The Thing That Made Me Think internationally was my hobby with sailboat racing. I went all over the world racing sailboats. I started racing sailboats internationally in Mexico when I was in my twenties. I sailed across the ocean the first time to Europe in 1966. I raced all over the world—in Brazil, mostly in Europe and South America, and Australia and New Zealand. Unlike a tourist—tourists stay in the Hilton Hotel, they get on a tour bus, they get taken around by these tour guides. But when you go as an athlete you get to know the local people. You stay in their homes, you go to parties with them. I realized just how parochial most Americans are. We’re such a big country and a wealthy country, and we think that the world—like the Romans did during the time of the Roman Empire—somehow circles around us, that we’re the center of the universe. Of course, the Indians thought they were the center of the universe until the white man came. But Americans don’t understand the world as they should. I learned the old saying, “When in Rome, do as the Romans do” when I went in these other countries. For instance, instead of going in a bar and bitching about the fact that there was no ice in the drink. I said, “Hey this is great,” you know, “drinks without ice are okay.” And bitching about the fact that there was no air conditioning, or that the local food isn’t good because it’s basically different. It’s not that it’s not good. Those people like that kind of food better than [our food]. So I developed through my yacht racing an international perspective that just suited me to a T.

Ted Turner
Vice Chairman, Time Warner Inc.

We’re gonna take the news and put it on the satellite, and then we’re gonna beam it down into Russia, and we’re gonna bring world peace, and we’re all gonna get rich in the process!

During much of his adult life, Ted Turner ridiculed news programming for its negativity and for its sensationalism. This anti-news view continued even after he created CNN, and probably was a factor in his bid to buy CBS in 1985. At the time, Turner argued that owning the giant broadcast network would help him reach many more eyeballs than TBS or CNN could, but more importantly, would teach the “arrogant” CBS broadcast network a lesson for using the newsmagazine 60 Minutes to attack such notable Americans as General William Westmoreland and former President Jimmy Carter. CBS thwarted Turner’s bid with an expensive buy-back of its own stock, which only reinforced Turner’s belief that

the greatest enemies that America has ever had—posing a greater threat to our way of life than Nazi Germany or Tojo’s Japan—are the three [U.S.] television networks and the people that run them, who are living amongst us and

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constantly tearing down everything that has made this country great.³

Turner’s vocal complaints about the three giant U.S. broadcast networks and his budding international aspirations—particularly his friendly dealings with countries outside of U.S. political influence—were beginning to attract the attention of American media analysts.

In the spring and summer of 1985, while bidding to buy CBS with $5.4 billion worth of junk bonds, Turner was also negotiating an agreement with the Soviet Union. On June 5 Robert Wussler, executive vice president of the Turner Broadcasting System and head of the Superstation WTBS, announced that Turner’s company had signed a two-year agreement with Gostelradio, the state-controlled Soviet radio and television network, to exchange news, entertainment, and sports programming.⁴

Turner’s interest in things international, which resulted in part from trips to Cuba, the Soviet Union, and Africa, led the once politically conservative Turner to conclude that the “enemy”—as defined by the U.S. government—was not necessarily his enemy: “I happen to love everybody. Like Jesus, I’ve made my peace with the Soviets. They’re not my enemies,” Turner told the New Republic in a 1986 interview.⁵ The transformation of Turner seemed real enough to disturb conservative journalists like Don Kowet, who was convinced by the mid-1980s that Turner had “absorbed too many ideas from his friends—including Castro—and now thinks of himself as a poor man’s Armand Hammer.”⁶

Turner had, indeed, discovered kindred spirits in those who argued that the western media flooded the airwaves, both domestic and international, with negative stories and cared about only a select group of societies and peoples, as reflected in their coverage.

⁴ Ibid.
⁵ Ibid.
⁶ Ibid.

Nobody ever gave the Palestinians or the Arab side a voice. Not here in the United States anyway. They didn’t have a voice. The most angry people in the world are those that don’t get listened to. You can defuse so much anger by just listening to what the other [side says]. But if you don’t give the man the chance to be heard, you know, like in court—you know, you go into court, you may not win your case, but at least the judge and jury listen to you.

We basically had a shutdown. In many instances the news media in this country were just as closed almost as they were in the government controlled countries. The news we got about Russia, or the Soviet Union, for the most part, was the stern unsmiling men sitting up there in the snow by Lenin’s tomb, looking down on these thousands of soldiers marching through, and missiles and tanks and missile carriers. I saw that image a thousand times on television. I was terrified. All the little kids were terrified. They showed us how to get in bomb shelters. I mean, bomb shelters for nuclear bombs, are you kiddin’? We’d have all been dead. And we were being given this image of them, hardly ever did you see anything about ordinary Russian people, or interviews with them, that they had the same concerns about the situation as we did. They were doing the same thing with Russian television. They were showing us in our most unflattering light.⁷

The communication problem, as Turner saw it, extended beyond the Cold War; it was a bias on the part of those who collected and distributed the news.

I read about the non-aligned nations griping about the fact that the western news agencies controlled the flow of information around the world [giving] a very biased impression about the world. The only time that news about India gets into the international media is when there’s something like Bhopal. That’s absolutely true. It’s outrageous.⁸

In early 1987, Turner had an idea about how to begin addressing the situation. Against the advice of his CNN management team, he decided to use the CNN channel as a way to respond to

⁷ Turner, interview (December 1996).
⁸ Ibid.
the imbalance caused by American cultural imperialism. This was the origin of World Report.

I was the one who said we were going to do it, and there was tremendous resistance. Everybody thought it was crazy. The braintrust of CNN, the little management group almost to a man thought it was outrageous that we would offer unedited time to Khadafi and Castro, the Russians, the Poles, the North Koreans. They just said, “You can’t even think about doing that. No news organization in the history of the world has ever given up its airtime or its space on an absolutely unqualified basis to another news organization to give them access like that.” And I said, “Well, everything we’ve done here is things that have never been done before, we’re going to do that too. And I’m the boss and that’s what I say.” They had no choice. Like Walter Cronkite [said], “That’s the way it is.” That’s the way it’s going to be.9

The World Report Initiative

Symbolically, if not completely, World Report opened the airwaves to broadcasters other than the elite of the world. In creating the program, Turner and his staff would establish a journalistic precedent—an on-going vehicle for airing multiple perspectives on local, regional, and world events.

I basically was trying to use the World Report and CNN and my power as someone who had some influence in the media to make the world a little better place, to try and improve understanding and goodwill around the world.10

Turner gave the task of getting non-U.S. broadcast perspectives onto CNN to Burt Reinhart, the network’s president. Reinhart, a consummate news manager in the American “hard-news” tradition, is reported to have sent form-letter invitations to broadcasters listed in the World Radio-Television Handbook.11 Reinhart’s invitation yielded no takers.

Never one to give up on a Big Idea, Turner turned to Stuart Loory, CNN’s former Moscow bureau chief who had recently been transferred to the Washington, D.C., bureau.12 Turner and Loory had often discussed global issues during Turner’s visits to the Soviet Union in the mid-1980s, and Turner knew that Loory was likely to appreciate the idea:

At the time I had a lot of different things going. I was trying to be one of these self-appointed goodwill ambassadors to end the Cold War. I didn’t want to see the world toasted, which it was headed for. Nuclear annihilation had me greatly concerned, and I felt like there was something I could do about it, so I dutifully spent a lot of time in Russia with various initiatives, the Goodwill Games and all sorts of other ones, television exchanges, documentaries and discussion programs. So I got over there a lot, and Stu was our Moscow bureau chief, so I got to know him. And when his tour was up over there I had to have somebody to run it, and I [had] spent a lot of time with him ... [and] I just basically discussed these sorts of things with Stuart and he shared that vision.13

Turner’s visits to the Soviet Union also gave Loory a chance to get to know his boss better. He recalled one incident from the mid-1980s that helped him appreciate Turner’s growing openness to new ways of thinking. On the last day of the visit, Loory, Turner, and a Soviet press officer were in a car driving through the streets of Moscow. From out of nowhere, Turner asked whether it was possible to become an honorary member of the Communist Party.

Sergei [Gregoriev] turned around and said, “Yes, Ted, the Communist Party does have honorary memberships, but if you are thinking of an honorary membership for yourself, first of all, I am not sure that the Communist Party is really ready to accept you because they don’t know you very well. And secondly I am not sure from a political point of view or a business point of view that you would be wise to even consider a honorary membership.” And Ted said, “Well, I

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9 Ibid.
10 Ibid.
guess maybe you are right.” All of a sudden Sergei turned around and said, “But I will tell you what I can do. I am a member of the journalists union and I know I can get you an honorary membership at our journalists union.” Ted got volubly and visibly excited and he said, “Absolutely not, I hate unions. We established CNN in Georgia because Georgia is a right-to-work state and we don’t have to have unions there.”

Such exchanges helped Loory understand Turner’s determination not to conform to the conventions of typical American broadcasters. When Turner invited Loory to Atlanta to create World Report, Loory understood that his task was to create a genuinely different kind of news program:

It was a very simple concept. All of the world’s countries could tell the stories as they saw it. We would put them on the air, unedited, uncensored in any way. We would get the stories. They would pay for them. We would, in turn, give them free of charge the right to use the program, so that the program would have a worldwide audience.

Loory very likely was the ideal choice to create World Report. He had an academic’s critical outlook on the media system within which he and CNN operated, as well as credibility with journalists from non-western traditions. Peter Arnett, who took over as Moscow bureau chief when Loory returned to Washington in 1987, recalled that Loory and Turner were sufficiently popular among Soviet media officials to ease his own entrance into the Moscow reporting scene, but at a price:

The cordiality of our relationship with the Soviet authorities was not lost on the distrustful resident Western press corps. The correspondent I was replacing, Stuart Loory, was a respected professional of long Soviet experience whose credentials were unchallenged. But I began to hear CNN’s objectivity questioned by suspicious colleagues.

The western media’s reaction described by Arnett may have represented genuine concern over CNN’s apparently cozy relationship with Soviet officials, or perhaps it was simply a case of sour grapes. After all, when the Soviet president signed his own resignation in December 1991, an event described by Atlanta Journal and Constitution reporter Deborah Scroggins:

Mr. Johnson flew to Moscow on Dec. 18 in the thick of fierce competition with ABC News to cover the first peaceful transfer of power in Soviet history. Holed up in the same hotel as Mr. Johnson, ABC’s Ted Koppel had already obtained permission to film Mr. Gorbachev’s last days in office. But when Mr. Johnson and CNN Vice President Stuart H. Loory visited the Soviet president on Dec. 20, he agreed to give them his first interview after his “decision,” as Mr. Johnson delicately put it.

After a false alarm on Christmas Eve, CNN was notified that Mr. Gorbachev planned to address the nation at 7 P.M. local time Christmas Day. Mr. Johnson and a 70-member CNN crew were rushed directly to the Kremlin’s Green Room. Mr. Gorbachev . . . acknowledged the rise of CNN’s clout even as his own waned. “You built your empire better than I built mine, but be sure to give enough power to your republics,” the Soviet president joked.

Mr. Johnson insists the inkless Soviet-made pen was not Mr. Gorbachev’s final humiliation. But the symbolism evidently was not lost on the Soviet president. “American?” Mr. Gorbachev wryly inquired as Mr. Johnson handed him the Mont Blanc.

World Report Airs on CNN

Upon first seeing CNN World Report, viewers and even CNN insiders could be forgiven if they stared slack-jawed at their television screens. Journalists from Africa, South America, Europe, and

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14 Loory, interview (October 1996). Gregoriev was Mikhail Gorbachev’s deputy press secretary.
15 Ibid.

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Asia were on "CNN air," giving firsthand accounts, often in heavily accented English, about events in their respective countries from their perspective, whatever it was. Starting that October, CNN televised up to three hours of contributors' reports each Sunday (or Monday, depending on the viewer's time zone). Each contributor had three minutes—later reduced to two and a half minutes—to tell the world what was important or interesting in his or her corner of the globe. "To paraphrase Andy Warhol," wrote the International Herald Tribune, "everyone gets to have his two and a half minutes" of uninterrupted air-time. But what would the world's broadcasters say during their allotted time?

Media scholars familiar with the litany of complaints about western media from the developing world could have predicted that the stories submitted to CNN would be different from conventional American TV news in at least one important way: reporting by journalists from state-run broadcast organizations and from the developing world in general would be less critical and more "development" oriented. That paradigm, which argues for minimizing what's gone wrong and stressing what's going right, emerged as a direct challenge to traditional western news values during the 1960s and '70s when the United Nations and UNESCO addressed inequities in the military news flows. Not surprisingly, calls for a New World Information Order to correct "illusions" and the overwhelmingly negative demeanor of the news typically have been dismissed by western journalists as a ploy on the part of corrupt governments in the developing world to keep the critical media in check. World Report gave the world's broadcasters a golden opportunity to do their own development journalism on CNN air. The question some scholars asked was, what would journalists from other parts of the world do with this opportunity?

Nontraditional News

Several studies have examined the nature of news material submitted to World Report over the years. The premise of the content studies stems from a single, simple research question, articulated by Don Flournoy in 1992:

After 20 years of complaining about how poorly the news collected by international agencies reflects life in their countries, broadcasters of the developing world now have a chance to put the record straight. On CNN's World Report they can correct whatever misimpressions and fill in whatever gaps they see by reporting events from their own perspective. Guaranteed a slot on an internationally distributed network, what do the local stations have to say?21

Flournoy's conclusions, and the conclusions of other scholars who have examined World Report over the course of 10 years, are that—at least as far as topics are concerned—"the news seen on World Report is the same old news of the world."22 In other words, World Report news reflects the conventional news definitions of its many conventional contributing journalists, who focus mostly on domestic and international politics, economics and business news, and news of military and defense actions that is the basis for international news nearly everywhere.23 World Report does,


22 Ibid., 96.

however, include a greater percentage of news topics focusing on environment and ecology, arts and culture, science, health, and social services than appear elsewhere. This could easily be a function of the freedom that contributing reporters are given when they submit stories to World Report, without interference from assignment editors and producers. In the case of World Report, contributors are encouraged to bring their own perspective to bear on the report. This, in fact, is the most significant journalistic difference between the practice of western broadcast journalism and that of World Report, according to Flournoy:

A greater number of international news stories are being told from the perspective of those closest to the events, sometimes by those affected personally, as with the reports from Lithuanian TV (its station surrounded by Soviet paratroopers) and JRT-Croatia (its cities being bombed).25

Stuart Loory, the founding editor of World Report, similarly characterized the stories submitted to the program as “distinctly nontraditional interpretations” of the news.26 Perhaps that’s what the Chicago Tribune had in mind when it described a 1990 report submitted by Cubavision:

The three-minute TV story on German reunification opened with malnourished Africans ambling along a dusty road. Then it bashed the United States, the Soviet Union and Western Europe for “forgetting about the Third World” by focusing on European matters. Clearly, the report by Cuba’s state-run television network was a different slant on a hot issue.27

But even stories that don’t confront U.S. or European authorities so directly provide the global audience with a refreshing look at the world, a look that still makes Ted Turner smile:

On the World Report we got a report from one African nation, and they had the band out at the airport, and they were welcoming the president of Liberia or some other country. So you saw an African leader get off the plane being greeted by another African leader, the flags of both countries there, countries you’ve never heard of or hardly ever see, and they’re meetin’ with each other. I mean, light bulb goes on: “Hey, there are other meetings going on in the world besides us and them.”28

Content analyses of World Report also support what any extended viewing of the program likely will reveal: journalism that focuses less on negativity and more on solutions to the world’s problems, a form of journalism not unlike what Davis “Buzz” Merritt,29 Jay Rosen,30 Arthur Charity,31 and James Fallows32 have called “public journalism.” A study by Park and colleagues examined 566 World Report stories submitted by a total of 106 broadcast news organizations during 1990-91. The study showed remarkable similarities between the contributions of the so-called North and South countries. In presentation of domestic news (news concerning the internal issues of a country), both the developed and the developing countries focused more on development news than on non-development news. Yet, both the developed and the

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28 Turner, interview (December 1996).
developing countries oriented their coverage more toward non-development news in what they offered as international news (news involving two or more nations), according to Park, who concludes that

If CNN World Report is an example of the ideal (New World Information Order) newscast—in which countries are free to present their own news from their own perspective—we may be seeing a news trend in the use of development journalism by both the developed and the developing countries. Namely, development news is as likely to come from the North as well as the South, the affluent as well as the poorer nations of the world.33

World Report, then, is more an “anthology of TV from many sources, some of which is crude and may be gathered in ways that are different from what Westerners are accustomed to,” according to media scholar Everette Dennis.34 The program’s limited (but thought to be loyal) following in the United States may reflect the fact that Americans are less accustomed to watching what may seem like oddball stories, contrasting sharply with the broadcast news that fills the American networks’ international news hole.35 Despite the presence of solid, groundbreaking journalism on World Report, it is the quirky World Report story about “dancing birds in Kuala Lumpur,” as one staffer put it, that seems to stick out like a sore thumb, even providing a form of journalistic comic relief for the program’s critics. The Chicago Tribune mused in 1990 about a World Report viewing experience that encompassed stories about

- poignant medical and economic travails in Africa;
- bizarre ethnic conflicts on exotic islands that viewers may have to

consult an atlas to locate; a Swedish view of tumult in Romania; penis transplants in Thailand; the suicide of an 86-year-old Osakan after Japanese real-estate speculators pressured him to sell his house; and a ho-hum fair of religious artifacts in Bolivia.36

On the other hand, observed the Record as far back as 1988, World Report offers a strange kind of

proof that life goes on in the village, even in the absence of death and destruction. . . . At the end of 90 minutes, the world seems a less horrible, more human, infinitely larger place than the view of geopolitical events presented nightly by the networks. And yet, it feels more intimate, more like the village we keep hearing about.37

Not surprisingly, this is much like what Turner says he set out to create when he first envisioned the program:

The World Report was to let the whole world be heard. To open up the whole world. . . . Our information before the World Report, before CNN, was like the spokes of the wheel, where everything was from the United States out and the United States back. That’s all the information we ever got. And now all of a sudden, with the World Report, you were seeing what was going on, like brain cells, numerous brain cells instead of one. There were all these other countries that are connected too. But we had [had] no view of that.38

From Turner, proponents of a New Information Order received a sympathetic—almost enthusiastic—hearing. If Turner hoped to “save the planet and save the human race,” he needed diverse views on CNN to offer viewers different perspectives on the news, and “positive” stories to counterbalance the negative ones that filled the more traditional newscasts at CNN. He could count on World Report contributors, many of them less hung up on American standards of objectivity, to help find ways to humanize distant cultures for viewers who heretofore had received only stereotypical images. But could he count on his own staff?

33 Park, et al., 11.
35 Studies of the U.S. broadcast networks show that they typically devote only about 20 percent of their nightly news programs to international news, no matter how big or small the international news story. See James B. Weaver, Christopher J. Porter, and Margaret E. Evens, “Patterns In Foreign News Coverage on U.S. Network Television: A 10-Year Analysis,” Journalism Quarterly 66 (Summer 1984): 356-363.
36 Warren, 1.
38 Turner, interview (December 1996).
The Insider View

Not surprisingly, the CNN staff didn’t buy it. Airing reports from broadcasters with journalistic agendas and abilities that fell short of what the public had come to expect of CNN was not a universal “hit” at the network, recalls Ralph Wenge, longtime World Report anchor and now executive producer for the program.

A lot of people [at CNN] didn’t like what they saw, didn’t like the idea of this program. When Ted first came up with the idea, there were a lot of people in this company who fought it.39

One can imagine, as did Newsweek media critic Jonathan Alter, in a 1990 report, that anxiety levels rose even higher when contributed reports occasionally made their way onto conventional CNN:

With portions of the World Report now abutting pieces by CNN correspondents abroad, where does “perspective” end and blur begin? These juxtapositions create the possibility of confusion and represent an acknowledgment that there are few consistent standards for what appears as news on CNN.40

The Chicago Tribune in 1990 concluded that World Report’s view of reality could leave “American TV anchors, reporters and editors wincing over its unabashed polemics.”41 Indeed, many of those wincing anchors, reporters, and editors worked at CNN and clung to the gilded “CNN Standard” for objective journalism despite Turner’s effort to force a broader definition of news. Bob Furnad, executive vice president for CNN and the person who must oversee everything that goes onto CNN air, long has fretted over the blurring lines that may cause viewers to confuse CNN work and World Report work. Even at the ten-year mark, some CNN journalists still see the program as stretching the boundaries of journalism to the breaking point, leaving former World Report staffers like Kim Norgaard, now working on the international assignment desk, trying to explain the concept of the program to colleagues.

One sometimes does hear negative criticism (here at CNN and elsewhere), but maybe it is because they are too set on how news should be done and don’t really understand the concept of World Report. I had a conversation with a CNN producer the other day who said: what is this crap? I explained how I look at the show not just as these other voices but representing something of the anarchy of the event itself. [World Report] is more like the incident where there is no particular order to it and you can say what you want and these voices can be heard whether you like them or not. That is the whole point.42

Newsweek’s Alter conceded the point, noting that “For the discerning viewer, the World Report provides terrific perspective, not just on global news but on the whole nature of propaganda.”43 CNN’s new vice president in charge of news production on CNN’s international channel (CNNI), Chris Cramer, agreed that the program offered the audience something different, something to react to:

There would be very few people in the building and very few people who watch the program who from time to time don’t wince, but that’s not the point. That absolutely is not the point. The point is, if the audience wins, good. It means this program is getting a response, and it does get a response.44

Even as it marks its tenth anniversary, World Report’s critics within and without CNN still fail at times to comprehend the story within the story on World Report, according to Cramer:

There’s an intellectual exercise in watching World Report, which is the extent to which you can select those correspondents and reporters from around the globe who you can feel them sort of shaking the chains in their reporting. And then there are the ones who are perfectly happy to be in chains—

41 Warren, 1.
42 Kim Norgaard (assignment editor, CNN International Desk), interview (October 1996).
43 Ibid.
44 Chris Cramer (vice president, CNN International), interview (September 1996).
Doing Business Doing Good

During his years at the BBC before becoming managing editor for CNN International in 1995, Cramer kept tabs on World Report in part because of a “sort of skepticism from conventional broadcasters about exactly what Turner and CNN were up to.”

What Turner was up to, it would seem, was relatively simple, according to CNN International’s Eason Jordan:

A lot of criticism from people who didn’t really know anything better thought that CNN was some sort of imperialistic force out to dominate the world in some sense. Ted’s reason for launching World Report was to allow journalists from all over the world to see CNN from the inside out and see that we are sincere and honest and impartial in everything we do.

The reasons why CNN would host a no-cash exchange of news that included the poorest stations as well as some of the most affluent broadcast enterprises of the world—airing all their stories as perspectives without editorial comment or control—are complex. The most obvious reason was that TBS chairman Ted Turner wanted, indeed willed it to happen. In the TBS organization, that reason alone is sufficient.

I was really pretty highly motivated. But at the bottom of it I thought it was going to be good for business too. I didn’t know it was going to be good for business. I didn’t know if

we were going to be able to make real money off it. I mean, nobody’s ever done it before.48

In Covering the World: International Television News Services, a commissioned work for the Twentieth Century Fund, Lewis Friedland noted how Turner’s “internationalism was coupled with a shrewd understanding of a changing international news market, well before any of his competitors.” Friedland gave Turner credit for understanding that the international news market would be limited to several major organizations, that the horizon for becoming a “player” was short, and that penetration of all world markets was a prerequisite for success.

Almost from its inception, CNN founder Ted Turner has had an international vision for his network that reflects his personal ambition as well as his growing interest in world ecology and nuclear disarmament. In a 1993 address to the National Academy of Television Arts and Sciences, Turner said he was more concerned with contributing to “salvation of life on earth” than making money on CNN’s international ventures. And in 1982 he told Time: “I want to start dealing with issues like disarmament, pollution, soil erosion, population control, alternative energy sources.” Turner’s interest in global ecology and disarmament drove CNN toward Moscow and Beijing.49

The Turner Paradox—the belief that social responsibility and making money can go hand in hand—is one of the central Turner strategies in the international news business. What may not be obvious to CNN viewers is that World Report, a decade after its debut, remains the most significant and enduring example of Ted Turner’s direct intervention into his network’s news programming. Even more significant is how Turner and CNN managers have deliberately and methodically used the World Report to make CNN more international—in its news gathering, distribution, on-air presentation, perspective, and appeal.

48 Turner, interview (December 1996).