

The headlines in all of our country's newspapers said there was an uprising in Basra, Iraq. Even as the newspapers were being distributed C.B.C. Television announced the uprising was a hoax. That evening international affairs expert, Gwyn Dyer, admitted that "once again Al Jazeera had got it right", the "uprising" had been propaganda. An embarrassed British Prime Minister, whose troops in Basra were under the command of U.S. general Tommy Franks, said in an interview "maybe there had been a little uprising somewhere in the city".

One of the winners of the U.S. - Iraq war was the Al Jazeera television station run out of the tiny gulf state of Qatar (where the U.S. had its military command). It was the first to "get it right" about U.S. casualty figures, civilian deaths due to bombing and Iraqi missile capabilities. So many people were turning away from the U.S. news service, CNN, to find the Al Jazeera English language webservice that mysterious hackers shut down the website and planted a U.S. flag in its place. Al Jazeera was barred from the New York Stock Exchange. Its reporters and cameramen were shot and killed in Baghdad in what a U.S. military spokesman described as a series of "accidents".

Canadian media were also losers. When the U.S. staged a media event by flying Iraqi exiles to Baghdad and pretending that these people were ordinary Iraqis trampling a statue of Saddam Hussain, the C.B.C. showed television coverage supplied by CNN. The close-ups made the crowd look larger and prevented viewers from seeing that the whole scene was ringed by U.S. troops.

Canadian media also reported on the "rescue" of U.S. private Jessica Lynch. According to Iraqi doctors and nurses, the Iraqi army had abandoned the hospital at which Lynch was being treated, two days before U.S. troops stormed the place. They tried to deliver Lynch by ambulance but turned back when fired on by U.S. troops. The doors to the hospital were undefended and unlocked but the sight of U.S. commandos blowing them up made for better T.V.

A Canadian cable company has applied to the Radio and Television Commission for a license to carry Al Jazeera. The application has been opposed by one political party on the grounds that Al Jazeera is "un-Canadian". No doubt. But they are an alternative source of news about the Arab world, and most Canadians would agree that they have a right to know what is going on in the world.

Many Canadians have a healthy scepticism about news reporting. Perhaps this stems from having most of our daily newspapers owned by just one company. We look for media that have a record of "getting it right". We look for the motives of the reporters. Clearly, the U.S. was at war, so its media such as CNN or Associated Press, would have a pro-U.S. bias. That bias has to be taken into account when reading their news stories. If we cannot get objective reporting we would at least like to get both sides of the story.

We can apply this health scepticism to our personal lives. Sometimes it is difficult to separate information from gossip. The first question to ask ourselves, of course, is "is this relevant?". If it is not, it is probably gossip. Next we can judge the record of the source. Does he or she have a record of "getting it right"? Third, does the source have a motive? Sometimes there is an "axe to grind", the informant wants to get even. Sometimes there is a benefit to the speaker to having people believe his version of

events. Sometimes the motive is simply to appear to be "in the know". Finally, get the other side of the story. Often this means going to the person the story is about. After you have done all that you will be in a better position to know what is going on in your community.

In some ways the minds of nations do not operate too differently from the minds of individuals. The challenge is to keep our own minds free.