

The Accidental Blogger

How a biotech company founder went to the World Economic Forum in Switzerland and ended up costing CNN's Eason Jordan his job

By **Neil Reisner**

Neil Reisner is a freelance writer and teacher living in Florida.

Rony Abovitz didn't intend to be a media star, a darling of the right, a villain to the left. He just wanted to take in one of the more interesting sessions at the World Economic Forum's annual meeting in Davos, Switzerland, a panel called "Will Democracy Survive the Media?"

He was drawn by the prestigious lineup of speakers: CNN Chief News Executive Eason Jordan; David R. Gergen, adviser to four presidents; U.S. Rep. Barney Frank (D-Mass.); Richard Sambrook, director of the BBC World Service; and Dr. Abdullah Abdullah, Afghanistan's minister of foreign affairs.

But as Abovitz listened at the January 27 session, it sounded to him as if Jordan was making an extremely disturbing allegation: that U.S. forces in Iraq had targeted and killed journalists. Abovitz took up the forum organizers on their pre-event invitation to contribute to the forum's blog and chronicled Jordan's controversial comments. The result was yet another tumultuous battle between the blogo-sphere and the mainstream media--with Jordan and Abovitz at its center.

Before it was over, Jordan had resigned and Abovitz found himself stunned by what he had stirred up. "It's not like being at ground zero, it's like being ground zero," he says. "I was half and Jordan was the other half."

While Abovitz soon became a hero to the right-wing bloggers who vilified Jordan, he says he had no partisan intentions. "My point was that I wanted to know what the truth was, and I was open to the truth being that the U.S. had done this," he says. And that was still the case six weeks post-Davos, after U.S. troops at a Baghdad checkpoint opened fire on the vehicle carrying Giuliana Sgrena, an Italian journalist freed in early March after a month as a hostage. An Italian intelligence agent died in the March 4 incident, and Sgrena was injured.

"It sounds like the core issues of Easongate live on," Abovitz says.

His biggest fear is that with Jordan out of the picture, what he considers one of the most important parts of the controversy--the mainstream media's initial reluctance to report on Jordan's comments--will fade away. Abovitz says he is wary of "big media's" corporate interests and their tendency--which he believes he witnessed in the Jordan affair--to circle the wagons when challenged.

The mainstream press "did not cover it very well, and I'm not sure the bloggers did very well, either," he says. "A lot of the mainstream media was late on it, confused; they didn't know what was being done. Some of the blogging was well done, some of the blogging looked like a lynch mob.. It's taken on weird aspects because it's like no one who's liberal can talk in public anymore, which isn't the point, or that bloggers are evil scumbags or that the mainstream media is all finished."

Rony Abovitz is an accidental blogger and an accidental media critic. He attended what could be the world's highest-end networking event only because the World Economic Forum named the biotech company he helped found, Z-KAT, as one of 29 "Technology Pioneers" for 2005.

Abovitz didn't start his blog (fixtheworld.blogs.com) until the episode in Davos. He was neither the citizen blogger praised by conservative columnist Michelle Malkin nor "one of those conservative online activists who believe the Internet is an opportunity to balance what they see as media pro-liberal bias," as the Guardian of London portrayed him. And he certainly was not "a blogger hired by the World Economic Forum," as The American Prospect described him in its April issue.

What Abovitz is is a 34-year-old, babyfaced, tousle-haired self-described geek, who sees himself as neither liberal nor conservative and is suspicious of power in general. His only previous contact with journalism was as a student at the University of Miami, where he wrote satiric essays and drew cartoons for the student newspaper. He is registered to vote but not affiliated with a political party; he went to the polls for the first time in the last presidential election, but won't say for whom he cast his ballot. He follows the news, especially about Israel, where he has many relatives. He plays rhythm guitar in a rock 'n' roll band, Sparkydog. He's married, the father of a 4-year-old girl.

(Full disclosure: I see Abovitz most Saturday mornings in synagogue in Hollywood, Florida, where he sits on the other side of the sanctuary. Until Davos, my only interaction with him was occasional, a passing nod as we rounded up our children, who sometimes hang out together during services.)

Abovitz says he has come to appreciate the blogosphere's ability to help bring out the truth; at the same time he acknowledges that many bloggers are driven by political agendas. Most of all, he says the Jordan affair bears witness to the death of the gatekeeper model for distributing news. "The blog world is like a natural event. It's like an earthquake happened. It doesn't have [to be] fair or not fair, it just happens," he says. "And once the earthquake starts, it starts kicking down everything."

Abovitz says he knew the media panel was being videotaped and assumed it was on the record. Because he was a WEF participant and not a journalist, he was not aware of forum directives barring working press from covering many programs, including the one in question.

When Jordan dropped his bombshell, contending that 12 journalists had been targeted and killed by U.S. forces in Iraq, Abovitz felt compelled to challenge the CNN executive to back up the charges. "My reaction wasn't that he was lying; my reaction was that he was telling the truth," Abovitz recalls. "I thought what he was saying was going to be blown open wide by CNN in some major exposé, that he was letting us in on some huge Abu Ghraib-type scandal, but much, much bigger."

And so, Abovitz says he told Jordan at the session, "You have just accused the United States of something quite terrible in front of a lot of people who might be quite hostile to the United States, a lot of foreigners, in a pretty anti-American environment. I hope you have something to back it up."

Jordan apparently backpedaled quickly. A number of participants said he stated that he hadn't meant to suggest that the troops were intentionally shooting at journalists. (Jordan told the Washington Post later that he was trying to make the point that many journalists' deaths weren't cases of "collateral damage," but of people being shot at intentionally, although not necessarily because they were journalists.)

Mostly, says Abovitz, Jordan just looked stunned. After the panel, Abovitz says, he asked Jordan, "Do you have a card? What did you just do?" Jordan replied: "I really caused a shit storm didn't I?" and I said, "Yeah, you did." (Jordan could not be reached for comment.)

Abovitz says he didn't decide to post anything on the forum blog until it became clear to him that journalists in attendance weren't going to write about the episode. So, late that night, Abovitz returned to his room, wrote down his impressions and filed his 1,094-word post.

"My first instinct was that this wasn't a private talk, this was said in front of hundreds of people and it was going to be buzzing around thousands of people at the conference," he says. "And, in fact, it was, because people who weren't there came up to me and were asking questions about it."

He had no idea at the time what a frenzy he had unleashed. "It wasn't until I came back to the States almost a week later that I realized something really nuts was going on. When I landed, I got a call from the general counsel of my company that CNN was calling, that Eason Jordan was calling, did I read the Web, did I know what I'd done?" he says.

In quick succession he got calls from the Miami Herald, CNN, Fox, MSNBC, NPR, the BBC, the Washington Post, the New York Times, Bill O'Reilly and conservative radio host and blogger Hugh Hewitt, of whom he had never heard. He marvels at the fact that reporters in Japan and Australia wanted to interview him. He's not especially pleased with most of the coverage, believing that the mainstream press tended to explain away Jordan's statements while the blogo-sphere wanted the CNN executive's head. He's especially critical of the way CNN handled the controversy and believes that the network could have defused the situation by responding more openly and urging the WEF to release the session videotape.

"It's like no one learned anything from Clinton and Monica," he says, "that evading and hiding and spinning [don't] work."

As the controversy ebbs, Abovitz wonders, "is there a way to do something constructive with all of this?"

"It seems that once you're in it, you can either hide or keep pushing forward and try to get somewhere good."