



A Matter of Semantics

DAVID SWEARINGEN finds the reception a little fuzzy

The early '80s were the last of real TV news. Back then, and before, networks stationed staff all over the world. I wasn't staff. I was freelance, and was sent to places where others preferred not to go. When Pope John Paul II went to Portugal in '82 I got that gig, I guess as a reward for all my days in Beirut.

Lisbon was decked out for the visit. I dumped my equipment at the local TV station and went for a walk. The first thing I found, in the old town, was a band of wild

Portuguese TV had cameras all over the place. Every inch of the Popemobile's progress would be recorded.

dogs, snarling and yapping at anyone foolish enough to approach them. I ducked into a bar, but the patrons didn't appear much friendlier. I went back to the hotel and spent the afternoon watching flies circling under a light bulb, which hung unadorned from the ceiling. I assumed the flies were mating, which made me feel a bit lonely.

The Pope caused quite a stir. Banners were everywhere. Swarms of people. An outdoor mass was planned, and Portuguese TV (PTV) had cameras all over the place. Every inch of the Popemobile's progress would be recorded, every inch of the Pope's walk. A path would be cleared through the crowd, leading to a stage erected for the mass.

Lisbon was eager. It was May. The sun offered a blessing. There was a festive air everywhere —

everywhere except Portuguese TV. We, the network guys, were scrambling to hook up our video recorders to PTV's feed. Our recorders needed heavy-duty transformers to deal with the difference in voltage. We were the big network guys. We had the proper transformers. After hooking up, we had a good feed going. Nice clean video. Then the punk from CNN arrived.

These were the early days of CNN. They weren't to be trusted. And the CNN punk had one of these tourist-type transformers, the kind you would use with an electric shaver. After he hooked it up, all of our video went fuzzy. He was ruining our feed! We shouted him down, but he stood defiant, claiming CNN had as much right to be there as anyone else. We, the big boys, were about to kill the dude, then decided to offer him a dub of our stuff if he would just unplug. A deal was made. War was averted. And the Pope was climbing out of the Popemobile to begin his walk through the crowd.

I stared at my monitor as the feed came in. The Pope walked slowly, stopping and waving at the parted sea of admirers, then shuffled along. It was all rather boring. But the big shots back in New York were apprehensive. It was just a year since some Turkish dude had attempted to assassinate the Pope. This Lisbon visit was the Pope's first outing since the incident. So, of course, the

networks wanted to make sure they were in place, just in case something were to happen. But it didn't look like anything was going to happen.

I tried my best to make notes: Pope walks, Pope waves, Pope smiles. At one point, the Pope stopped, and without waving or smiling, looked into the crowd, then walked on. Finally he got to the stage, and the mass began. I popped in a new tape and labeled the old one, "Pope Walks Thru Crowd."

Just as I was about to fall asleep, the phone rang.

"Mr. David," said the PTV receptionist, "New York is on the line."

I waited, curious. Then, "Did you get it?"

"Get ... what?"

"The assassination attempt!"

I had seen no assassination attempt. I was asked if I had been monitoring the feed. Yes, and nothing unusual had happened.

"Reuters issued a wire! A priest lunged at the Pope with a dagger! Check your tapes! It's got to be there! Find it!"

It was moments like this, as opposed to when I was being fired upon, that made me question why I was in the news business. Things were just fine until that damn phone call. When a gun is pointed at you, you know what you're dealing with. When New York is pointed at you, anything can happen.

After my call, the phone rang for all the others. Even the punk got a call from CNN. Our problem was, no one had seen anything unusual. I rolled back through the earlier tape. The only curious moment was the Pope looking intently into the crowd. I marked it on my log.

After the mass, I rushed my tapes over to our temporary office in one of the nice hotels. A producer was there, and asked about the tape. New York had called, and was sending in a top correspondent. He was due to arrive in a couple of hours. Meanwhile, we looked through the

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tapes, searching for anything to support the story.

Suddenly the door flew open. It was the producer's girl friend. She was Brazilian, spoke Portuguese, and was working as our interpreter. She had just been to the police. This is what she discovered:

A man dressed as a priest had been in the crowd. He had yelled profanities at the Pope, and was taken by security to a local holding station. A pocket knife, unopened, was discovered in his bag. He was carted away.

None of this was evident on our PTV feed. We were all rather puzzled about Reuter's report of the man having, "lunged at the Pope with a dagger." But soon enough, the correspondent arrived to do the story. He was one of the network stars. He owed his life to the network. We explained what

had happened, and he disappeared to write his script. After a while, he rushed back into the room.

"I've been on the phone with New York," he said. "All the wire services, radio, and another network are running with the assassination attempt. Get that video cued to the spot where the Pope looks over. We've got to get this story on the air."

So we cued the tape as he laid down his voice track. When he got to the line, "lunged at the Pope with a dagger," the producer stopped him.

"It didn't happen," he said.

"Never mind," said the correspondent, "New York wants an assassination story. That's what they'll get. Relax. It's just a matter of semantics."

That correspondent continues to bring the latest news into our homes. The unfortunate deranged priest still lingers in a Portuguese jail. •



David H. Swearingen was raised in a military family, has lived in many places (including England in the 1980s), and now lives in Durham. His passions are poetry and jazz, good food, and Mexican beer.

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