



DANIEL PEARL AWARD

for courage and integrity
in journalism

Kevin Sites —On Site

BY JILL STEWART

AT 43, YAHOO'S "Hot Zone" war correspondent Kevin Sites has reported on, and been the subject of, more controversy than a typical war journalist experiences during an entire career.

He is the recipient of the Daniel Pearl Award for Courage and Integrity in Journalism, given by the Los Angeles Press Club in consultation with Judea and Ruth Pearl, parents of the Wall Street Journal reporter assassinated by terrorists in Pakistan in 2002.

Sites was tapped by Yahoo! last September to launch his news journal (<http://hotzone.yahoo.com>), where he plans in a single year to cover all of

the roughly three-dozen armed conflicts identified globally by the International Institute for Strategic Studies. His most recent assignment, as of press time, was in troubled Sri Lanka.

The multi-media program Sites produces includes print reports, still photography, live video and audio—all gathered using an ingenious array of technology stuffed into a single backpack.

His Los Angeles-based senior producer, Robert Padavick, formerly of CNN and NBC News, says, "If he'd been in the Middle East or Africa, some place closer to California, he would be there to receive the Daniel Pearl Award. But he couldn't make it from a remote place in Asia. This award for Kevin is just a huge honor, and it shows that we are on people's minds."

While things have gone surprisingly well from a technical standpoint, Padavick worries about Sites' safety—he was surrounded in the Sudan by "nerve-wracking anarchy." Padavick does, however, see ample rewards in Sites' coverage. The most disturbing was a piece on a child bride in Afghanistan, given up at age four to a family who "tortured her for years," Padavick says. She escaped, and Sites discovered her in an orphanage transformed into "a girl with so much poise beyond her years that Kevin was floored." After it ran, Sites received 16,000 e-mails, and another 8,000 reactions appeared on Hot Zone's comment board.

Sites has been a lightning rod for controversy since he blazed into the public conscience in November of 2004 after he videotaped a U.S. Marine shooting an already-wounded Iraqi insurgent in a Fallujah mosque. Then an NBC correspondent, Sites was eviscerated by some as a traitor to U.S. troops, but praised by others as an impartial journalist.

The embattled Sites later defended himself on his blog, www.kevinsites.net, saying, "I never got

An old woman stands in front of a funeral pyre on the banks of Kathmandu's Bagmati River.



Kevin Sites records a standup from inside the remains of a building in Grozny, Chechnya.

Some families too poor to afford houses on dry land live on their fishing boats on Dal Lake in Srinagar, Indian-controlled Kashmir.

Inset: During a rare break in reporting, Kevin Sites conducts an interview from his London hotel room with a journalism class in Texas.

an angry email from the unit I was with nor from Marine battlefield commanders who, though, saddened by the incident, knew I reported with fairness and context."

His work continued to draw strong reaction as he reported from the Colombian drug wars, Haitian slums, Pakistan-Afghanistan borderlands, Iranian religious communities in Tehran and grim surgery wards on both sides of the Israeli-Palestinian conflict.

In a Jewish Review article in March, Sites said public reaction to online reporting, including his own, tends to be "very vitriolic"—a response he welcomes for providing a "self-correcting mechanism," but says can also discourage "reason and dialogue."

The past four years have been a rocket ride

for the sometimes-college lecturer raised in rural Geneva, Ohio, who got his start as a photographer at his town newspaper at age 15. Politically active after college (he holds a master's degree from Northwestern's Medill School of Journalism), he worked on Gary Hart's presidential campaigns in the 1980's, later worked for cable and local news, and covered the Afghanistan war for the alternative weekly, The New Times of San Luis Obispo.

As a CNN correspondent, he and his team were captured while trying to be first into volatile Tikrit during the U.S. invasion of Iraq. Threatened with death by the Fedayeen militia controlled by Saddam Hussein, the CNN team was released thanks to the efforts of a Kurdish translator traveling with them.

Things have changed dramatically since his

Photos by Kevin Sites



At the Red Security Museum in northern Iraq, housed in a former Iraqi intelligence facility of the same name, museum guide Hamid Ibrahim stands in front of a display depicting the torture that occurred there.

Twelve-year-old Gulsoma lives in a Kabul orphanage. When her father died, her mother gave her away to a new family in an arranged marriage. Gulsoma was just four. For years the family beat and tortured her, until Gulsoma finally escaped and made it to the police with a neighbor's help. Despite her horrific past, Gulsoma displays strength and hope far beyond her years.



Kevin Sites interviews a Sudan People's Liberation Army commander in Rumbek, south Sudan.

A villager in the town of El Difcil, Colombia, where paramilitaries operating in the area recently laid down their arms.

bosses at CNN ordered Sites to suspend his "war blog" three years ago, with a CNN spokesman explaining to USC Annenberg's Online Journalism Review at the time, "We do not blog."

Last fall, Sites bucked tradition again, signing onto Hot Zone. At the time, Yahoo! said he would cover conflicts "typically left uncovered or under-reported by mainstream news organizations." The job came with an even more unusual four-part credo: "transparency" in his reporting process so online users can see him overcoming real-time problems in the field; "vulnerability" as Sites experiences the same dangers to which his interview subjects are exposed; "empathy" as Sites pursues local sources regardless of what they believe; and "solutions" provided to his readers, who are given online links to organizations working in war-torn areas.

Few journalists could work under such non-traditional conditions, but Sites has made a career of defying tradition. Today, he usually works without a safety net, traveling solo and relying on high-definition digital cameras and satellite modems to get his stories out—with help from Los Angeles producer Padavick, associate producer Erin Green, formerly with C-SPAN and NBC, and researcher Lisa Liu, formerly with Radio Free Asia.

"Kevin was in the Sudan, in a very difficult and remote place, then after a short break he was heading to Fallujah, and he tells me, 'Man I think I have malaria. I have night sweats,'" Padavick recalls. "Before I could ask him if he was taking his medication he was saying, 'I have my next story set up, tomorrow,' and he was off and running. It reinforces the point that we are doing this without bureaus or contacts along the way."

Yahoo! describes the brand of journalism Sites is practicing as "a nexus of backpack journalism, narrative story-telling techniques, and the Internet."

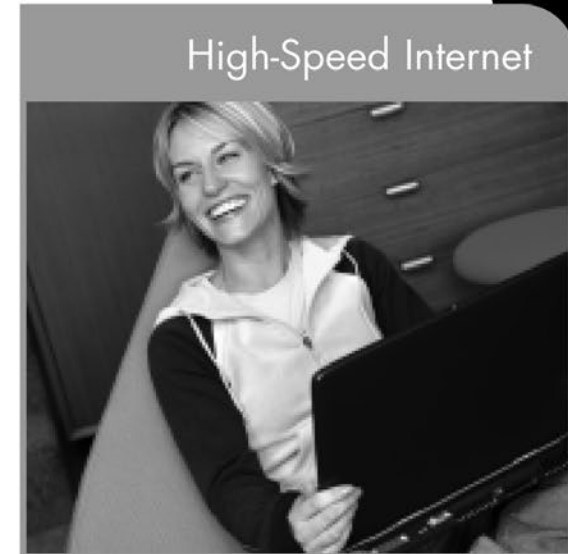
Perhaps. But for millions of online users who have seen his work and images, both terrible and beautiful, the untraditional risk-taker Kevin Sites is practicing journalism in its most unfettered form.



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