the [Guardian's Chris McGreal reported](#) on the network's Middle East bureau:

*"CNN sources say the network has bowed to considerable pressure on its editors. Israeli officials boast that they now have only to call a number at the network's headquarters in Atlanta to pull any story they do not like."*

Lyon insists that few are willing to speak out due to fear that they will immediately be viewed as a troublemaker and made radioactive to future news employers. Several former CNN employees echoed Lyon's experiences and complaints, but nobody other than her would speak on the record.

Highlighting this dynamic of self-censorship among journalists was [one incident several years ago](#) involving a CNN reporter, Jessica Yellin. In a clearly unscripted moment, Yellin told CNN's Anderson Cooper on-air that when she had worked at MSNBC executives there had forced her to change her war reporting to reflect more positively on the US and the Bush administration. When her comments led to controversy, Yellin – by then CNN's congressional correspondent – immediately [walked them back](#).

As to why Lyon has decided to disregard careerist fears, despite still being only in her 20s, she said that she hopes her act of speaking out about what she witnessed inside CNNi will lead to other journalists to do the same:

*"I want to encourage mainstream journalists to speak up when they discover their companies are misleading the people, doing PR for corporations and governments and disguising it as journalism. Many journalists get into this business, for low pay and grueling hours, because they genuinely want to make a difference, expose injustice. But what's the point if the elephant in the room is the conduct of own company, and you ignore it?"*

Revealingly, Lyon's purest and perhaps bravest act of journalism became possible only once she had left CNN.