

The impact on viewers of an international television news signal began to dawn on us at CNN in the early 1980s. The attempted assassinations of the Pope and President Reagan are obvious enough. However, there are some lesser experiences that are more instructive to me and perhaps more interesting to you, if I may go briefly back in time.

In 1981, you may remember that Solidarity had come out very strong in Poland at a time when the Warsaw Pact troops were on manoeuvre and they had in effect surrounded the country. All of a sudden, one day, all contact with Warsaw was cut off, wire services were shut down, television was cut off. I remember we had to smuggle out videotapes on the express to Vienna. That's the time when you saw, if you remember in the still pictures perhaps, the anchors wearing military tunics. Well, we found out that it was possible to pick up an off-the-air signal right on the outskirts of the border. We took that signal from a little set with rabbit ears and we landlined it to Copenhagen. We had to re-route it then to Rome, Rome satellite to London, London satellite to Maine, Maine downlink landline through Washington, where I happened to be the bureau chief, and I had a Polish translator sit in there on set, landline to Atlanta, at Atlanta the signal would go back out to our subscribers around the world.

Well of course none of us thought it had a prayer of working, except the guys who were setting it up in Atlanta, and it worked. And so instantly, the viewers of Warsaw and the viewers who were watching CNN could hear what their fate was to be as read to them by the anchors in military uniform. It was very dramatic and the first use I know of for a communication of a breaking event like that.

Another experience we had was in December of 1985, you will recall that President Marcos' government was coming unravelled. He controlled Channel 4 in Manila, and on a regular basis would ask the CNN people in Manila down from Tokyo to cover the story if we would be interested in carrying his speech, which was pure propaganda. But the answer was yes within the context of the story. He was interested because he knew that his target audience, a few congressmen and senators on Capital Hill, could help save his government with a much needed appropriation or they could kill it. So we would carry the speech from Channel 4 in Manila, broadcast back to our subscribers in the States and with a forewarning