

Monday, May. 31, 2004

## Raising the Bar in Beijing

U.S. newsman John Terenzio is helping China show a friendlier face to American TV viewers

BY MATTHEW FORNEY | BEIJING



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**THE FIXER:** John Terenzio gives CCTV's global news channel some chemistry

market, he's pleased that the chemistry appears to be working. "This," he says, "is really good television."

The Beijing headquarters of China Central Television (CCTV) are heavily guarded, as one would expect of a key propaganda arm of the Communist Party.

A People's Liberation Army garrison is billeted on the studio lot, and an armed soldier commands the entrance to the main newsroom. Foreigners usually need layers of approval to arrange a visit—but not John Terenzio. During a recent news broadcast, the American media consultant sat casually among a team of Chinese producers in the control room critiquing the show. "I thought maybe I was a dope to go for two anchors," Terenzio observes, "but I wanted to build a bit of chemistry."

When news presenters Chris Gelken and Jacqueline Chan abandon their scripts to banter amiably about the stock

Terenzio's job is to make it even better. As a part-time adviser to CCTV International's 24-hour English-language news channel, the independent producer is the first foreigner charged with putting an internationally friendly face on the mainland's propaganda machine. As if that weren't odd enough, his salary is paid by News Corp.—the global media conglomerate whose U.S.-based news channel, Fox News, is widely perceived as unabashedly pro-American and whose chairman, Rupert Murdoch, once infuriated China's leaders by stating that satellite-TV systems posed a threat to "totalitarian regimes everywhere."

But the global media business, like politics, makes for strange bedfellows. Nowadays, News Corp. and CCTV International are partners of sorts, bound by their mutual desire to reach more viewers. Three years ago, Beijing opened its heavily restricted TV market a crack and granted News Corp. permission to offer its new Chinese-language network, Starry Sky, over cable in the southern province of Guangdong. News Corp. reciprocated by agreeing to air CCTV International on its Fox cable channels in America and later on its newly acquired satellite network, DirecTV. (Beijing struck a similar deal with Time Warner, owner of TIME, which still carries CCTV International on its cable systems but has sold its controlling stake in a Chinese channel.) As part of News Corp.'s commitment to the venture, it hired Terenzio to spend a few months a year helping reprogram CCTV—which once railed against "hegemonic powers" like the U.S.—to appeal to American audiences.

Terenzio, who covered four wars for ABC News, thought offering in-depth coverage of the mainland in the U.S. had promise, given China's growing economic importance. "Cable operators should salivate to carry the only channel dedicated to China," he says. But the news program needed a major overhaul. Soon after he took the job, Terenzio installed a satellite dish atop his Los Angeles home and pointed it at the CCTV satellite so that he could assess the task at hand.

He saw rebar-stiff newsreaders intoning stilted copy supported by cheap graphics. The channel was "essentially a translation service for Chinese-language programs," Terenzio says. But CCTV International did have one small advantage: the English-language broadcaster is unintelligible to most Chinese, so its journalists enjoy slightly more reporting leeway. In one of his first moves, Terenzio called a meeting to stress that "reporters never say what they think, only what they know" and to urge that all government statements be attributed to their source,

standard practice in the West. Within two weeks, "they were practically attributing the weather report," Terenzio says. "I had to tell them to cool it."

Terenzio has since helped make the program slicker by advising the channels' bosses to create snappy sets, commission new theme music and hire foreign anchors. More important, his efforts to introduce more aggressive standards of journalism have resulted in sharper news coverage. Last month, Terenzio sat in the reporting team's cluttered office to review a series called *China's Challenges*, an unusually frank exploration of issues such as environmental damage and poor rural health care. One episode on China's growing number of heroin addicts included footage of a dazed druggie lying in a puddle of vomit. "That's a powerful image," Terenzio says. "That's just what a piece like this should show." Another, on China's disastrous traffic snarls, pleases him because it quoted academics blaming poor government planning while others defended consumers' right to buy cars. "This is balanced coverage," he says of the series. CCTV International's journalists "are light-years beyond where they were." But censorship remains. The channel's controller, Jiang Heping, a Party member who earned a journalism degree at Cardiff University in Wales, says his goal is a "Western approach," but his reporters still "can't report antigovernment activity, and anything anti-Party is taboo."

Any media outlet wishing to operate in China must compromise, as News Corp. officials know. In 1993, the company removed the BBC from its Chinese-language Star satellite network—which at the time had government permission to be shown in hotels and foreign compounds—after the British news service irritated Beijing with a series critical of Chairman Mao Zedong. But with 340 million TV households, China is a plummy market awaiting those who gain the government's favor. Last year, advertising reached \$2.7 billion, up 11% over the year before. And Beijing is showing signs of loosening up. Earlier this year it began allowing foreign companies to buy into state-owned production companies, a step many see as a precursor to opening its television industry more widely. "The government wants to know if its system is robust enough to exert necessary controls" on foreign participation, says David Wolf, managing director for technology and finance at the Beijing office of international public relations agency Burson-Marsteller.

Helping CCTV International may give News Corp. the upper hand over other foreign TV programmers who want a piece of China's market. "Rupert [Murdoch] is medium-term savvy and long-term wise," says an official with another international media company. Placing a consultant inside CCTV headquarters in Beijing "further entwines News Corp. and CCTV." And Murdoch's man Terenzio slipped in without so much as a hail from the soldier at the gate.

From TIME Asia Magazine, issue dated June 7, 2004 / Vol. 163 No. 22