4TH UNWTO INTERNATIONAL CONFERENCE ON TOURISM AND THE MEDIA

ADDRESS BY JIM BITTERMANN

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Your Excellency, Dr. Taleb Rifai, Secretary-General, World Tourism Organization (UNWTO), Honourable Mrs. Salma Elloumi Rekik, Minister of Tourism and Handicrafts of Tunisia, Honourable Ministers,

Members of the Tourism Sector,

Members of the Media

Ladies and Gentlemen,

It is a great pleasure to be with you here in Tunis for 4TH UNWTO International Conference On Tourism And The Media.

CNN International has a longstanding partnership with the UNWTO, and the global travel industry. This relationship is one that we place great value in, as we are acutely aware of the critical role that the tourism industry plays in developing nations at many levels:

• Economically
• Socially
• Environmentally
• and politically.

Both editorially and as a trusted advertising platform, CNN has been telling the stories of nations not just through the tourism lens, but through the lenses of business, investment, development, environment, arts, culture, sport, and of course, society.

We are particularly proud of our close relationship with you, Dr Rifai, and your great team across the UNWTO world. We remain ever-grateful for our partnership, one that really does
work to ensure that tourism is working for the people of tourism, be they travellers or hosts. Thank you, sir.

Today, given this honour of keynote address, I am also delighted to be speaking on a subject that is of great importance to me and my colleagues across the world at CNN: namely

**How to build a stronger partnership between tourism and the media**

Reflecting on this topic, one which I believe raises subjects at the heart of effective journalism, it made me pause for thought about just how dramatically the media world has changed - and as a result, how the needs of relationships with the media have evolved.

Without dating myself, I’d like to take you on a journey through the world of media, as I have experienced it....

While today I am call Paris ‘home, my career as a journalist began in the United States. In some ways it feels a lifetime ago, and yet I can still remember that time like yesterday.

My love for journalism started, well, when I was 17. I was working at a local newspaper as a switchboard operator, watching the reporters coming and going.

Up until that point I wanted to be an electrical engineer, like my father, but that experience changed my mind. The energy of the reporting process, the excitement of touching the issues of the day, being the first to know, and the one to get the story out, this I found magnetic. I was convinced that for me, journalism was it.

It did, however, take two years of university to convince my father I didn’t have the right stuff for engineering, and that journalism was actually the right way to go if I was going to make a go of my future as an independent, productive, responsible adult!

I started writing for the paper early in 1965, during the times when newspapers were the holy grail of storytelling.

Fast forward 50 years to 2015, when in May of this year, we had a celebration to mark my 50th year in journalism.

For me personally, first and foremost, all these years on, my love of journalism still remains.

Why? Because I think I was, and remain, insatiably curious about just about everything. And journalism is the one profession where you can ask just about anybody just about anything....and then feel like you are contributing a bit to making the world a better place by passing on what you learn. Many of my colleagues at CNN would say exactly the same thing.
Interestingly, this goes hand in hand with my love of travel. Travel shows us the way the world works and helps us to identify with people around the globe.

When I look at these two loves – travel and journalism, I appreciate that I am able to dig below the surface to get an understanding of not just what happened, but why things happened.

Travel always gives me insight into why things are the way they are, seeing things that will open my eyes to how the world really works, finding the heartbeat within the story.

As a journalist, this is essential perspective, and appreciation for the diversity yet unity that our world offers. This is timeless.

Which brings to the fore the fact that, while so much has changed, there is so much that remains the same.

From my own perspective as a lifetime journalist, these are just a few of the changes I have been fortunate to live through.

• Up until the 1980s, journalism was about sending reports in in bits and pieces. We sometimes did not see how story turned out for days, sometimes even weeks. The final product came from the editing room.

• All of this changed in the late 1980s / early 1990s when we were able to feed entire story packages in from the field.

• And then came the age of ‘live’ television, with the need to carefully manage the pressures of speed and accuracy. The mantra of “get it right” soon became “get it right, right away.”

• And now, with the advent of the IT revolution, and the development of social media, the media landscape has evolved even more rapidly and dramatically than anyone in the journalism community could have imagined.

With all of these changes, and all of the changes still to come, competition to get the story out is fierce.

Citizen journalism has become like a media tsunami. It challenges us to be ever more speedy and accurate. And attention grabbing. For some, this quest for the quantity of appeal of story, as shown by ‘Likes’, shared and retweets, can eclipse quality of content.

And truthfulness.

This is where the issue of relationships between the media and, in this case, the Tourism industry, becomes interesting.
And critically important.

Ladies and Gentlemen, in exploring the issue of relationships with the media, especially in times of crisis, I would like to frame my point of view based on three themes:

1) Accuracy
2) Responsibility
and
3) Transparency

I use this as a framework for my address as, through all of my years in the Media, and the last almost 20 years with CNN, these I find are the pillars of what is, and what will always be, quality journalism, and quality relationships with journalists.

Let’s start with the first pillar, **Accuracy**.

In today’s over-connected world, where millions live and breathe by the battery strength of their mobile devices, and anyone with a social media account can play the role of ‘journalist’, spreading information and opinions, accurate or not, has become the norm.

Social media, for all of its strengths in reach, speed, and ability to get to the essence of the story quickly. Has one central weakness – content is not verified.

For this reason, global audiences across the media spectrum are turning to mainstream media for confirmation of importance and accuracy of stories.

CNN, a brand I am proud to represent, has developed a worldwide reputation of trust for not only getting the story out, but so importantly, getting it right and in the right perspective.

This trust has created a global following of CNN of:

- over 396 million households and hotels around the world
- 2.9 billion global page views per month
- 160 million unique users per month
- the most followed news brand on social media with over 70m Twitter & Facebook followers
At CNN, we take this responsibility seriously. Our credibility is our most important product.

As we have since CNN was born 35 years ago. Across the globe, our teams work tirelessly to ensure that what we communicate, the stories we tell, are truthful, in context, and complete.

This principle of completeness is something which I have always admired about CNN’ and its commitment to the story, even when the rest of the media world thinks that the story has moved on.

Is CNN there when a crisis occurs? Absolutely. We have an unparalleled global network of bureaus, crew and stringers that make it possible for us to be immediately on the front lines of the story, ensuring that the story is being captured, and conveyed, truthfully.

But it is not only about CNN’s physical infrastructure that enables us to cover, immediately and accurately, the world’s stories.

It is our relationships that make this possible.

Across the world, CNN has developed rich, longstanding, genuine relationships on the ground. As a result, when a story breaks, we have the ability to immediately reach out to people we know, trust and can call on to give us the information we need, in context, in a way that ensures the world gets the full story.

And, importantly, we stay on afterwards, ensuring that the world gets the whole story.

As an example, we saw it in the Philippines with CNN’s coverage of Supertyphoon Haiyan, we saw it in Nigeria when the girls of Chibok disappeared,

we will see it and I will be a direct part of it in the new year for the first anniversary of the attacks on Charlie Hebdo.

CNN’s definition of ‘accuracy of reporting’ includes staying close to the story, and storytellers, getting the whole story, during, and after.

My second pillar is directly linked to the first – Responsibility.

This has become an area which many in the media world, formal and informal, are able to define as ‘grey’, especially as speed and traction of media has become such an important, even if not a very accurate way to measure of media quality.

When I speak of responsibility, this covers not just accuracy of content, but also appropriateness. Every day, everywhere we are in the world, CNN internalises the responsibility we have to the story, to our audiences, to our brand.
In today’s immediate media environment, content, be it in the form of words, images or videos, can be released into the worldwide media space without going through a litmus test of, simply put, ethics and good taste. This has, in some cases, seeded a dangerous desensitisation towards what is simply not right to show our audiences.

Sadly, however, it has not become the norm. The communications eco-system, inspired and magnified by digital technology, has become an ego-system.

The ability for anyone, anywhere, to broadcast their views, voice and often venom, can create a dangerous ego rush when the ‘send’ button is hit on one’s laptop, tablet, smartphone, whatever the case may be.

We know the damage, often irreparable, that can be done to people, nations, companies, anyone anywhere, when rumour is released as fact. And when opinion becomes more important than factual information.

For this reason, when, in a case of crisis, information is still emerging, and we know there is a rush to be the first to get the story out, we will not hesitate to express the need for caution around speculation.

We all saw this recently when the Moscowjet came down in Egypt’s Sinai Peninsula, taking with it 224 souls. Immediately rumours began to fly around the who and why.

Until now, there is still no confirmation of exactly what happened, and CNN continues to report that a terrorist act is the suspected cause. When we know for sure, we will let the world know. Until then, the principle of responsible handling of this highly sensitive story will guide our coverage.

Our media platforms may have changed, but our ethics and sense of responsibility have not, and nor should they.

Finally, Transparency.

This, ladies and gentleman, can often be seen as the area of greatest risk when it comes to relationships with the media. But the truth is that it is the greatest investment you can make.

When a story breaks, be it positive or otherwise, the media is in immediate need of access to people, access to information. When a crisis occurs, it is easy to understand why one might want to hold back, and even hide, from the media. But doing so will only fuel the media’s need to know and strength of efforts to find out.

By establishing and nurturing long-term relationships with the media, relationships based on trust, honesty, and respect, the ability for the media to tell the story accurately, responsibly and holistically is made possible.
When a crisis occurs, whatever one may hope to hide will come out. Don’t try to hide it – the media is there to help you tell the story. And to do it in a way that enables your country to move forward through the crisis, focusing on what matters, with a view towards recovery and rebuilding.

Masking the truth will only damage credibility. And as I said earlier, credibility is the gold commodity in any relationship.

So, Ladies and Gentlemen, in conclusion, and with these three pillars in place as the foundations of relationship building between the Tourism industry and the Media, namely:

- Accuracy
- Responsibility
- Transparency

the following are what I define as guidelines for relationship building with the media, especially when faced with crisis:

1. When a crisis occurs, get info out there, quickly, and accurately. Do not afraid to say you don't know. Do not sugarcoat information. It is better to be honest and straight forward from the start, as transparent as possible.

2. Linked to the above, make it personal. Do not hide behind institutions or institutional messaging. And don’t be afraid to tell the human side of the story.

3. Reluctance to cooperate with the media does not serve you. To push the media aside is to risk raising red flags. The media will follow those flags, assertively.

4. Build relationships over the long term so that when you need them. they are there. And when they need you, they know you are there for them.

And finally,

5. Provide wider context to the Tourism story. We at CNN know that, more and more. Tourism is a growing part of international commerce, national competitivenesssm and global diplomacy. Work with the media to frame the Tourism story from the perspective of other industries, other aspet of the national story.
These guidelines, which have been shaped from over a half century in journalism, I wanted to share with you with the full support of CNN as your partner as you work together to advance Tourism for your individual destinations, your people and your futures.

CNN remains committed to the global Tourism industry, and we look forward to working with you as 2016 unfolds.

Thank you for the opportunity to share my story with you.

And the honour of CNN being your partner in this important conference as we work, together, with the UNWTO, to get the story of Tourism out to the world.